Summary

Summary of the Novel
Five men sit on board the Nellie, a boat docked in the Thames. An unnamed narrator introduces them to the reader: the owner of the boat, a lawyer, an accountant, and Charlie Marlow, who tells the story of his journey to the African jungle.

He introduces his tale by referring to ancient times in Britain, some nineteen hundred years ago. After help from an aunt, Marlow gets a job commanding a ship for an ivory trading company. Before he leaves, he meets two knitting women and a doctor from the company who make him feel uneasy.

He sails from Europe on a French steamer. The endless coastline and the appearance of sweating and shouting black men fascinate him. After more than thirty days, he leaves the French steamer for a boat captained by a Swede. He makes it to the company’s Outer Station. Rotting equipment and black slaves chained by the neck appall him. Even when he runs from the sight of them, he sees black workers starving and dying slowly. He meets the company’s chief accountant, a man whose neat appearance stands out from the company’s chaos. He waits ten days here. The hot weather and many flies irritate Marlow. During this time, though, the accountant mentions Mr. Kurtz, a remarkable man, a first-class ivory agent, a favorite of the Administration.

Marlow leaves the Outer Station with a white companion and a caravan of sixty blacks. Through thickets, ravines, and paths they travel two-hundred miles in fifteen days to the Central Station. Marlow finds his steamboat sunk at the bottom of the river. It will take months to repair. He meets the manager, a man Marlow dislikes because he talks without thinking. He speaks of Kurtz, saying he is ill, perhaps dead. Like the accountant, the manager praises Kurtz and reiterates his importance to the company. Marlow turns his back on the manager and concentrates on repairing his steamboat. Everywhere he looks, he notices “pilgrims,” white men who carry staves and speak of nothing but ivory. A shed full of goods burns one night. While going to see it, Marlow overhears the manager speaking with another agent about Kurtz.

Marlow meets a brickmaker. He invites Marlow to his room, where he asks him many questions about Europe. As he leaves the room, Marlow sees a sketch in oils of a blindfolded woman carrying a torch. Kurtz had painted it, he says, more than a year ago.

They talk about Kurtz, the agent saying he expects him to be promoted soon. He says Kurtz and Marlow belong to the same “gang” because the same people had recommended both of them. Marlow realizes this man resents Kurtz’s success.

Marlow tells the agent he needs rivets to fix the boat. When Marlow finally demands the rivets, the agent abruptly changes the subject. They do not arrive for many weeks. Marlow boards his steamer after the agent
leaves. He meets a boilermaker, a good worker with a long beard. They dance on deck after Marlow tells him the rivets will come soon. Led by the manager’s uncle, the Eldorado Exploring Expedition appears. Marlow overhears them speak about Kurtz. He had come downriver a few months ago with ivory, but turned back. He had left a clerk to deliver the shipment, instead. He had spoken of Kurtz’s illness then, with no further word coming in the last nine months.

The rivets arrive, Marlow repairs the boat, and they resume the journey. The manager, a few pilgrims, and twenty natives accompany Marlow on the steamer. It takes two months to get close to Kurtz’s station. During that time, drums roll, people howl and clap, and the jungle becomes thick and dark.

They find an abandoned hut fifty miles below Kurtz’s station. Marlow discovers a faded note, a coverless book, and a stack of firewood. Eight miles from Kurtz’s station, Marlow and the manager argue over their navigation. Marlow wants to push on, but the manager urges caution. A mile and a half from their destination, the natives attack the boat. A spear kills the helmsman, who falls at Marlow’s feet. They throw his body into the river, a simple funeral. They come upon a man on shore. A Russian, this “harlequin” speaks admiringly of Kurtz. He tells them of Kurtz’s serious illness.

While the manager and the pilgrims go to Kurtz’s house, Marlow finds out many things from the Russian about Kurtz. Kurtz had ordered the attack on the steamer, he had discovered villages, and had even tried to kill the Russian over some ivory. Most importantly, the natives worshipped Kurtz, and offered sacrifices in his name.

They bring Kurtz to the steamer on an improvised stretcher. Physically weak, Kurtz still speaks with power. The natives line the shore to watch their god leave. A black woman, Kurtz’s mistress, joins them. Kurtz escapes from the steamer that evening. Marlow follows him, finally returning Kurtz to the boat. Kurtz gives Marlow a packet of papers. He dies a few days later. His last words—“The horror! The horror!”—haunt Marlow. They bury him in a muddy hole the next day.

Marlow returns to Europe. He becomes sick, running a fever. Three people call on him to retrieve Kurtz’s writings. A company officer, a musician claiming to be Kurtz’s cousin, and a journalist want his papers for their use. Marlow gives them unimportant documents, saving the personal ones for Kurtz’s Intended.

More than a year after Kurtz’s death, Marlow visits this woman. At her door, he hears Kurtz’s last words ring. In a drawing room, Marlow meets her, a beautiful lady suffering over Kurtz’s death. Marlow never answers her questions directly. He lies to her, saying Kurtz’s last words were her name. She cries to release herself from the agony of loss. Marlow feels bad for betraying Kurtz’s memory, but glad for saving the woman from the truth.

With Marlow’s story ended, we return to the Nellie. The narrator describes Marlow sitting in the pose of a Buddha, then raises his head to the “heart of the immense darkness” in the distance.

The Life and Work of Joseph Conrad
Joseph Conrad was born Josef Teodor Konrad Nalecz Korzeniowski in a Russian-ruled province of Poland (now part of the Ukraine) on December 3, 1857. His father was a poet, a writer, and a political activist. His mother was also politically involved. As a result of his parents’ participation in the Polish independence movement, young Conrad and his mother and father were forced into exile in northern Russia in 1862. In the next few years, by the time Conrad was eleven, both his parents had died, and the boy had been sent to live with his uncle, Thaddeus Bobrowski. Conrad dropped out of school when he was sixteen and took up life on the sea, first joining the French merchant marines and sailing as apprentice and then steward to Martinique and the West Indies. At the age of twenty-one, Conrad joined a British ship, and served with the British merchant marines. During this time, he achieved the rank of captain, became a naturalized British citizen, and
traveled to Asia, Africa, Australia, and India. A trip to the Belgian Congo in 1890, during which Conrad sailed the Congo River, was crucial to the development of the 1899 work *Heart of Darkness*.

Poor health, from which Conrad had suffered all his life, forced his retirement from the British merchant marines in 1894. Conrad had begun writing while still in the service, basing much of his work on his life at sea. His first novel, *Almayer's Folly*, was published in 1895 and began Conrad’s difficult and often financially unrewarding career as a writer. Not until 1913, with the publication of the novel *Chance*, did he achieve true critical and financial success. Nevertheless, Conrad managed to earn his living by his pen, writing all his novels in his acquired language, English, and always returning to the sea and the outskirts of civilization for his most enduring themes.

In addition to *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad’s most notable early works include The Nigger of the ‘‘Narcissus’’ (1897), *Lord Jim* (1900), *Youth*, containing *Heart of Darkness*, (1902), and *Typhoon* (1902). The novels that are widely regarded as Conrad’s greatest works are *Nostromo* (1904), *The Secret Agent* (1907), *Under Western Eyes* (1911), and *Chance* (1913). The novel *Victory*, which appeared in 1915, may be the best known of these later works. Conrad collaborated on two novels with his friend and fellow novelist Ford Madox Ford, *The Inheritors* (1901) and *Romance* (1903).

Joseph Conrad married in 1896, had two sons, and died of a heart attack in England on August 3, 1924. He was buried in Canterbury Cathedral, where many of England’s greatest writers lie. Although he often struggled to write in his adopted language, Conrad is now considered one of the greatest prose stylists in English literature.

**Estimated Reading Time**

Due to Conrad’s complex language, the long paragraphs, and the chronological shifts in narration, *Heart of Darkness* will probably take longer to cover than another work of equal length, with an actual reading time of six to seven hours.

**Additional Summary: Summary**

*Heart of Darkness* was based upon Conrad’s own experiences in the Congo as first mate on the riverboat *Roi des Belges* in 1890, during which he was overwhelmed by intense moral revulsion at the degradation and exploitation of the natives by the ruthless European traders. Conrad noted that, in turn, the savage jungle quickly eliminated the slight beneficial effects that civilization gave to the white plunderers. His observations and reactions to this situation were transmuted into one of his most powerful works.

The character of Marlow, introduced in the short story “Youth,” reappears as the narrator and central character of *Heart of Darkness*. The center of *Heart of Darkness* is a trip by Marlow up the Congo River in search of a mysterious Mister Kurtz. The events that take place during this river voyage constitute both a literal and a symbolic journey by Marlow into that “immense heart of darkness” that is both the African jungle and the human soul.

The events of the story are relatively simple. Marlow finds himself, as sailors often do, without a position, a situation Conrad knew well. Against his better judgment, Marlow contracts to serve as a riverboat captain for a Belgian company that exports ivory from the Congo. Exactly as happened to Conrad, however, Marlow’s boat is wrecked before he arrives, and he is assigned to serve as a mate on a company steamboat sailing upriver. Marlow goes willingly because he wishes to meet the famous Mister Kurtz, a man who has become renowned equally as a trader of ivory and as a champion of civilization.
Marlow learns, however, that Kurtz is more than an ivory trader, and that the man’s vision of civilization and progress has been changed by contact with the African wilderness. When Marlow arrives at Kurtz’s station, he finds that Kurtz has reverted to savagery and is alternately feared or worshiped by the terrified natives whom he oppresses. Kurtz’s station is ringed with posts decorated with human skulls, and unspeakable rites are celebrated there in honor of the man-god Kurtz. Marlow loads the sick, delirious Kurtz on the boat and hurries back down the river, narrowly escaping an ambush by the terrified and outraged natives. Kurtz dies on the journey.

Marlow takes Kurtz’s belongings, including his precious journal, back to Kurtz’s fiancé in Europe. Having carefully removed the increasingly frenzied and desperate passages that occur toward the end of the diary, Marlow lies to the woman, claiming that Kurtz died as he had wished and as she herself would have wanted, as an apostle for civilization and Christianity. Still, Marlow must recognize the truth that he has witnessed.

The impact of Heart of Darkness comes from the nearly devastating effects Marlow experiences in the Congo. As the story unfolds, the world in which Marlow finds himself grows both more corrupted and more corrupting, so that nothing is left untouched or untainted. Marlow’s adventures become stranger, and the characters he meets grow increasingly odd, starting with the greedy traders whom Marlow ironically describes as “pilgrims,” through an eccentric Russian who wanders in dress clothes through the jungle, to Kurtz himself, that figure of ultimate madness. Only the native Africans, whether the cruelly abused workers who slave for the trading company or the savages who serve Kurtz out of fear and superstition, retain some of their original dignity. To Marlow, however, they are initially beyond his comprehension. Heart of Darkness shows the reader the world through Marlow’s eyes, and it is a strange and terrifying place where the normal order of civilized life is both inverted and perverted.

In Heart of Darkness, Conrad presents his narrative in a carefully distanced fashion; little is told directly. The story begins with Marlow and four friends aboard a small boat on the Thames River, talking about their experiences. One of the listeners, who is never named, is the actual narrator of the story he has heard from Marlow; while readers may believe they are listening directly to Marlow, actually they hear his story secondhand. Within this narrative framework, the tale shuttles back and forth as Marlow recount part of his story, then comments upon it. At times, Marlow makes additional reflections upon his own observations. It is only by retelling the events that Marlow comes to understand them, a gradual revelation that is shared by the reader.

Heart of Darkness makes substantial use of symbolism. Conrad used symbolism—the literary device that uses the images of a work to underscore and emphasize its themes and meanings—in many of his works, especially in his descriptions of the landscape, which grows denser and darker as Marlow’s journey progresses. The technique is essential for Heart of Darkness; the underlying meanings of the story are too terrifying and bleak to be expressed openly. Conrad also uses imagery throughout his story to underscore the meaning of events as Marlow comes to understand them. Opposites are frequent, so that brightness is contrasted with gloom; the lush growth of the jungle is juxtaposed with the sterility of the white traders; and the luxuriant, even alarming, life of the wild is always connected with death and decomposition. Running throughout the story are images and metaphors of madness, especially the insanity caused by isolation. In particular, the decline of Kurtz is a powerfully symbolic expression of the weaknesses of supposedly civilized Europeans. The dominant symbol for the entire work is found in its title and final words: All human nature is a vast “heart of darkness.”

Additional Summary: Summary

A group of men sit on the deck of the cruising yawl, The Nellie, which is anchored one calm evening in the Thames estuary. One of the seamen, Marlow, reflects that the Thames, at the time of the invading Romans, was one of the dark and barbarous areas of the earth. Dwelling on this theme, he begins to tell a story of the
most barbarous area of the earth that he has experienced.

Through his aunt’s connections, Marlow once secured a billet as commander of a river steamer for one of the trading companies with interests in the Belgian Congo. When he went to Belgium to learn more about the job, he found that few of the officials of the company expected him to return alive. In Brussels, he also heard of the distinguished Mr. Kurtz, the powerful and intelligent man who was educating the natives and at the same time sending back record shipments of ivory. The mysterious figure of Mr. Kurtz fascinated Marlow. In spite of the ominous hints that he gathered from various company officials, he became more and more curious about what awaited him in the Congo.

During his journey, as he passed along the African coast, Marlow reflected that the wilderness and the unknown seemed to seep right out to the sea. Many of the trading posts and stations the ship passed were dilapidated and looked barbaric. Finally, Marlow arrived at the seat of the government at the mouth of the river. Again, he heard of the great distinction and power of Mr. Kurtz, who had an enormous reputation because of his plans to enlighten the natives and his success in gaining their confidence. Marlow also saw natives working in the hot sun until they collapsed and died. Marlow had to wait impatiently for ten days at the government site because his work would not begin until he reached the district manager’s station, two hundred miles up the river. At last, the expedition left for the district station.

Marlow arrived at the district station to find that the river steamer he was to command had sunk a few days earlier. He met the district manager, a man whose only ability seemed to be the ability to survive. The district manager, unconcerned with the fate of the natives, was interested only in getting out of the country; he felt that Mr. Kurtz’s new methods were ruining the whole district. The district manager also reported that he had not heard from Kurtz for quite some time but had received disquieting rumors about his failing health.

Although he was impeded by a lack of rivets, Marlow spent months supervising repairs to the antiquated river steamer. He also overheard a conversation that revealed that the district manager was Kurtz’s implacable enemy, who hoped that the climate would do away with his rival. When the steamer was finally ready for use, Marlow and the district manager sailed to visit Kurtz at the inner station, far up the river. The journey was difficult and perilous; the water was shallow, and there were frequent fogs. Just as they arrived within a few miles of Kurtz’s station, natives attacked the vessel with spears and arrows. Marlow’s helmsman, a faithful native, was killed by a long spear when he leaned from his window to fire at the savages. Marlow finally blew the steamboat whistle, and the sound frightened the natives away. The district manager was sure that Kurtz had lost control of the natives. When they docked, they met an enthusiastic Russian traveler who told them that Kurtz was gravely ill.

While the district manager visited Kurtz, the Russian told Marlow that the sick man had become corrupted by the very natives he had hoped to enlighten. He still had power over the natives, but instead of his changing them, they had debased him into an atavistic savage. Kurtz attended native rituals, killed frequently in order to get ivory, and had hung heads as decorations outside his hut. Later, Marlow met Kurtz and found that the man had, indeed, been corrupted by the evil at the center of experience. Marlow learned from the Russian that Kurtz had ordered the natives to attack the steamer, thinking that, if they did so, the white men would run away and leave Kurtz to die among his fellow savages in the wilderness. Talking to Marlow, Kurtz showed his awareness of how uncivilized he had become and how his plans to educate the natives had been reversed. He gave Marlow a packet of letters for his fiancé in Belgium and the manuscript of an article, written sometime earlier, in which he urged efforts to educate the natives.

The district manager and Marlow loaded Kurtz, now on a stretcher, onto the river steamer to take him back home. The district manager contended that the area was now ruined for collecting ivory. Full of despair and the realization that devouring evil was at the heart of everything, Kurtz died while the steamer was temporarily stopped for repairs.
Marlow returned to civilization. About a year later, he went to Belgium to see Kurtz’s fiancée. She still thought of Kurtz as the splendid and powerful man who had gone to Africa with a mission, and she still believed in his goodness and power. When she asked Marlow what Kurtz’s last words had been, Marlow lied and told her that Kurtz had asked for her at the end. In reality, Kurtz, who had seen all experience, had in his final words testified to the horror of it all. This horror was not something, Marlow felt, that civilized ladies could, or should, understand.

**Additional Summary: Summary**

**Section I**

Literally speaking, the action of *Heart of Darkness* is simply the act of storytelling aboard a ship on the river Thames around the turn of the twentieth century. An unnamed narrator, along with four other men, is aboard the anchored *Nellie* waiting for the tide to turn. They trade sea stories to pass the time. One of these men is Charlie Marlow, whose story will itself be the primary narrative of *Heart of Darkness*. Before Marlow begins his tale, however, the unnamed narrator muses to himself on a history of exploration and conquest which also originated on the Thames, the waterway connecting London to the sea. The narrator mentions Sir Francis Drake and his ship the *Golden Hind*, which traveled around the globe at the end of the sixteenth century, as well as Sir John Franklin, whose expedition to North America disappeared in the Arctic Ocean in the middle of the nineteenth century.

As the sun is setting on the *Nellie*, Marlow also begins to speak of London’s history and of naval expeditions. He, however, imagines an earlier point in history: he sketches the story of a hypothetical Roman seaman sent north from the Mediterranean to the then barely known British Isles. This is Marlow’s prelude to his narration of his own journey up the Congo river, and he then begins an account of how he himself once secured a job as the captain of a river steamer in the Belgian colony in Africa. From here on the bulk of the novella is Marlow’s narration of his journey into the Congo.

Through an aunt in Brussels, Belgium’s capital, Marlow manages to get an interview with a trading company which operates a system of ivory trading posts in the Belgian Congo (formerly Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of the Congo). After a very brief discussion with a Company official in Brussels and a very strange physical examination by a Company doctor, Marlow is hired to sail a steamer between trading posts on the Congo River. He is then sent on a French ship down the African coast to the mouth of the Congo.

From the mouth of the Congo, Marlow takes a short trip upriver on a steamer. This ship leaves him at the Company’s Lower Station. Marlow finds the station to be a vision of hell—it is a “wanton smash-up” with loads of rusting ancient wreckage everywhere, a cliff nearby being demolished with dynamite for no apparent reason, and many starving and dying Africans enslaved and laboring under the armed guard of the Company’s white employees. Marlow meets the Company’s chief accountant, who mentions a Mr. Kurtz—manager of the Inner Station—for the first time and describes him as a “very remarkable person” who sends an enormous amount of ivory out of the interior. Marlow must wait at the Lower Station for ten days before setting out two hundred miles overland in a caravan to where his steamer is waiting up the river at the Central Station.

After fifteen days the caravan arrives at the Central Station, where Marlow first sees the ship that he is to command. It is sunk in the river. Marlow meets the manager of the Central Station, with whom he discusses the sunken ship. It will, they anticipate, take several months to repair. Over the course of the next several weeks, Marlow notices that the rivets he keeps requesting for the repair never arrive from the Lower Station; and when he overhears the manager speaking with several other Company officials, he begins to suspect that his requests are being intercepted—that is, that the manager does not want the ship to get repaired for some reason.
Section II
Overhearing a conversation between the manager and his uncle, Marlow learns some information that begins to make some sense of the delays in his travel. Kurtz, chief of the Inner Station, has been in the interior alone for more than a year. He has sent no communication other than a steady and tremendous flow of ivory down to the Central Station. The manager fears that Kurtz is too strong competition for him professionally, and is not particularly interested in seeing him return.

Marlow's steamer, however, finally gets fixed, and he and his party start heading up river to retrieve Kurtz and whatever ivory is at the Inner Station. On board are Marlow, the manager, several employees of the Company, and a crew of approximately twenty cannibals. The river is treacherous and the vegetation thick and almost impenetrable throughout the journey. At a place nearly fifty miles downstream from the Inner Station, they come across an abandoned hut with a sign telling them to approach cautiously. Inside the hut, Marlow discovers a tattered copy of a navigation manual in which undecipherable notes are written in the margins.

Nearing the Station in a heavy fog, the ship is attacked from the shore by arrows, and the passengers—"pilgrims." Marlow calls them—fire into the jungle with their rifles. Marlow ends the attack by blowing the steam whistle and scaring off the unseen attackers, but not before his helmsman is killed by a spear. Marlow imagines that he will not get to meet the mysterious Kurtz, that perhaps he has been killed, and suddenly realizes something:

"I made the strange discovery that I had never imagined him as doing, you know, but as discoursing I didn't say to myself, 'Now I will never see him,' or 'Now I will never shake him by the hand,' but 'Now I will never hear him.' The man presented himself as a voice. Not of course that I did not connect him with some sort of action. Hadn't I been told in all the tones of jealousy and admiration that he had collected, bartered, swindled, or stolen more ivory than all the other agents together? That was not the point. The point was in his being a gifted creature, and that of all his gifts the one that stood out preeminently, that carried with it a sense of real presence, was his ability to talk, his words—the gift of expression, the bewildering, the illuminating, the most exalted and the most contemptible, the pulsating stream of light, or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness."

When they finally reach the Inner Station, they are beckoned by an odd Russian man who is a sort of disciple of Kurtz's. He turns out also to have been the owner of the hut and navigation manual Marlow found downstream. He speaks feverishly to Marlow about Kurtz's greatness.

Section III
The Russian explains to Marlow that the Africans attacked the ship because they were afraid it was coming to take Kurtz away from them. It appears that they worship Kurtz, and the Inner Station is a terrifying monument to Kurtz's power. The full extent of Kurtz's authority at the Inner Station is now revealed to Marlow. There are heads of "rebels" on stakes surrounding Kurtz's hut, and Marlow speaks of Kurtz presiding over "unspeakable" rituals. When Kurtz is carried out to meet the ship—by this time he is very frail with illness—he commands the crowd to allow him to be taken aboard without incident. As they wait out the night on board the steamer, the people of the Inner Station build fires and pound drums in vigil.

Late that night Marlow wakes up to find Kurtz gone, so he goes ashore to find him. When he tracks him down, Kurtz is crawling through the brush, trying to return to the Station, to the fires, to "his people," and to his "immense plans." Marlow persuades him to return to the ship. When the ship leaves the next day with the ailing Kurtz on board, the crowd gathers at the shore and wails in desperate sadness at his disappearance. Marlow blows the steam whistle and disperses the crowd.
On the return trip to the Central Station, Kurtz's health worsens. He half coherently reflects on his “soul's adventure,” as Marlow describes it, and his famous final words are: “The horror! The horror!” He dies and is buried somewhere downriver on the muddy shore.

When Marlow returns to Belgium, he goes to see Kurtz's fiancee, his “Intended.” She speaks with him about Kurtz's greatness, his genius, his ability to speak eloquently, and of his great plans for civilizing Africa. Rather than explain the truth of Kurtz's life in Africa, Marlow decides not to disillusion her. He returns some of Kurtz's things to her—some letters and a pamphlet he had written—and tells her that Kurtz's last word was her name. Marlow's story ends and the scene returns to the anchored Nellie, where the unnamed narrator and the other sailors are sitting silently as the tide is turning.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter Summaries: Section I Summary and Analysis

New Characters
The Director of Companies: captain and owner of the boat

“I”: unnamed narrator on the boat

The Lawyer, The Accountant: people on the boat in the Thames

Charlie Marlow: also on the boat; tells the story of his journey to see Kurtz deep in the jungle

Two Knitting Women: they sit outside the outer office

The Doctor: he examines Marlow before his journey

The Aunt: related to Marlow, she helps him get his appointment to the ship

The Swedish Captain: the man in charge of a little sea-going steamer

The Company's Chief Accountant: his neat appearance contrasts with the chaos of the station

The Dying Agent: the man tormented by flies at the station

The Manager: leader of the station who survives because of his excellent health

The Pilgrims: workers who carry long staves; they want any chance to obtain ivory

The Brickmaker: does secretarial work for the manager, but does not seem to make bricks

The Boilermaker: a good worker who talks to Marlow about the rivets they need

The Manager's Uncle: leader of the Eldorado Exploring Expedition; he speaks only to his nephew

Summary
A boat, the Nellie, is docked in the Thames. Its sails are still, and the water and sea calm. An unnamed narrator, who refers to himself only as “I,” introduces the people on board. Four people sit on deck besides himself: the Director of Companies, the Lawyer, the Accountant, and Marlow. The Director of Companies is
their captain and host. An elderly man, the Lawyer, sits on the rug for comfort, while the Accountant plays with a box of dominoes. Finally, Marlow sits cross-legged, his arms dropped, his palms facing outward. The narrator says they “exchanged a few words lazily.”

The unnamed narrator thinks of the great history of the sea, its people, and ships. He mentions Sir Francis Drake and Sir John Franklin. He recalls the Golden Hind, the Erebus, and the Terror—ships from the past. He mentions all the greatness, dreams, and empires of history.

The sun sets. In the distance, the lights from the Chapman lighthouse, ships, and London shine at night. Still, a lurid glare glows between London and the sky.

Marlow speaks about London, saying how it’s been “one of the dark places of the earth.” No one responds. The narrator tells us that Marlow is the only one who still follows the sea. He considers him to be a wanderer. Their home is the ship, their country is the sea. He says Marlow is not typical. For Marlow, when he tells a tale, its meaning is not inside like a kernel, but outside.

Suddenly, Marlow begins talking about the Romans and ancient times. He pictures the cold, fog, disease, and battles with the savage natives they had to endure. He admires their courage to face the darkness. In the posture of a Buddha, he speaks about how they used only force and violence to get what they wanted. Conquests back then, he says, meant stealing from people who were different from you. He believes there is more needed to redeem mankind, something to “bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to….”

Marlow stops speaking. There is a long silence and no one speaks. When he starts talking again, he begins to tell a story of one of his journeys. He says it reveals something about himself.

Marlow tells of how he’d spent six years traveling on the Indian Ocean, Pacific, and China Seas before taking the journey he’s talking about. When he was young, he used to point to blank spaces on maps and say, “When I grow up I will go there.” He’s visited most of them, except one. He calls Africa a “place of darkness.” He compares the Congo river on the map to a snake: its head in the sea, its body curving over a country, and its tail in the deep of the land. As he had looked at a map in a shop window, he says he was as fascinated by this place as a bird is when it looks at a snake.

He cannot secure this job until his aunt helps him. She knows the wife of a person in the Administration. Marlow cannot believe he needs help from a woman.

Marlow tells how the company had recently discovered the death of one of their captains by a native. His name was Fresleven, and his murder stemmed from an argument over some black hens. Months later, when Marlow arrives, he uncovers Fresleven’s body, the grass growing over his remains.

In forty-eight hours Marlow crosses the Channel and presents himself to his employer. Knitting black wool, two women—one fat, the other thin—sit outside the office. A map on a wall pictures the world in many colors. Marlow mentions the yellow patch at dead center, his destination.

Marlow meets the secretary, signs his contract, and is told he must have a medical exam. The women continue knitting as he passes through the outer office. They watch him strangely. A young clerk shows Marlow out of the office. It is early for his exam, so Marlow and the clerk have a drink. Speaking admiringly of Africa, the clerk surprises Marlow by not going there himself. “I am not such a fool as I look,” he says. At his exam, the doctor measures Marlow’s head with calipers. He asks if there was any madness in Marlow’s family. He also adds, “… the changes take place inside, you know.”
Marlow visits his aunt to thank her and say good-bye. He finds that his aunt had recommended him as “an emissary of light, something like a lower apostle.” All woman are out of touch with the truth, he says. He feels hesitant about leaving Brussels for Africa, the “center of the earth.” He leaves on a slow French steamer. It stops at many ports to unload soldiers and officers. The monotonous journey lulls Marlow into a depression. Occasionally, a boat from shore paddled by blacks interrupts the boredom. The steamer passes a French man-of-war ship shelling the coastline. They deliver mail to this ship. They also learn that the sailors aboard her were dying of fever at three a day. The steamer moves on, never stopping for Marlow to get a clear impression, except for “hints of nightmares.” They reach the mouth of the river in thirty days. Marlow switches to a small sea-going steamer captained by a Swede to take him farther upstream. The captain tells him he had taken a fellow Swede recently up the river. The man had hanged himself. The captain cannot answer Marlow directly when he asks why. When they reach the Outer Station, Marlow gets his first glimpse of Africa, the ivory trade, and the general waste. Broken machinery and loose rails litter the ground. Commanded by an arrogant guard, a six-man chain gang walks by with the “deathlike indifference of unhappy savages.”

Marlow turns away from them and heads for the trees. Marlow avoids an artificial hole and nearly falls into a narrow ravine before reaching the shade. Black shapes occupy the area. These diseased, starving men lean against trees. Marlow gives one young man a biscuit he had gotten from the Swede’s ship. He takes it, but does not eat it. Another man crawls to the river to drink.

Marlow walks away from the station. He meets a white man whose fanciful appearance contrasts with the surrounding darkness. He is the Company’s chief accountant. Everything about him is orderly, unlike the “muddle” around him.

Marlow spends ten days at the Outer Station. Flies buzz. A deathly sick agent is brought in. He groans continuously. A caravan also arrives. The ensuing uproar causes the accountant to say he hates the savages “to the death.” With sixty men, Marlow leaves the next day for the Central Station. He has a white companion, a man who faints and catches fever. Marlow meets a white man in an unbuttoned uniform. He says he repairs roads, but Marlow sees no roads or upkeep.

After fifteen days, Marlow reaches the Central Station. He finds that the boat he was to command was wrecked at the bottom of the river. The repair job, he knows, will take months. Marlow meets the manager in a curious interview. This man has attained his position because of his good health, not his ability and performance. The manager tells Marlow he had wanted to wait for him two days before, but he couldn’t because Kurtz, the Inner Station’s manager, was ill. He had visited him, and the skipper of Marlow’s boat tore the bottom out. Marlow says he has heard of Kurtz. The manager assures Marlow of Kurtz’s value. He also adds that it will take three months to repair the boat. Disgusted, Marlow leaves angered with the manager. He sees “pilgrims,” white men carrying staves. A bit later, a shed full of prints, beads, and other goods catches fire. Marlow investigates the scene. He hears two men talking. One mentions Kurtz. The other is the manager. A black man accused of starting the fire is beaten. The “brickmaker” invites Marlow to his room for a drink. Marlow does not see a “fragment of a brick anywhere.” He asks Marlow about Europe and his connections there. Marlow realizes the man intends to get information. Marlow notices a sketch in oils on the wall. It is of a “woman, draped and blindfolded, carrying a lighted torch.” The manager says Kurtz had painted it a year before at the Central Station.

Marlow asks about Kurtz. The manager calls Kurtz a “prodigy,” and an “emissary of pity and science and progress….” He says the same people who had sent Kurtz also had recommended Marlow. They go outside. A man with a black mustache approves of beating the black native blamed for the fire. The agent follows Marlow. He doesn’t want Marlow to speak badly of him to Kurtz. Marlow detests this man who, he thinks, has “nothing inside but a little loose dirt, maybe.” Marlow adds how he hates a lie because it appalls him. He also says it is hard for one person to explain himself to another because “we live, as we dream—alone.”
Momently, the story returns to the *Nellie*. The narrator listens intently, though the others may have been sleeping. It is dark. Marlow is more voice than person.

Marlow resumes his story. The brickmaker continues speaking of Kurtz, calling him a “universal genius.” Marlow demands rivets to repair the boat. Every week, a caravan arrives with trade goods, but never any rivets. The man says Kurtz, too, needs rivets. Marlow suggests that, as secretary to the manager, he should find a way to obtain them. The man mentions a hippopotamus, then leaves.

Marlow needs rivets to continue. He says he does not like to work, but enjoys finding himself, his “own reality,” while working. He returns to the boat. He speaks with the foreman, a man Marlow admires because of his dedication to work. A widower with six young children, this man raves about pigeons. He tells the man that rivets will arrive in a few weeks. They dance with joy on the deck.

The rivets do not come for awhile. An exploring party, the Eldorado Exploring Expedition, arrives. For the next six weeks, they appear in sections. A white man on a donkey leads each group, followed by a band of blacks. They are reckless, greedy, and cruel. They will “tear treasure out of the bowels of the land.”

The manager’s uncle leads them. Fat, with short legs, he resembles a butcher. He speaks only to his nephew. They stay together all day with their heads close to one another.

**Analysis**

Conrad uses a “framed” narrative technique. One narrator, in this case “I,” sets up another narrator, Marlow, who will continue the story. At first, readers may suspect that “I” will narrate the story. He doesn’t. After introducing the passengers to us, Marlow talks. His story becomes *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad reveals some of “I’s” thoughts to us, then Marlow’s story takes over.

The reader should remember that Marlow’s journey has already happened. He is not actually experiencing the events as he speaks of them. Marlow also abandons chronological sequence. Sometimes he jumps ahead in his story, then retraces his narration.

Conrad establishes a calm gloominess at the beginning. The *Nellie* is “without a flutter of sails,” “the wind was nearly calm,” and the air “seemed condensed into a mournful gloom.” Later, when the sun sets, there is still a “brooding gloom in the sunshine.” These descriptions suggest an eerie setting, as if something evil is about to occur. The narrator says the passengers feel “the bond of the sea” between them. We see this shared feeling when the narrator thinks of the sea’s history on the Thames, and Marlow speaks of the Romans nineteen hundred years ago. The past interests them. Marlow’s idea of history, though, includes the savages in Ancient Rome and “aggravated murder on a great scale.” The dark side intrigues him. His first sentence contains the words “dark places.” Even the river on a map resembles a snake, a sinister reptile.

Conrad deepens Marlow’s uniqueness with his physical posture. He sits cross-legged in “the pose of a Buddha preaching in European clothes.” Very simply, Buddhist philosophy establishes suffering as inseparable from existence. It also contains “nirvana,” a state of illumination. If he imitates a Buddha, how has Marlow suffered and what does he know?

He refers to the company he will join when he calls them “conquerors,” people who “grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got.” He disapproves of them. Since they did not have “belief in the idea,” Marlow rejects their ambitions as a mere materialistic hunt.

As the traffic in London continues, the narrator mentions the green, red, and white flames gliding in the river during the “deepening night.” Again, images of light and dark play against each other.
In order for Marlow to convey meaning in his tale, he says he must tell us how he got there, what he saw, and how he went up the river to meet the “poor chap,” Kurtz. The journey was not “very clear,” but it seemed to “throw a kind of light.” In a symbolic way now, dark and light mix. Marlow relates his feelings as a child, when he used to stare at maps and dream of explorations. Since then, many of those places had been visited, named, and inhabited. One place remains, though—the river “resembling an immense snake uncoiled.” Traditionally, snakes symbolize evil. Marlow speaks of it with this meaning, saying the place “had become a place of darkness.” This refers to the Belgian Congo.

Marlow tells how he needed help from his aunt to secure his appointment. He says, “Then would you believe it?—I tried the women. I, Charlie Marlow, set the women to work—to get a job. Heavens!” This information seems insignificant. It isn’t. Conrad foreshadows Marlow’s lie to Kurtz’s Intended at the end of the novel. He will sacrifice the truth for a woman.

Our first indication of wasteful suffering during Marlow’s journey comes when he mentions Fresleven’s death. Killed in a fight over two black hens, the captain’s murder suggests an abandonment of rational behavior. Since Marlow has been to the jungle, he says it “didn’t surprise me in the least to hear this.” No respect is even shown to Fresleven’s corpse, because Marlow discovers his body with grass growing over it.

The two knitting women present another sign of the macabre. Marlow thinks of them “guarding the door of Darkness, knitting black wool as for a warm pall....” Everything about them gives him an “eerie feeling.”

Marlow’s visit to the doctor adds to the idea on the unknown. The doctor measures his head, then asks if there was any sign of madness in Marlow’s family. He also says the changes take place “inside.” These clues lead us to believe that Marlow’s journey is more than a physical one, it is a mental and psychological one.

Marlow knows what happens, but he has not told us yet. Conrad withholds information to create suspense. Though short, Marlow’s visit to his aunt contains an important passage. She had recommended him, Marlow believes, using the words “emissary of light.” This connects to a scene later in Section I, when the manager refers to Kurtz as an “emissary.” They share the description of being a messenger or agent. We cannot know their message, though, until Marlow concludes his story.

The beginning of Marlow’s journey on the French steamer initiates his descent into “darkness.” They travel on the “edge of a colossal jungle, so dark as to be almost black....” At this point, light still shows. The sun is “fierce,” the land “seemed to glisten,” and “grayish-whitish specks showed up clustered inside the white surf.” Conrad alternates images of light and darkness not only to convey mood but also to allude to ethical questions of good and bad, and right and wrong. As Marlow’s journey progresses though, light fades and darkness dominates.

The Swede’s story of a fellow Swede’s suicide advances the idea of irrational acts. Marlow is not told the reason why he had hanged himself. We can sense the feeling of chaos Marlow will find in Africa. Why is there killing and madness? Notice how Conrad hints at these strange events without actually revealing too much about them.

Marlow notices more decay. He sees an “undersized railway truck lying on its back,” the “carcass of some animal,” and “a stack of rusty nails.” These images define a general sense of squalor, a sign of neglect and waste. As Marlow tells of his travels, he never fails to include these descriptions. He has seen a world few of us have.

The next scene, when Marlow sees the black slaves chained together, shows us his disgust of man’s treatment toward his fellow man. Here, Conrad attacks imperialism—the use by one group or nation over another for their own gain. The whites in the jungle use the blacks, reducing them to machines. Marlow feels guilty of
this attitude, saying he is “a part of the great cause of these high and just proceedings.” He flees from them to disassociate himself from the treatment of the blacks. But Marlow cannot run away. Everywhere, starving and dying blacks lean for rest, crawl for water, and crouch for shade. Marlow is “horrorstruck.” The savage cruelty reflects the depravity in the jungle. And, he has only begun his journey.

The appearance of the Company’s chief accountant represents a sharp contrast. His “brushed hair,” “starched collars,” and “got-up shirt-fronts” show a sense of order amidst all disorder. Marlow acknowledges him. While all around the manager falls to waste and rots, he keeps himself and his books in “apple-pie order.” He cannot tolerate the groans of a dying agent in his office because it makes it “difficult to guard against clerical errors.”

Marlow hears of Kurtz for the first time. The manager praises him. Marlow knows nothing of him at this time. Remember, in reality, Marlow knows everything about Kurtz because he is recounting the events, not experiencing them now.

The next part of Marlow’s journey, with a caravan of sixty men, leads him through “networks of paths.” No people are around, “nobody, not a hut.” He sees “abandoned villages” and “ruins of grass walls.” The jungle gets darker, the isolation more pronounced. The “white men with long staves” in their hands who appear momentarily represent the “pilgrims,” the ivory hunters. They seek money and profit. They ignore the degradation. Marlow’s meeting with the manager here serves three purposes: he finds out that the steamer he is to command is stuck, he hears more about Kurtz, and he comes to dislike this man because he is a “chattering idiot.” The manager’s superior health contrasts with the information about Kurtz’s illness. We should observe how Conrad’s conception of health includes the physical and mental. The jungle, its weather, and isolation affect everyone in many ways. The accountant and this manager seem to have survived the conditions. Others succumb. Which group will Marlow and Kurtz belong to? The manager is an interesting character. He seems to hate Kurtz. If Marlow and Kurtz are linked together, then he must hate Marlow. This explains why Marlow is uneasy around him.

Marlow feels that the manager can only “keep the routine going—that’s all.” The manager never offers food or rest to Marlow. “Being hungry,” he says, “and kept on my feet too, I was getting savage.” The key word is, of course, “savage.” Are the surroundings influencing Marlow? And if the manager praises Kurtz, but Marlow dislikes the manager, can he accept his assessment of Kurtz?

Marlow sees more “pilgrims,” who speak of ivory. The word “rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed.” He detests this greed for wealth. He considers it to be “philanthropic pretense.” Unconcerned with money, Marlow is the outsider, the intruder.

The brickmaker’s appearance poses an intriguing question. How can he be a brickmaker if there are no bricks around? He fits the man who repairs roads earlier in the section, when Marlow said he did not see roads or upkeep. A mysterious element surrounds many characters. It is difficult to get a sense of them. Conrad leaves us questioning both who these people are, and Marlow’s description of them. Are they the way Marlow describes them, or is he purposely omitting important information about them? If he is, then why? Conrad raises these questions through the use of the first-person flashback narrative.

Marlow’s description of Kurtz’s oil painting gives us the first solid detail about him. The picture of a woman draped and blindfolded carrying a lighted torch against a black background suggests a few ideas. First, we see the combination of light and dark again. The blindfold refers to the actual darkness, as well as a spiritual and philosophical one, since the person cannot “see.” The woman anticipates Kurtz’s mistress and Intended, two women who will appear later.
In the next sequence, Marlow reveals much about his philosophy. He says he hates and detests a lie. Again, Conrad foreshadows the ending, when Marlow lies to Kurtz’s Intended. Later, we have to compare that moment with this statement. Marlow then says it is difficult for him to convey Kurtz to his listeners, the people on the boat. This implies us, the reader, also. “Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream,” he says. This points to Marlow’s problem. He is trying to tell the untellable, explain the unexplainable. Marlow’s words reflect Conrad’s function as a writer—to make the reader understand the story. “We live, as we dream—alone.” Marlow adds. This statement comes close to illuminating Marlow’s tale. It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, for one person to understand another.

If this is true, then Marlow cannot understand Kurtz, Kurtz cannot understand Marlow, and we cannot understand either of them. We can try to make sense, nothing more. As Marlow’s tale becomes philosophical, Conrad takes us back to the Nellie and the “I” narrator. This breaks the dream-like trance of the story. We come back to reality, if only for a moment. Everyone but the narrator is asleep. If we are like him, then we are “on watch for the sentence, for the word, that would give … the clue” to this story. Together, we try to catch Marlow’s meaning.

Conrad returns to Marlow’s story and a most practical matter: the need for rivets. Without them, his journey ends. This leads to a humorous scene when Marlow meets the Boilermaker, one of the few men he admires in the jungle. They reassure themselves that the rivets will arrive in three weeks, then danced “like lunatics.”

The Eldorado Exploring Expedition arrives. Marlow abhors them. They want to “tear treasure out of the bowels of the land.” They represent the greedy white men, whose sole purpose revolves around destroying the land to obtain money and wealth. Since the manager’s uncle leads them, they further the idea of the pilgrims’ infiltration. They lack “moral purpose,” something Marlow appreciates.

Instead, Marlow thinks of Kurtz, a man “who had come out equipped with moral ideas of some sort.” His interest stimulated, Marlow begins the next step on his quest to the mysterious ivory agent and the heart of darkness, a mythical place of hell.

Chapter Summaries: Section II Summary and Analysis

New Characters
The Helmsman: a black man killed by arrows shot by natives
The Russian: man who greets Marlow at Kurtz’s station

Summary
While on his boat, Marlow hears the manager and his uncle talk about Kurtz. They stand on the shore alongside the steamboat. Without moving, he listens. The manager fears Kurtz’s influence. Threatened by Kurtz’s influence and success, the manager says, “Am I the manager—or am I not?” The uncle hopes the climate will eventually ruin Kurtz.

From the “absurd sentences,” Marlow hears how Kurtz had traveled three hundred miles with a shipment of ivory nine months ago. Kurtz had then returned upriver in a canoe with four native paddlers, a “half-caste” left in charge of delivering the load of ivory. Kurtz’s station has been without goods and stores since then. Kurtz’s motives escape the manager and his uncle. Marlow says he sees Kurtz in his mind for the first time, how he faces the wilderness and desolation. The half-caste, a “scoundrel” to the manager and his uncle, had told of Kurtz’s illness and how he had “recovered imperfectly.” They walk away from Marlow, then return close to the boat again. When they speak this time, Marlow is not sure if they are talking about Kurtz, or about
someone else in Kurtz’s district of whom the manager disapproves. The manager says neither of them will be free until “one of these fellows is hanged.” They agree that the real danger begins in Europe, where the orders come from. The manager quotes something Kurtz had said: “Each station should be like a beacon on the road towards better things, a center for trade of course, but also for humanizing, improving, instructing.” He calls Kurtz an “ass” for his ideas and his desire to be a manager one day. The uncle reassures his nephew when he says, “… I say, trust to this.” He points to the jungle around him while he speaks, as if to say all these things will help you destroy Kurtz. Marlow jumps up to look at the forest, half expecting to receive an answer from the darkness. They knew he had been listening, he says, because they went back to the station “pretending not to know anything of my existence.” Side by side, they walk away, their unequal shadows trailing behind them. The Eldorado Expedition leaves for the wilderness a few days later. In the future, Marlow finds out all the donkeys died, as well as the blacks, “the less valuable animals.”

Marlow is excited about meeting Kurtz soon. It will not happen for two more months, though. They encounter warm air, empty streams, and the deep forest as they travel upriver. Marlow compares it to going back to the beginning of the world. Hippos and alligators line the sand-banks. Stillness and silence brood over everything. He has to watch for hidden banks to avoid damaging the boat. He looks for wood to burn for the next day’s steaming. He refers to the details of his job as “monkey tricks,” as the mysterious Truth watches him. He says when you attend to things on the surface, reality fades. The inner truth, he adds, is “hidden—luckily.”

For a moment, we return to the men aboard the Nellie. One man says, “Try to be civil, Marlow.” The narrator knows one person besides himself is listening. Driving the boat, Marlow says, resuming his story, was like a “blindfolded man set to drive a van over a bad road.” He sweats and shivers over worrying about the boat. Once, he needs twenty cannibals to help push the boat. With sarcasm and humor, he says they at least did not “eat each other before my face.” He recalls the smell of rotten hippo-meat the cannibals had brought with them. With the manager and three or four pilgrims holding their staves aboard, they pass white men greeting them with joy about ivory, the word itself ringing in the air. Massive trees fill the immense landscape. Marlow’s journey is now headed “towards Kurtz—exclusively.” He is not sure who it crawls to for the pilgrims. He hears the roll of drums, but does not understand if they signify war, peace, or prayer. The snapping of a twig can shatter the stillness of dawn. He again compares his journey to prehistoric times. Ancient man curses, prays, and welcomes them. Like phantoms, they glide past their surroundings. When natives howl and leap, Marlow thinks not how different they are from him, but their “remote kinship” to him. He says it is “ugly,” if you are at least willing to admit it. He philosophizes about man’s mind, and how it encompasses all periods of time and knowledge. Man must meet the truth with his own strength, not an external force.

Someone on the Nellie grunts a question. Marlow answers by saying he did not go ashore because he had to worry about the steampipes and the boat. Marlow mentions the fireman, a black man who keeps fire in the boiler. He could have been on shore with the natives, but instead helps Marlow because he has been trained for a profession. His filed teeth, strange patterns shaved on his head, and three scars on each of his cheeks fit well with his belief that an evil spirit lived inside the boiler. Both Marlow and the fireman are too busy with their jobs to think about their “creepy thoughts.”

Marlow reaches a reed hut fifty miles below the Inner Station, Kurtz’s domain. He finds a stack of firewood and a note: “Wood for you. Hurry up. Approach cautiously.” Marlow knows something is wrong, but is not sure what. They look into the jungle, but find no clues. In the hut, with a plank on two posts serving as a table and rubbish in a dark corner, he finds a coverless book, An Inquiry into some Points of Seamanship. He handles it with care, even though it is not an “enthralling book.” Marlow appreciates the work and concern required to write it. Finding the book and looking at the notes in cipher along the margin equal an “extravagant mystery” for Marlow.
While absorbed with the book, Marlow forgets the forest, the manager, and woodpile. When he looks up, everything has gone. The pilgrims shout at him, as he puts the book in his pocket. The boat is loaded and ready to go. The manager calls the white man who had lived in the hut an “intruder.” He assumes he is English, but this will not protect him from trouble unless he is careful. No one in the world is safe from trouble, Marlow observes with “assumed innocence.”

Convinced the more rapid current will overpower the steamer, Marlow expects the boat to give “her last gasp.” Somehow, though, it moves on. Marlow thinks of what he will say to Kurtz when he meets him. Then he experiences a “flash of insight” and realizes the importance of this affair is under the surface, beyond his understanding.

In two days they are eight miles from Kurtz’s station. The manager suggests they wait until morning for safety. Annoyed, Marlow reasons that one more night means little after so many months. The unnatural silence makes him believe he is deaf. At three in the morning, fish leap, their splash reminding Marlow of gun fire. Fog accompanies the rising sun. It lifts by eight or nine in the morning. He orders the anchor, which they were taking in, to be paid out again. A clamor “modulated in savage discords” through the air. It ends in a shriek, then stops, leaving silence. Frightened, the pilgrims rush for their guns—Winchesters. They anticipate an attack.

Marlow notices the different expressions on the whites and blacks aboard the ship. The whites look discomposed, shocked at the frightful noise. Though interested, the blacks remain calm. They grunt to each other. One black man says they should catch the people hiding in the jungle. When Marlow asks why, he says, “Eat ‘im!” Bothered at first by this idea, Marlow figures they are hungry. Besides some rations they had brought aboard, they had taken only rotten hippo-meat, which the pilgrims had thrown overboard. In theory, Marlow says, they were to use their payment—three nine-inch pieces of brass—to purchase food at the villages. They could not, though, because there were no villages, the people were hostile, or the manager did not want to stop. Sarcastically, Marlow says they could have eaten the wire itself for food. Marlow wonders why the cannibals do not eat the five white men. They could have easily overpowered them. Something had restrained them, but Marlow is not sure what. He and the others look “unwholesome” and “unappetizing,” he concludes. He also believes starvation is easier to fight than “bereavement, dishonor, and perdition of one’s soul…..” Fighting hunger requires all of a man’s strength.

The manager wants to push on. Marlow knows they cannot steer properly. The manager authorizes him to “take all the risks.” Marlow refuses. The manager defers to his judgment. Marlow turns away from the manager to look into the fog. He compares the adventures in approaching Kurtz to an “enchanted princess sleeping in a fabulous castle.” The manager fears an attack. Marlow believes the thick fog will prevent it. He associates “sorrow” with the natives, not violence. Marlow feels the pilgrims stare at him as if he is mad. He watches the fog the way a “cat watches a mouse.” Marlow interprets the natives’ actions as protective and desperate, not aggressive or even defensive.

They travel through the thick fog until they come within a mile and a half below Kurtz’s station. A bright green islet appears in the middle of the stream. Marlow can steer either left or right, with each path looking similar. He chooses the western passage because he had been informed the station was on the west side. It is narrower than he had anticipated. He steers the boat close to the bank, where the water is deepest. Marlow mentions the helmsman, a black man who thinks highly of himself. He wears a pair of brass earrings and blue cloth wrapper. When Marlow is next to him, this man steers with “no end of a swagger,” but if no one is near he falls “prey to an abject funk.” Marlow looks at the sounding-pole sticking further out of the water each time the poleman puts it in. This indicates how the water turns shallow.

The next moment, the poleman falls flat to the deck without the pole, and the fireman sits ducking by his furnace. Arrows fly. Marlow instructs the helmsman to steer straight. The pilgrims fire their guns into the
jungle. Letting go of the steering, the helmsman grabs a gun. Marlow yells at him to return to his duty. He may have as well “ordered a tree not to sway in the wind.” Instead, he steers the boat toward the bank. They hit overhanging bushes.

The helmsman holds his rifle and yells at the shore. Something big appears in the air, knocking the helmsman back. His head hits the wheel twice. He rolls back and stares up at Marlow, a shaft of spear sticking below his ribs. He lands at Marlow’s feet. The helmsman’s blood fills Marlow’s shoes. The helmsman clutches the spear while Marlow forces himself to turn away from him and steer. He pulls the steam whistle cord repeatedly with one hand. The warlike yells die, the arrows stop.

Marlow and a pilgrim in pink pajamas stand over the helmsman. He dies without making a sound, a frown coming over his face at the last moment. Marlow tells the agent to steer. He tugs at his shoelaces. He believes Kurtz is dead now, too. Marlow throws one shoe overboard. He feels disappointment in not being able to speak with Kurtz now. Even though he had heard Kurtz was a swindler and thief, Marlow feels he is still a “gifted creature.” Kurtz’s ability to talk still fascinates him. He throws his other shoe overboard. Marlow thinks he has missed his destiny in life if he cannot hear Kurtz talk. He feels more lonely than if he had been “robbed of a belief.”

On the Nellie, Marlow lights his pipe. The match shows his narrow face and dropped eyelids. He draws on his pipe, then the match goes out. This momentary switch in scene ends.

Marlow speaks of missing the privilege of listening to Kurtz. He amazes himself that he does not shed tears over missing Kurtz. He considers Kurtz “very little more than a voice.” The “I” narrator cuts in again, telling us that Marlow becomes silent for a long time. We return quickly to Marlow’s story. Marlow now jumps ahead in his story. He mentions women, specifically Kurtz’s Intended, who will not appear until the end of the novella, after Marlow returns from Africa. He says she is “out of it,” meaning out of touch with all that happened in Africa. He talks of Kurtz’s baldness, an “ivory ball” of a head. Marlow marvels at the amount of ivory Kurtz had collected. It fills the mud shanty and the boat when they load it. There could not be a single tusk either above or below the ground. He says Kurtz watched over it and referred to everything as belonging to him.

Speaking philosophically, Marlow says Kurtz belonged to the “powers of darkness.” He adds how Kurtz sat “amongst the devils of the land….” He tells about Kurtz’s background, how he had been educated in England with a half-English mother and a half-French father. He says all “Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz.” He finds out how Kurtz had been instructed by the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs to write a report. Marlow sees it later, seventeen pages written before Kurtz’s nerves “went wrong.” A beautiful piece of writing, it described Kurtz presiding at midnight dances with unspeakable rites.

Marlow recalls Kurtz’s words. In one section, Kurtz had written how the blacks approach the whites as if they possess the “might as of a deity….” He also had written “Exterminate all the brutes.” Marlow considers the writing to be the “unbounded power of words.” He tells how Kurtz believed his pamphlet would secure his future career. Kurtz was not common, Marlow says. His power to charm had influenced the natives, as well as himself. He cannot forget him, yet he is not sure it was worth the helmsman’s death to reach him.

Marlow ends his jump ahead in the story, the “flash-forward.” He returns to the helmsman’s death. Marlow misses the helmsman and the partnership they had developed as they worked together. The bond now broken, he remembers the “profundity” of the helmsman’s look before he had died. Marlow puts on dry slippers, then throws the helmsman’s body overboard. The current takes his body, it rolls over twice, then disappears. Marlow says he had been a second-rate helmsman, but now he would be a first-class temptation—meaning food for the cannibals. Marlow steers after the funeral. Everyone on board believes Kurtz is dead. One red-haired pilgrim says they must have slaughtered everyone. Marlow says they at least had made a lot of
smoke. He thinks they had missed their targets during the fight, by shooting too high. The screeching whistle had sent them running, he maintains. The manager talks of getting down the river for safety before it turns dark.

A decaying building with the jungle background fills the slope of a hill. They finally see the station. A white man wearing a hat like a cartwheel motions to them. Other human forms glide through the jungle. Marlow stops the engine and lets the boat drift. The manager tells the man about the attack. The man knows about it and says everything is all right. He reminds Marlow of a harlequin: bright clothes of blue, red, and yellow sparkling in the sun. He looks young with a boyish face, no beard, and little blue eyes. He asks Marlow if he is English, and Marlow answers with the same question. Pointing up the hill, he tells them Kurtz is there. Armed, the manager and pilgrims go to the house. The man comes aboard. He says the whistle will scare the natives, “simple people,” he calls them. The sound of the whistle works better to drive the natives away than guns do, he says. People don’t talk to Mr. Kurtz, he adds, they listen to him. The son of an arch-priest, he is Russian, had run away from school, and served on English ships. He had been wandering alone on the river for two years. He is twenty-five, not so young as he looks. He tells Marlow the small house, stack of wood, and note were his. Marlow hands him the book. He makes as if to kiss Marlow, but restrains himself. Marlow finds out that the notes in the book are in Russian, not cipher. He tells Marlow that the natives had attacked because they do not want Kurtz to be taken away, not to kill him and the crew. Kurtz has “enlarged” his mind, he adds. He opens his arms and stares at Marlow.

Analysis
Marlow hears second-hand information about Kurtz from the manager and his uncle. Their opinion of him contrasts Marlow’s growing admiration for Kurtz. He gathers bits from them about Kurtz, the way we gather bits from him. He anticipates meeting Kurtz, mirroring our interest. Their fear of Kurtz and his success parallels Marlow’s desire to meet him and draw his own conclusions. Marlow understands Kurtz’s fine business sense when the manager talks of the ivory, “lots of it,” coming from Kurtz’s station. This period establishes Marlow’s changing reason for his journey. At first, it was for the job and the adventure, but now Kurtz occupies his thoughts. He says he seemed “to see Kurtz for the first time.” Surrounded by paddling savages, Kurtz leads the way “towards the depth of the wilderness.” At this time, Marlow does not understand Kurtz’s rejection of conventional society for unknown territory.

We come to see how the manager and his uncle represent the selfishness and greediness of civilized Europe. They care only about themselves, their positions, and promotions. They ridicule Kurtz’s philosophy of how each station should be a “beacon on the road towards better things, a center for trade of course, but also for humanizing, improving, instructing.” Kurtz’s idyllic vision aggravates them. Ironically, we will find out how Kurtz’s life and practices contrast with his once idealistic views. When the manager’s uncle asks him if he feels well, we see the power of the jungle, as it weakens and kills people. The uncle gestures toward the forest as he suggests how the climate may destroy Kurtz. Marlow calls the man’s wishes a “treacherous appeal to the lurking death, to the hidden evil, to the profound darkness of its heart.” Physically, the jungle conquers most men, leaving only the strong to live on. The power of nature overwhelms the power of man.

Marlow then compares traveling farther into the jungle to prehistoric times. The “empty stream,” “great silence,” and “impenetrable forest” validate this association. No civilization or laws governed people then. Marlow recalls his own past “in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream, remembered with wonder amongst the overwhelming realities of this strange world of plants, and water, and silence.” As he journeys deeper into the forest, reality fades. A dream-like quality, with its “inner truth” surfaces. He adds to this idea of the ancient past without laws by speaking of the cannibals on the boat. These “fine fellows” show their progression to modern man by working well and not eating each other in front of Marlow. As civilized and tamed people, they fit Marlow’s European view of man, not the native African, which he speaks of next. As the drums roll, Marlow sees the natives on shore. Their howling, leaping, and spinning thrill him. Their behavior evokes a “remote kinship with this wild and passionate roar.” Instead of rejecting their outbursts,
Marlow identifies with them; he understands that part in himself. Since the “mind of man is capable of anything,” Marlow intellectually merges past and present.

This enables him to meet the truth before him—these savages dancing in the jungle. Notice how the farther he moves away from Europe, the more he identifies with the natives. The fireman, who fires the boiler, represents a combination of both worlds, savage and civilized. Marlow says he “ought to have been clapping his hands and stamping his feet on the bank.” Physically, he resembles a typical native. He wears a charm made of rags around his arm and a piece of polished bone through his lower lip. He considers the fire in the boiler to be an “evil spirit.” Since “he had been instructed,” though, he works on the boat. He personifies the transformation from the savage native to the educated white man. Marlow compares him to a dog walking on his hind-legs, which simultaneously insults and compliments him.

The hut they come upon some fifty miles below the Inner Station foreshadows Marlow’s meeting with the Russian and a packet of papers Kurtz will give him. We find out at the end of Section II of Heart of Darkness that the Russian had left the note, firewood, and book. Marlow handles the coverless book, An Inquiry into some Points of Seamanship, “with the greatest possible tenderness.” A plain book, this work attracts Marlow because it represents “an honest concern for the right way of going to work.” He appreciates the care necessary to write it. He compares having to stop reading to tearing himself “away from the shelter of an old and solid friendship.” Later, in Section III, when Kurtz hands Marlow his personal papers, Marlow will handle them with extreme care, too. Their value transcends their tattered appearance.

As the boat progresses up the river, Marlow and the manager disagree about their navigation. The manager urges caution, while Marlow wants to push on. Fearing the warning alluded to in the Russian’s note, the manager suggests traveling in daylight for safety. Yearning “to talk openly with Kurtz,” Marlow intends to get there as quickly as possible. Any delay annoys him. He disregards the dangers.

Marlow returns to the idea of the savage cannibals. They belong to the beginnings of time and eat rotten hippo-meat. He marvels at how they simply do not overpower the white men to eat them. For all their supposed barbarity, the savages and cannibals control their behavior more than the white man, who initiates violence in the search for ivory and wealth. The cannibals’ “primitive honor” restrains them from physical aggression. They even check their hunger through some kind of restricting code of law. The arguments between Marlow and the manager build the tension and accentuate their differences. Since Marlow thinks of Kurtz as “an enchanted princess sleeping in a fabulous castle,” he wants to avoid caution and further delays. The closer Marlow gets to Kurtz, the more reckless he becomes. The manager always remains wary. Marlow’s personal quest interferes with the manager’s business-like approach. The forest turns thickest within a mile and a half of Kurtz’s station. Trees stand in “serried ranks,” twigs overhang the “current thickly,” and a “broad strip of shadow” falls across the water.

Conrad intends this blurring on literal and symbolic levels. While the vegetation prevents Marlow from seeing the natives in the jungle, man’s humanity and morality mix with his inhumanity and immorality. It becomes difficult to distinguish one from the other. The jungle disguises man’s external and internal worlds. The densely matted forest allows the natives to attack Marlow’s boat. Marlow sees “human limbs in movement” in the “tangled gloom,” but cannot prepare for the arrows. The pilgrims, with their more sophisticated weapons, lose any advantage they might have. Accustomed to the jungle, the natives seize the initiative with their primitive spears. The pilgrims fire at random into the forest. They cannot see their targets, but their targets can see them. The helmsman’s death in battle establishes Marlow’s growing obsession with meeting Kurtz.

The helmsman suffers a horrible death, a spear hitting him in the side below the ribs. He spills a pool of blood onto the floor and Marlow’s feet. After watching him die, Marlow thinks that Kurtz must be dead as well. “For the moment that was the dominant thought,” he adds, showing his disregard for the helmsman’s life. This man means little to him in relation to Kurtz. Later, he checks himself by saying that meeting Kurtz may
not have been “exactly worth the life we lost in getting to him.” When Marlow next considers Kurtz to “present himself as a voice,” we see how Conrad connects him to Kurtz. In Section I, the narrator had said Marlow telling his story “had been no more to us than a voice.” The way we listen to Marlow parallels the way Marlow listens to Kurtz. Marlow believes Kurtz to be “something altogether without substance.” This is what Marlow is for us, the reader—merely a voice speaking words. Of course, Conrad throws in a catch. There is “substance” to Kurtz’s story and Marlow’s story. Marlow must interpret Kurtz’s words, while we must interpret Marlow’s words. These comparisons determine important distinctions. Marlow is like Kurtz because he leads, but he also resembles us because he listens.

Next, Conrad interrupts Marlow’s story to return to the Nellie. These transitions accomplish two things: one, they force us to listen more intently; two, they break the dream-like quality of Marlow’s journey by bringing us back to the reality of the present on the boat. The first time, Marlow lights his pipe, which illuminates his face momentarily. The second time, Marlow becomes silent. The idea of light and dark couples with sound and silence. The alternating shades of white and black suggest the good and evil of the actions of Marlow’s company toward the natives, the changing shades in the jungle, and the white Europeans and the black Africans. The sound and silence reflect the intermittent noises in the jungle, and Kurtz’s voice in life against his silence in death for Marlow.

Marlow then jumps forward in his narrative. By breaking the chronological structure, Conrad again forces us to listen to Marlow’s suggestion of looking beneath the surface to understand the finer points of his tale. We cannot simply accept the story as told, but must consider how Conrad gives us information. The deception Conrad incorporates in his narrative mirrors the deception Marlow encounters in the jungle. While he navigates the Congo, we navigate his story.

One oversight affects the rest of the journey/story. In his jump ahead, Marlow offers us glimpses of Kurtz before he appears. First, he mentions Kurtz’s Intended, the woman who waits for him in Europe. She will not appear until the end of the novella. He covets ivory, with his bald head even summoning the image of “an ivory ball.” He refers to everything as “my,” and belongs to the powers of darkness. Kurtz represents evil, a connection to man’s dark side. In a “high seat amongst the devils of the land,” Kurtz leads the natives in literal and symbolic ways. Marlow’s ambition of speaking to Kurtz shows how he wants to embrace and understand Kurtz, his world, and his philosophy. In a sense, Marlow wants to transform himself into one of the natives, a follower of this mad deity. Marlow attributes Kurtz’s origin not to Africa and the jungle, but Europe. Since “all Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz,” we see how Conrad rejects the idea of the black natives as evil, instead accusing the white European society of creating this devilish man. Here, Conrad flips the traditional image of white/good and black/bad around. Appearances can be deceiving, as the jungle often proves. Kurtz’s report for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs enhances his relationship to the dark side. Marlow learns of the “unspeakable rites” Kurtz presided at, the sacrifices “offered up to him,” and the “exterminate all the brutes” ideology he espoused. Kurtz preaches a racial inequality, with the blacks looking at the whites “in the nature of supernatural beings.” Ironically, Kurtz becomes a savage while reporting for their suppression. Marlow does not say whether he approves of Kurtz’s ideas, even if he admires the “unbounded power of eloquence” of the words. Confused by the contradicting images of Kurtz, Marlow thinks that “whatever he was, he was not common.” He could “charm or frighten rudimentary souls.”

In Section I, the narrator said “Marlow was not typical.” Conrad develops another similarity, here, suggesting how Marlow charms us with his words, and frightens us with them, as well. Marlow says Kurtz will not be forgotten, which he will assure because “as it turned out, he was to have the care of his memory.” Will we carry on Marlow’s memory?

The appearance of the Russian next adds a sort of strange, humorous element to the story. A brightly dressed “harlequin” with blue, red, and yellow patches over all his clothes, this man announces Kurtz’s presence to
Marlow. He is reminiscent of the “Fool” in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, a character who looks nonsensical, yet imparts much wisdom. He speaks to Marlow while the manager and pilgrims investigate Kurtz’s situation. He fills in some missing details for Marlow. He tells him that the hut, firewood, and note had been his. He explains how the natives had run for fear from the boat’s whistle, adding how they “don’t want him to go”—meaning Kurtz. And, most importantly for Marlow, he relates how Kurtz’s speaking had captivated him. Almost as a sign of thanks for these bits of information, Marlow gives him the book he had found in the hut. The Russian returns the thanks by making to kiss Marlow, but “restrained himself.” This act foreshadows Marlow’s return of Kurtz’s manuscript to Kurtz’s Intended at the end of the novella. Marlow always handles with care the things he treasures, particularly Kurtz’s memory. The Russian says Kurtz has “enlarged” his mind. Kurtz’s life has answered some deep need for the Russian. Marlow’s need to meet Kurtz will be answered shortly, in the next section. For the moment, though, when the Russian “opened his arms wide,” Marlow receives his long-awaited invitation to Kurtz’s world. This last image alludes to a religious service, where a priest (the Russian) invites his parishioner (Marlow) to worship their god (Kurtz).

**Chapter Summaries: Section III Summary and Analysis**

**New Characters**

Kurtz’s Black Mistress: black woman in the jungle who wears many ornaments

A Clean-Shaved Man, Kurtz’s “Cousin,” a Journalist: three people who visit Marlow in Europe to get Kurtz’s papers

Kurtz’s Intended: Kurtz’s fiancée in Europe

**Summary**

Marlow looks at the Russian, whose “improbable, inexplicable, and altogether bewildering” existence fascinates him. He wonders how he had survived in the jungle. Marlow imagines he will disappear before his eyes. The Russian tells Marlow to take Kurtz away quickly. Marlow does not envy the Russian’s devotion to Kurtz because he had not “meditated over it.” He believes it is a “most dangerous thing.”

Marlow compares the Russian and Kurtz to ships “becalmed near each other.” The Russian fulfills Kurtz’s need to have an audience. He says he had talked to Kurtz many nights, especially about love. Kurtz had made him “see” things.

The Russian throws his arms up in praise of Kurtz. The headman of Marlow’s wood-cutters looks at Marlow. Frightened, for the first time he sees the jungle as a dark place without hope.

The Russian’s friendship with Kurtz had been broken, not continuous. He had nursed Kurtz through two illnesses. Often, he had waited many days for Kurtz to return from his wanderings.

He tells Marlow how Kurtz had discovered villages, a lake, and searched for ivory. It had always been worth the wait. Marlow reminds the Russian how Kurtz had run out of goods to trade for ivory. The Russian says, “There’s a good lot of cartridges left even yet.”

Marlow figures that Kurtz had raided the country. He asks if Kurtz had the natives following him. The Russian says the natives adore Kurtz, lured by his “thunder and lightning.” He says Kurtz can be terrible at times, but no one can judge him as you would an ordinary man. Once, Kurtz had tried to kill him, he says. Kurtz had wanted his ivory. The Russian had given it to him. He had to be careful, until he had reestablished his friendship with Kurtz. He had nursed him through his second illness then. Marlow says Kurtz is mad. The Russian objects. He tells Marlow he will change his mind when he hears Kurtz speak.
Marlow sees people moving in the forest through his binoculars. He compares the woods to the “closed door of a prison.” The silence disturbs him. The Russian tells Marlow that Kurtz is very ill now. Only lately had he come to the river, after an absence of many months. Marlow sees round knobs on posts near Kurtz’s house. They are “black, dried, sunken” heads. The first one in the row faces him. It seems to smile at some “dream of that eternal slumber.” Marlow believes the heads show Kurtz’s lack of restraint. The wilderness had made him mad, he figures. Marlow can only wonder if Kurtz knows of his own “deficiency.” He puts down his binoculars.

The Russian tells Marlow about Kurtz’s ascendancy, how the chiefs venerate him, and how keeping him alive has occupied all his time. Marlow does not want to hear about the ceremonies used to honor Kurtz. Marlow believes he is in a “region of subtle horrors.” The Russian justifies Kurtz’s savagery by telling Marlow the heads had belonged to rebels, Kurtz’s opposition. Kurtz’s trying life, he adds, had led him to these cruel acts. Only keeping Kurtz alive, the Russian says he had nothing to do with these killings.

A group of men carrying Kurtz on a stretcher, appears from around the house. Waist-deep in the grass, they appear to rise from the ground. Naked human beings with spears, bows, and shields follow. The bushes shake and the grass sways, but then stop in “attentive immobility,” as if everything waits for something to happen next. The Russian tells Marlow that if Kurtz does not say the right thing, they are done for.

Kurtz sits up. Marlow resents the absurd danger. Through his glasses, he sees Kurtz move his arm, talk, and nod his head. He realizes Kurtz means “short” in German, and feels the name fits, though he looks “at least seven feet long.” The cage of his ribs and bones of his arms show. He thinks of Kurtz as an “animated image of death.” Marlow hears Kurtz’s deep voice from afar.

Kurtz falls back, then the savages carry him forward again. Some savages vanish into the forest, which after breathing them out, was drawing them back in.

Some pilgrims carry Kurtz’s guns as they walk behind the stretcher. Bent over and talking, the manager walks beside him. They take Kurtz aboard the steamer and put him in a little cabin. Kurtz plays with the letters they had brought him. Marlow notices both the fire in Kurtz’s eyes and the dullness. Speaking for the first time, he says to Marlow, “I am glad.” Kurtz had received special recommendations about Marlow. The grave voice contains power. The manager appears in the doorway, and the Russian stares at the shore. Marlow follows his glance.

A woman appears along the shore. She wears brass leggings to the knee, brass wire gauntlets to the elbow, and necklaces of glass beads. A “wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman,” she walks with measured steps. She wears the “value of several elephant tusks upon her.” The land, wilderness, and mysterious life seem to look at her. She approaches the steamer. Standing still, she faces them. The Russian growls, and the pilgrims murmur at Marlow’s back. She lifts up her arms, the shadows darting out. Silence hangs over the scene. She turns and walks away, looking back at the men once.

The Russian says he would have shot her if she had tried to come aboard. He had been keeping her away from Kurtz for two weeks. According to the Russian, she had created problems. Once, while pointing at the Russian, she had to talk to Kurtz for an hour. Kurtz had been ill that day, or else “there would have been mischief.” Marlow hears Kurtz yelling at the manager. He accuses him of caring only for the ivory. He says he is not as sick as the manager believes he is. The manager has interfered with his plans, and he will return to complete them. The manager walks from behind the curtain and tells Marlow how “low” Kurtz is, how he has done more harm than good for the company, and how they have done all they can for him. He agrees there is much ivory, but on the whole “the trade will suffer.” Despite Kurtz’s amazing success in obtaining ivory, the manager considers his method “unsound.” Marlow ignores the manager’s disapproval. He tells him that Kurtz is a remarkable man. The manager says Kurtz “was” a remarkable man. According to the manager, Marlow
belongs to the same group as Kurtz.

Kurtz is “as good as buried,” Marlow believes. The Russian taps Marlow on the shoulder and stammers out broken sentences. Marlow implores the Russian to speak. The Russian believes the white men hold ill-will toward him. Marlow agrees, saying the manager wants him hanged. The Russian plans to leave the area for a military post three hundred miles away. He asks Marlow to keep secrets so as to save Kurtz’s reputation. Marlow promises.

He tells Marlow that Kurtz had ordered the attack to prevent them from taking him away. He is a simple man, though, and does not understand these matters. He has a canoe and three black fellows waiting for him. He asks for cartridges. Marlow hands them to him. The Russian takes some of Marlow’s good English tobacco. He asks Marlow for shoes, showing him soles tied like sandals under his bare feet. Marlow gives him an old pair. He tells Marlow how Kurtz had read his own poetry, and he will never again meet a man like him. He rolls his eyes with delight and repeats how Kurtz had enlarged his mind. With cartridges in one pocket and the seamanship book in the other, the Russian vanishes. Marlow compares him to a “phenomenon!”

Marlow wakes after midnight. A fire burns on the hill, a line of agents guards the ivory, and men chant to themselves. Where Kurtz’s “adorers” keep a vigil, red gleams waver in the forest against the intense blackness. Marlow dozes off again. When he wakes, he looks into the cabin and sees a light, but not Kurtz. An agent sleeps on a deck chair three feet from Marlow. Leaping ashore, Marlow says he will never betray Kurtz. He feels “jealous of sharing with any one the peculiar blackness of that experience.”

Marlow discovers a trail in the wet grass. Kurtz crawls on all-fours. Marlow surprises himself by thinking of one of the knitting women. He believes he will never make it back to the steamer, instead living alone in the woods to an old age. He confuses the beat of the drums with that of his heart. He overcomes Kurtz, some thirty feet from a fire. Kurtz stands “like a vapor exhaled by the earth.” He fears Kurtz will shout. A sorcerer, or witch-man, stands close behind them. Kurtz tells Marlow, “Go away—hide yourself.” When Marlow asks Kurtz if he knows what he is doing, he says, “Perfectly.”

Marlow threatens to smash Kurtz’s head, even though nothing is near to use. Kurtz says his plans have been thwarted and he “was on the threshold of great things.” Marlow assures him of success in Europe. He believes Kurtz belongs to no one, “nobody either above or below.” His common words suggest dreams and nightmares. Kurtz’s “perfectly clear” intelligence appears before Marlow. He says Kurtz’s mad soul defies description. Marlow carries him back to the couch, comparing Kurtz’s weight to a child’s. He shakes, though, as if he “had carried half a ton on my back down that hill.”

At noon the next day, with Kurtz aboard, Marlow steers the steamer away. Covered in dirt from head to foot, three men strut on the slope. Blacks fill the clearing, the black woman among them. They nod their horned heads, sway their bodies, and shake black feathers toward the river. The black woman puts out her hands and shouts. In chorus, the mob responds to her sounds, reminiscent of a “satanic litany.”

In the pilot-house, Marlow asks Kurtz if he understands their actions. Kurtz answers, “Do I not?” Pulling the string of the whistle, Marlow scares the natives away. The pilgrims get their rifles. Someone on deck tells him to stop. The three men fall face down on the shore. Only the black woman remains in view. She stretches her arms after them over the river. The men aboard the boat begin firing, the smoke blocking Marlow’s vision.

The steamer heads toward the sea at twice the speed it had come up the river. The manager watches Kurtz and Marlow. Kurtz is dying. The pilgrims look at Marlow with disfavor. He considers himself numbered with the dead. He accepts this “unforeseen partnership.”
Kurtz mutters of his Intended, station, career, and ideas. He speaks of wanting kings to meet him at railway stations, a childish concept to Marlow. He insists on having the “right motives.” He asks Marlow to close the shutters, and Marlow obliges.

The steamer breaks down, as Marlow had expected. One morning, Kurtz hands him papers and a photograph tied with a shoestring. He tells Marlow to keep them in his care, away from the manager, the “noxious fool.” Kurtz mutters, “Live rightly, die, die….” Marlow believes he is rehearsing for some speech, or repeating a newspaper article.

Marlow spends more time helping the engine-driver fix the boat than speaking to Kurtz. One night, Kurtz says he is waiting for death. Marlow says, “Oh, nonsense.” Marlow has never seen anything like the changes on Kurtz’s face as he approached death. Kurtz’s last words are, “The horror! The horror!”

Marlow goes to the mess-room and sits opposite the manager. He avoids his glance. Flies stream over the lamp, cloth, hands, and faces. The manager’s boy peeks in the doorway, and says, “Mistah Kurtz—he dead.” The pilgrims run to see, but Marlow stays to eat dinner. The voice is gone. The next day they bury Kurtz in a muddy hole. “And then they very nearly buried me,” Marlow adds.

Marlow cannot compare himself to Kurtz, he says, because Kurtz had something to say. “The horror” is an expression of belief, a “moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats,” he reasons. Kurtz had been able to summarize and judge with his final pronouncement. He remains loyal to Kurtz because of this conviction. Marlow returns to Europe, back to the “sepulchral city.” He resents the sight of people hurrying about, drinking beer, and eating. He feels they do not know what he now knows. He often runs a fever and “was not very well at the time.” His aunt tries to nurse him. He hears of Kurtz’s mother’s death, watched over by his Intended.

One day a company official stops by to get Kurtz’s writings. Marlow says he had two fights about them with the manager, and he still refuses to give them up. The man says the company needs the reports, adding how it would be a great loss if he could not get the papers. Marlow finally gives him the “Suppression of Savage Customs” with the postscript torn off. He wants more. “Expect nothing else,” Marlow says.

Two days later, another man, calling himself Kurtz’s “cousin,” appears. He is an organist and tells Marlow that Kurtz had been a talented musician. Marlow does not doubt this man’s opinion. Marlow adds how to this day he does not know what Kurtz’s profession was. He had been a painter, a journalist, a “universal genius.” Marlow gives him some family letters and unimportant memoranda.

Then a journalist shows up. He considers Kurtz to have been a politician, an extremist leader. He says Kurtz could not write, but “heavens! how that man could talk.” The man says Kurtz’s faith could make himself believe anything. Marlow hands him the report, the man saying he will publish it. Left with a packet of letters and a portrait of a beautiful girl, he wants to visit Kurtz’s Intended.

Kurtz’s soul, body, station, plans, ivory, and career had passed out of Marlow’s hands by now. Only his memory and this woman survive. He recalls one day when Kurtz had complained how the company would try to claim the ivory as theirs, though he had collected it himself. At her house, Marlow has a vision of Kurtz on a stretcher, as he whispers again “The horror! The horror!”

All in black, she comes forward in her drawing room. It is more than a year after Kurtz’s death. She mourns for him, as if he had died “only yesterday.” Marlow hands her the packet. When she asks Marlow if he had known Kurtz well, he says, “I knew him as well as it is possible for one man to know another.” She had not been able to share her memories of Kurtz with anyone since his mother’s death. Marlow says he had heard how her family had disapproved of the engagement.
They promise always to remember him. She says he will live on because of his words and because “his goodness shone in every act.” She puts out her arms across the light of the window. This action reminds Marlow of the black woman’s movements in the jungle. She regrets not being with Kurtz at his death. Marlow says he had stayed with him until the end.

When she asks about Kurtz’s last words, Marlow says they were her name. She sighs, saying, “I knew it—I was sure!” Marlow believes he could not have told the truth, something too painful for her to bear. She hides her face in her hands and weeps. Marlow expects the house to collapse for telling a lie, but “the heavens do not fall for such a trifle.”

We return to the *Nellie*, with Marlow in the pose of a meditating Buddha. The story is over. The Director says they have lost the first of the ebb. The narrator raises his head and sees a black bank of clouds, the tranquil Thames, and an overcast sky. All “lead into the heart of an immense darkness.” The novella ends as it had begun, in darkness.

**Analysis**

Section III opens with the Russian extolling his admiration for Kurtz, his idol. “Something like admiration—like envy” for the Russian, Marlow listens to Kurtz’s exploits—how he talks eloquently, discovers ivory and land, and receives adoration from natives.

The Russian never says anything derogatory or negative about Kurtz, even though Kurtz had tried to kill him over some ivory.

While Marlow by this time admires Kurtz, he rejects the Russian’s complete devotion. Since the Russian “had not meditated over it,” Marlow figures it to border on a “most dangerous thing.”

The Russian embraces Kurtz “with a sort of eager fatalism.” Marlow still judges him objectively. Considering Kurtz “mad,” Marlow contrasts the Russian’s unwavering idolization. This insight into Kurtz’s behavior tempers Marlow’s growing reverence. We also discover how Kurtz has suffered two illnesses, the nature of which we are not told.

By the next scene, however, when Marlow sees the heads attached to poles, we know that Kurtz suffers from mental illness. Marlow considers them “not ornamental but symbolic.” “Food for thought,” they show Kurtz’s extreme policies. His actions exceed acceptable behavior. They show no “restraint in the gratification of his lusts.” Not coincidentally, only one head faces Marlow, the rest pointing the other way. As a symbol, this represents Kurtz staring at Marlow, or Marlow coming to terms with his other half, the side similar to Kurtz, where desires dominate logic.

Marlow attributes Kurtz’s madness to the jungle. By taking a “terrible vengeance” out on him, it has forced Kurtz to abandon morality and reasonable judgment. The whispering forest echoes “loudly within” Kurtz because he is “hollow at the core…..” This shatters Marlow’s earlier image of Kurtz.

At this point, Marlow compares Kurtz’s world to a “region of subtle horrors.” He denounces Kurtz, considering him “no idol of mine.” The Russian opposes Marlow’s refutation by justifying Kurtz’s savagery. Since the heads belonged to rebels, Kurtz had no choice. Marlow rejects the Russian’s explanation. A few moments later, Kurtz appears for the first time. Marlow sees him “in the gloom,” while he stands “in the sunshine.” This contrast of light and dark shows how Marlow still isolates himself from Kurtz’s world. The natives trail behind, though, as if they follow a god.

When Marlow notices Kurtz’s deep voice, he completes the idea he had established earlier—Kurtz as more of a spiritual being than a physical one. Kurtz’s “thin arm,” “bony head,” and eyes of an “apparition”
de-emphasize his physicality. Marlow thinks of him as “an animated image of death carved out of old ivory.”

On the boat, Kurtz’s first words to Marlow, “I am glad,” represent an ironic acknowledgment. Since people had mentioned Marlow to Kurtz, they show the simple pleasure of meeting someone. However, we know Marlow feels the same way toward Kurtz, even with his recent doubtings. Marlow could have spoken these words, in turn.

Kurtz’s black mistress, “the wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman,” links him to a woman in Africa the way his Intended connects him to a woman in Europe. Although the pilgrims and the Russian disapprove of her, she stands immune from their censure. She is a reverse Kurtz in a female form, though more of a physical presence with her “flash of barbarous ornaments.” She never speaks, whereas Kurtz is a voice. Her “savage and superb” physical strength opposes Kurtz’s physical frailty.

The manager questions Kurtz’s sanity by calling his methods “unsound.” He believes he lacks judgment. Marlow defends Kurtz, saying, “Nevertheless, I think Mr. Kurtz is a remarkable man.” Marlow sides with Kurtz for two reasons. First, he dislikes the manager, so this contradiction, he knows, annoys him. Second, when he finds himself “lumped along with Kurtz,” he takes it as a compliment.

This affinity determines the next scene, when Marlow promises the Russian that he will save Kurtz’s reputation by keeping his savagery secret. Marlow surprises himself. “I did not know how truly I spoke,” he says. When the Russian flees the area, we see a further connection with Marlow. The Russian has a “canoe and three black fellows waiting” to take him away. This parallels Marlow’s steamer and crew on a smaller level. The Russian also needs shoes, which Marlow gives him. Remember earlier, Marlow needed shoes when the helmsman’s blood had soaked into them. The Russian also says he will never meet such a man again. We know Marlow feels the same way.

The next scene turns dream-like. Marlow falls asleep, then awakes after midnight with fires burning and drums filling the air “with muffled shocks and a lingering vibration.” The natives keep “their uneasy vigil” over Kurtz’s house, a religious connotation. When Marlow chases Kurtz through the jungle to get him back to the boat, we notice how possessive of him he feels. He says he is “jealous of sharing with any one the peculiar blackness of that experience.” Yet, he shares the memory of Kurtz with us as he narrates his adventure.

Kurtz’s crawling on all-fours to escape links him to the native in Section I who had crawled on all-fours to drink from the river. They both crawl to survive, they both are near death, and they both fall victim to the jungle. And, since the natives worship Kurtz, they should share similarities.

In the fragmented conversation with Kurtz, Marlow fluctuates between wanting to kill Kurtz and assuring him of success in Europe based on his accomplishments. Marlow knows that Kurtz personifies contradictions. There is nothing “above or below him”; he is mad, yet intelligent; and, he is “alone in the wilderness,” yet Marlow “supported him, his long bony arm clasped round my neck.” During the next scene, the natives and black mistress line the jungle to watch Kurtz leave, their god being taken from them. She leads them in a “roaring chorus,” suggesting a religious response at a formal service. When Marlow asks Kurtz if he understands their actions, he smiles and says, “Do I not?” He understands their devotion, and how removing him betrays their belief.

Marlow then scares the natives, to the dismay of some people on the boat. He fears for his life, so he blows the whistle. Only the black mistress remains, her arms “stretched tragically” in the pose of a priestess. She stays devoted until the end, the same way Kurtz’s Intended, another woman, will at the end.

As they escape “out of the heart of darkness,” Marlow continues his dedication to Kurtz. The manager and pilgrims look upon him with “disfavor.” His “unforeseen partnership” with Kurtz forges his complicity.
Marlow even helps Kurtz by closing the shutters to the outside, as he requests. Kurtz’s separation from the jungle unnerves him. He does not want to leave Africa and his followers the same way Marlow does not want to leave Kurtz. This explains why Marlow murmurs, “Oh, nonsense,” when Kurtz says he waits for death. “The horror! The horror!”—Kurtz’s last words—suggest many interpretations. They refer to his death, his destroyed plans, his submission to his evil side, and the pain of life. Marlow “blew the candle out” and then left the cabin. This extinguished light signifies not only Kurtz’s life, but the sanctity he embodies for Marlow.

Appropriately, a native announces Kurtz’s death. Marlow would not because he would rather deny it. Since Kurtz represents a god, his followers should pronounce his death. Ironically, Marlow appears “brutally callous” by not remaining with Kurtz; we know this is not true. His emotional closeness to Kurtz surpasses any pilgrim’s. Marlow agrees with the Russian when he proclaims Kurtz’s greatness. Kurtz “had something to say.” His judgment, as summarized in “The Horror!” expresses conviction and an “appalling face of a glimpsed truth.” Kurtz’s life extended to extremes. He “stepped over the edge,” while Marlow “had been permitted to draw back his hesitating foot.” Marlow withdraws where Kurtz advances.

This distinction represents the Freudian psychological terms ego and id. The id is man’s instinctual impulses and the satisfaction of primal needs. This is Kurtz, the man who satisfies his needs by returning to the primitive forest. He lets loose his urges, no matter how excessive or deviant they are. Conversely, Marlow is the ego—the part of the personality that controls behavior and external reality. He questions the savagery, killing, and abandonment of laws for pleasure.

Marlow never relinquishes his rational side for Kurtz’s irrational one. Marlow is the way Kurtz once was, and Kurtz is what Marlow does not want to be. When Marlow returns to Europe, the daily routine of working, eating, and drinking bores him. His experience has taught him things these people can never know. He feels like “laughing in their faces so full of stupid importance.”

He runs a fever, fulfilling the doctor’s predictions in Section I, when he had said that the changes take place inside. Like Kurtz, Marlow is mentally, not physically, ill. His “inexcusable behavior” proves the jungle’s influence.

The visits by the company official, Kurtz’s “cousin,” and the journalist illustrate their impersonal concern for Kurtz’s life, unlike Marlow’s deeply personal one. They want his papers for official and public reasons. Marlow gives them only unimportant papers, saving the personal letters and photographs for Kurtz’s Intended. Marlow finds the seamanship book and Kurtz’s writings. He gives the book to the Russian because he knows he values it, and Kurtz’s letters to his Intended because she values them.

Marlow’s last act—his visit to Kurtz’s Intended more than a year after his death—completes Marlow’s journey. She constitutes the European version of Kurtz’s black mistress in Africa. Her “fair hair,” “pale visage,” and “pure brow” oppose the black woman’s ornamental excesses. She speaks of her loss to Marlow. The black woman had expressed it through physical movements. They talk of intimacy, knowing Kurtz, and love. Ironically, she says she “knew him best.” In many ways, Marlow knows Kurtz on a deeper level than she does. She also is unaware of his black mistress, barbaric actions, and mental illness. She says he “drew men towards him.” For Marlow, nothing could be more true. Mesmerized by Kurtz, he remains loyal to his memory. Marlow avoids breaking the “illusion that shone with an unearthly glow” in Kurtz’s Intended. He believes she is not capable of dealing with the truth, a force too powerful to oppose. Her misconception shows when she says Kurtz’s “goodness shone in every act.” Marlow agrees, furthering the deception. He connects Kurtz’s Intended to the black mistress. These women show their love for Kurtz by cherishing their image of him—each mirroring their culture’s ways.

Let’s return for a moment to the oil painting Marlow had seen in Section I. We now recognize a reference to the black mistress and his Intended in the picture. The blindfold and torch reflect his Intended, her delusion
toward Kurtz and her light of love in his dark world. The somber, black background and stately movement reflect his black mistress, the African jungle and her measured gestures. With only Kurtz’s words left to them, Marlow and the woman talk of his verbal gifts. When she wants to know Kurtz’s last words, Marlow lies and tells her they had been her name, not “The horror! The horror!”

Earlier, in Section I, Marlow had said he detested a lie because there is a “taint of death” in it. He lies to Kurtz’s Intended to shield her from the truth. He has seen the truth in the jungle, but knows the lie here is better. Kurtz’s Intended cries, and, in so doing, comforts herself. It would have been “too dark altogether” for her. Marlow finalizes his idea of “how out of touch with truth women are,” which he had announced in Section II. He also atones, in a way, for his attitude toward his aunt for helping him secure his job. There he had belittled a woman, here he protects a woman.

The framed narrative ends. We return to the Nellie and Marlow’s “pose of a meditating Buddha.” As we had asked in Section I, what has he learned and suffered? Now we can answer these questions. He has learned of man’s darker side, his attraction toward evil, through Kurtz. He has discovered how the heart of darkness is not only a physical place (Africa), but a place within all men. He has suffered from seeing that darker side. Few people can claim this, which explains why Marlow “sat apart” from the others on the boat. Finally, the Director says, “We have lost the first of the ebb.” He ignores Marlow’s tale. Nothing reaches him, none of the philosophy and insights into human nature. The narrator lifts his head and sees “the heart of an immense darkness” in the distance. Marlow’s story has enlightened him. If we have listened, it has done the same for us.

**Themes**

Conrad blends many of his recurrent themes in Heart of Darkness. Chief among them are the education of a young man in search of the meaning of self and society in an ambiguous universe, the solitary and necessary reliance upon self, the oppositions of the values of civilization and savagery as well as their intersections, and the oppositions of appearance and reality and of innocence and experience replete with the tensions inherent in those eroding oppositions that blur at times into sameness. In blending all of these themes into his narrative Conrad also molds them into his habitual and overarching theme of tale-telling, the communication of experience and a sense of reality, the ruminations of a narrator attempting to sort out reality so that his listeners may see it, and the power and imperfections of language as the instrument of thought.

This is a tale of many voyages. The voyage into the heart of an immense darkness is a voyage into the collective unconsciousness of the human race, a quest after the meaning of intelligent life in an alien and brutal universe. The voyage is also a descent into the underworld, not unlike the journeys in Virgil and Dante. This voyage is also one of self-discovery as Charlie Marlow attempts, many years later, to continue to make sense of his experience and to communicate his self-exploration to his listeners on board the yawl Nellie. Finally, there is the emotional voyage of one of Marlow’s listeners, who is the chief narrator of the work and whose narrative frames Marlow’s. He bears the burden of the inward voyage of one attempting to make sense of Marlow’s discoveries.

**Additional Themes: Themes**

**Alienation and Loneliness**

Throughout *Heart of Darkness*, which tells of a journey into the heart of the Belgian Congo and out again, the themes of alienation, loneliness, silence and solitude predominate. The book begins and ends in silence, with men first waiting for a tale to begin and then left to their own thoughts after it has concluded. The question of what the alienation and loneliness of extended periods of time in a remote and hostile environment can do to
men's minds is a central theme of the book. The doctor who measures Marlow's head prior to his departure for Africa warns him of changes to his personality that may be produced by a long stay in-country. Prolonged silence and solitude are seen to have damaging effects on many characters in the book. Among these are the late Captain Fresleven, Marlow's predecessor, who was transformed from a gentle soul into a man of violence, and the Russian, who has been alone on the River for two years and dresses bizarrely and chatters constantly. But loneliness and alienation have taken their greatest toll on Kurtz, who, cut off from all humanizing influence, has forfeited the restraints of reason and conscience and given free rein to his most base and brutal instincts.

**Deception**

Deception, or hypocrisy, is a central theme of the novel and is explored on many levels. In the disguise of a ‘‘noble cause,’’ the Belgians have exploited the Congo. Actions taken in the name of philanthropy are merely covers for greed. Claiming to educate the natives, to bring them religion and a better way of life, European colonizers remained to starve, mutilate, and murder the indigenous population for profit. Marlow has even obtained his captaincy through deception, for his aunt misrepresented him as ‘‘an exceptional and gifted creature.’’ She also presented him as ‘‘one of the Workers, with a capital [W] … something like an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle,’’ and Conrad notes the deception in elevating working people to some mystical status they can not realistically obtain. At the end of the book, Marlow engages in his own deception when he tells Kurtz's fiancée the lie that Kurtz died with her name on his lips.

**Order and Disorder**

Conrad sounds the themes of order and disorder in showing, primarily through the example of the Company's chief clerk, how people can carry on with the most mundane details of their lives while all around them chaos reigns. In the larger context, the Company attends to the details of sending agents into the interior to trade with the natives and collect ivory while remaining oblivious to the devastation such acts have caused. Yet on a closer look, the Company's Manager has no talent for order or organization. His station is in a deplorable state, and Marlow can see no reason for the Manager to have his position other than the fact that he is never ill. On the other hand, the chief clerk is so impeccably dressed that when Marlow first meets him he thinks he is a vision. This man, who has been in-country three years and witnessed all its attendant horrors, manages to keep his clothes and books in excellent order. He even speaks with confidence of a Council of Europe which intended Kurtz to go far in ‘‘the administration,’’ as if there is some overall rational principle guiding their lives.

**Sanity and Insanity**

Closely linked to the themes of order and disorder are those of sanity and insanity. Madness, given prolonged exposure to the isolation of the wilderness, seems an inevitable extension of chaos. The atmospheric influences at the heart of the African continent—the stifling heat, the incessant drums, the whispering bush, the mysterious light—play havoc with the unadapted European mind and reduce it either to the insanity of thinking anything is allowable in such an atmosphere or, as in Kurtz's case, to literal madness. Kurtz, after many years in the jungle, is presented as a man who has gone mad with power and greed. No restraints were placed on him—either from above, from a rule of law, or from within, from his own conscience. In the wilderness, he came to believe he was free to do whatever he liked, and the freedom drove him mad. Small acts of madness line Marlow's path to Kurtz: the Man-of-War that fires into the bush for no apparent reason, the urgently needed rivets that never arrive, the bricks that will never be built, the jig that is suddenly danced, the immense hole dug for no discernible purpose. All these events ultimately lead to a row of impaled severed human heads and Kurtz, a man who, in his insanity, has conferred a godlike status on himself and has ritual human sacrifices performed for him. The previously mentioned themes of solitude and silence have here achieved their most powerful effect: they have driven Kurtz mad. He is presented as a voice, a disembodied head, a mouth that opens as if to devour everything before him. Kurtz speaks of ‘‘my ivory … my intended … my river … my station,’’ as if everything in the Congo belonged to him. This is the final arrogant insanity of the white man who comes supposedly to improve a land, but stays to exploit, ravage, and destroy it.
Duty and Responsibility
As is true of all other themes in the book, those of duty and responsibility are glimpsed on many levels. On a national level, we are told of the British devotion to duty and efficiency that led to systematic colonization of large parts of the globe and has its counterpart in Belgian colonization of the Congo, the book's focus. On an individual level, Conrad weaves the themes of duty and responsibility through Marlow's job as captain, a position that makes him responsible for his crew and bound to his duties as the boat's commander. There are also the jobs of those with whom Marlow comes into contact on his journey. In *Heart of Darkness*, duty and responsibility revolve most often about how one does one's work. A job well done is respected; simply doing the work one is responsible for is an honorable act. Yet Conrad does not believe in romanticizing the worker. Workers can often be engaged in meaningless tasks, as illustrated in the scene where the Africans blast away at the rock face in order to build a railway, but the rock is not altered by the blasts and the cliff is not at all in the way. The Company's Manager would seem to have a duty to run his business efficiently, but he cannot keep order, and although he is obeyed, he is not respected. The Foreman, however, earns Marlow's respect for being a good worker. Marlow admires the way the Foreman ties up his waist-length beard when he has to crawl in the mud beneath the steamboat to do his job. (Having a waist-length beard in a jungle environment can be seen as another act of madness, even from an efficient worker.) Section I of the novel ends with Marlow speculating on how Kurtz would do his work. But there is a larger sense in which the themes of work and responsibility figure. Marlow says, “I don't like work—no man does—but I like what is in the work—the chance to find yourself.” It is through the work (or what passes for it) that Kurtz does in Africa that his moral bankruptcy is revealed. For himself, Marlow emerges with a self-imposed duty to remain loyal to Kurtz, and it is this responsibility that finally forces him to lie to Kurtz's fiancée.

Doubt and Ambiguity
As reason loses hold, doubt and ambiguity take over. As Marlow travels deeper inland, the reality of everything he encounters becomes suspect. The perceptions, motivations, and reliability of those he meets, as well as his own, are all open to doubt. Conrad repeatedly tells us that the heat and light of the wilderness cast a spell and put those who would dare venture further into a kind of trancelike state. Nothing is to be taken at face value. After the Russian leaves, Marlow wonders if he ever actually saw him.

The central ambiguity of *Heart of Darkness* is Kurtz himself. Who is he? What does he do? What does he actually say? Those who know him speak again and again of his superb powers of rhetoric, but the reader hears little of it. The Russian says he is devoted to Kurtz, and yet we are left to wonder why. Kurtz has written a report that supposedly shows his interest in educating the African natives, but it ends with his advice, “Exterminate all the brutes!” Marlow has heard that Kurtz is a great man, yet he suspects he is “hollow to the core.” In Marlow's estimation, if Kurtz was remarkable it was because he had something to say at the end of his life. But what he found to say was “the horror!” After Kurtz's death, when various people come to Marlow representing themselves as having known Kurtz, it seems none of them really knew him. Was he a painter, a writer, a great musician, a politician, as he is variously described? Marlow settles for the ambiguous term “universal genius,” which would imply Kurtz was whatever one wanted to make of him.

Race and Racism
The subject of racism is not really treated by Conrad as a theme in *Heart of Darkness* as much as it is simply shown to be the prevailing attitude of the day. The African natives are referred to as “niggers,” “cannibals,” “criminals,” and “savages.” European colonizers see them as a subordinate species and chain, starve, rob, mutilate, and murder them without fear of punishment. The book presents a damning account of imperialism as it illustrates the white man's belief in his innate right to come into a country inhabited by people of a different race and pillage to his heart's content.

Kurtz is writing a treatise for something called the “International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs.” This implies the existence of a worldwide movement to subjugate all nonwhite races. Kurtz bestows a kind of childlike quality upon the Africans by saying that white people appear to them as
supernatural beings. The natives do, indeed, seem to have worshipped Kurtz as a god and to have offered up human sacrifices to him. This innocence proceeds, in Kurtz's view, from an inferior intelligence and does not prevent him from concluding that the way to deal with the natives is to exterminate them all.

Early in his journey, Marlow sees a group of black men paddling boats. He admires their naturalness, strength, and vitality, and senses that they want nothing from the land but to coexist with it. This notion prompts him to believe that he still belongs to a world of reason. The feeling is short-lived, however, for it is not long before Marlow, too, comes to see the Africans as some subhuman form of life and to use the language of his day in referring to them as “creatures,” “niggers,” “cannibals,” and “savages.” He does not protest or try to interfere when he sees six Africans forced to work with chains about their necks. He calls what he sees in their eyes the “deathlike indifference of unhappy savages.” Marlow exhibits some humanity in offering a dying young African one of the ship's biscuits, and although he regrets the death of his helmsman, he says he was “a savage who was no more account than a grain of sand in a black Sahara.” It is not the man he misses so much as his function as steersman. Marlow refers to the “savage who was fireman” as “an improved specimen.” He compares him, standing before his vertical boiler, to “a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind legs.”

Violence and Cruelty
The violence and cruelty depicted in *Heart of Darkness* escalate from acts of inhumanity committed against the natives of the Belgian Congo to “unspeakable” and undescribed horrors. Kurtz (representing European imperialists) has systematically engaged in human plunder. The natives are seen chained by iron collars about their necks, starved, beaten, subsisting on rotten hippo meat, forced into soul-crushing and meaningless labor, and finally ruthlessly murdered. Beyond this, it is implied that Kurtz has had human sacrifices performed for him, and the reader is presented with the sight of a row of severed human heads impaled on posts leading to Kurtz's cabin. Conrad suggests that violence and cruelty result when law is absent and man allows himself to be ruled by whatever brutal passions lie within him. Consumed by greed, conferring upon himself the status of a god, Kurtz runs amok in a land without law. (©2004 eNotes.com) Under such circumstances, anything is possible, and what Conrad sees emerging from the situation is the profound cruelty and limitless violence that lies at the heart of the human soul.

Moral Corruption
The book's theme of moral corruption is the one to which, like streams to a river, all others lead. Racism, madness, loneliness, deception and disorder, doubt and ambiguity, violence and cruelty—culminate in the moral corruption revealed by Kurtz's acts in the Congo. Kurtz has cast off reason and allowed his most base and brutal instincts to rule unrestrained. He has permitted the evil within him to gain the upper hand. Kurtz's appalling moral corruption is the result not only of external forces, such as the isolation and loneliness imposed by the jungle, but also, Conrad suggests, of forces that lie within all men and await the chance to emerge. Kurtz perhaps realizes the depth of his own moral corruption when, as he lays dying, he utters, “The horror! The horror!” Marlow feels this realization transferred to himself and understands that he too, living in a lawless state, is capable of sinking into the depths of moral corruption The savage nature of man is thus reached at the end of the journey, not upriver, but into his own soul.

Characters: Characters Discussed

Marlow

Marlow, the narrator and impartial observer of the action who becomes the central figure of the story. Because he is an observer and never centrally involved in the action of the story, he survives to tell the tale. He tells his listeners about his childhood passion for maps and about his declared intention to go, someday, to the heart of Africa. This thoroughly British Everyman describes how, years later, he signs on for the journey, with the
help of his aunt. An accident has befallen the steamer that he was to have commanded, and the previous captain was murdered. Because of the damage done to his intended vessel, Marlow waits months for repairs that eventually allow him to command his steamboat. He then makes the difficult and perilous trip upriver to retrieve a sick agent, Kurtz, who dies on board shortly after being rescued. Marlow’s voyage into the heart of Africa becomes, symbolically, a journey into the core of his being as well as into the evil at the center of human experience. After talking with Kurtz, with whom he identifies, he is able to see deeply into his own being. Even after returning to Brussels, Marlow is haunted by the memory of Kurtz.

**Kurtz**

Kurtz, a powerful and intelligent man who manages an inland trading station in the Belgian Congo. His fame is based partly on the fact that he brings in more ivory than all the others put together, and his station is surrounded by heads on stakes. After having arrived in the Congo with high ideals and a self-imposed mission to “civilize” the natives (he was entrusted with making a report for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs), he is instead converted by them to savagery and is destroyed by the dark and weak aspects of his own personality. He represents the dark continent, that is, a continent that has been subjected to the evils of colonialism. Kurtz’s awareness of his downfall and his conviction that evil is at the heart of everything is revealed in a long talk that he has with Marlow. After Kurtz falls into a fever and dies, Marlow becomes the custodian of his papers and last wishes.

**The District Manager**

The District Manager, an avowed enemy of Kurtz who wishes that the climate would do away with his rival. He believes that Kurtz’s new methods are ruining the entire district. His only interest while in the Congo is in collecting as much ivory as possible, and he is oblivious to the fate of the natives. His only desire is to get out of the country.

**Russian Traveler**

Russian Traveler, an admirer and disciple of Kurtz. He later tells Marlow about Kurtz’s ultimate corruption and about his grave illness.

**Kurtz’s Fiancée**

Kurtz’s Fiancée, a woman who Marlow wishes to retain the belief that Kurtz is good and powerful.

**Characters: Themes and Characters**

*Heart of Darkness* is a tale of many voyages. Charlie Marlow's voyage into the depths of the "Dark Continent" parallels his voyage into the heart of an immense darkness, into the collective unconsciousness of the human race. At the end of his quest Marlow hopes to find Mr. Kurtz and through him learn the meaning of intelligent life in an alien and brutal universe; instead the voyage becomes a descent into an underworld in which Kurtz is both captive and creator, and from which Marlow barely escapes. Many years later, as Marlow tells his story to listeners on the yawl Nellie, one of his listeners, whose narrative frames Marlow's, takes on the burden of attempting to make sense of Marlow's discoveries.

Conrad has referred to all his novels and short stories as "autobiography as fiction." *Heart of Darkness* is based upon the author's journey of 1890, first aboard the *Ville de Maceio* from France to the Belgian Congo and then on the *SS Roi des Belges* up the Congo River. Conrad narrates the story through both the "frame" narrator and Marlow, a veteran sailor who, like his listeners—the Director of Companies, the lawyer, the
accountant and the unnamed narrator—has spent his life at sea. Conrad, whose own father died when he was young, employed Marlow—an older and widely experienced father figure—as the principal narrator of several of his works of fiction in addition to *Heart of Darkness*, among them *Youth* and *Lord Jim*. A sometimes talkative and opinionated man, who is also a wise and ironic sage, Marlow charts the regions of Conrad's experiences, sensations, and ideas.

...the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky—seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness. The much-heralded Kurtz is the object of Marlow's speculations, aspirations, and anticipations as he journeys up the Congo. Enshrined by the Belgians back home as a being of supreme intellectual power and the principal representative of the forces of civilization in the Congo, Kurtz in fact demands worship from the natives and both instigates and partakes in unspeakably savage rites. The actual Kurtz and the idealized Kurtz are aptly reflected by the two women with whom he is romantically linked. Kurtz's African woman, sensual and wild, is an appropriate companion for the real Kurtz; his "Intended" in Belgium is one of the living dead in the heart of another darkness, civilization.

Many of the themes present in *Heart of Darkness* are trademarks of Conrad's work. Chief among them are the search for meaning in an ambiguous universe, the isolation of the self in an alienating society, and the conflict between civilization and savagery, appearance and reality, innocence and experience. Conrad blends these concerns into his narrative, molding them into the overarching theme of tale-telling: the communication of experience, the narrators struggle to convey a sense of reality to listeners, and the power and imperfections of language as an instrument of thought.

**Characters**

Conrad has referred to *Heart of Darkness* and all of his fiction as "autobiography as fiction," and this tale is based upon his own Congo journey of 1890, first aboard the Ville de Maceio from France to the Belgian Congo and then on the S.S. Roi des Beiges up the Congo River. In large measure Conrad is his own narrator in the persons of Marlow and the "frame" narrator; this makes him a chief character in two guises in addition to his authorial role. Next in importance is Marlow, a veteran sailor who, like his listeners — the Director of Companies, the lawyer, the accountant, and the unnamed narrator, perhaps a writer — has followed the sea. Marlow's (and Conrad's) voyages form the basis for many of Conrad's tales, so that Marlow's experiences and acquaintances become the ostensible subject of the narratives. Interestingly, Conrad, whose own experience of his father was virtually nonexistent, creates an older and widely experienced father figure as his principal voice. This father figure, a sometimes garrulous and opinionated man, who is concurrently a wise and ironic sage, explores and charts the regions of Conrad's experiences, sensations and ideas.

The much heralded Kurtz is the object of Marlow's speculations, aspirations, and anticipations on the voyage out and up the Congo. He is enshrined by the Belgians back home as a being of supreme intellectual power and the principal representative of the forces of civilization in the Congo. In fact, Kurtz has become an insanely evil genius who demands worship from the natives and who both partakes in and instigates unspeakably savage rites. The actual Kurtz and the idealized Kurtz are aptly reflected by the two women in the novella. Kurtz's African woman, sensual and wild, is an appropriate companion for the real Kurtz; his "Intended" in Belgium is one of the living dead in the sepulchral heart of another darkness, civilization, which has made of Kurtz something he is not.

**Additional Characters: Characters**

**The Aunt**

The Aunt uses her influence to help Charlie Marlow secure an appointment as skipper of the steamboat that
will take him up the Congo River. Echoing the prevailing sentiments of the Victorian day, the Aunt speaks of missions to Africa as “weaning the ignorant millions from their horrid ways.”

The Chief Accountant
The Chief Accountant, sometimes referred to as the Clerk, is a white man who has been in the Congo for three years. He appears in such an unexpectedly elegant outfit when Marlow first encounters him that Marlow thinks he is a vision. Both the Chief Accountant's clothes and his books are in excellent order. He keeps up appearances, despite the sight of people dying all around him and the great demoralization of the land. For this, he earns Marlow's respect. ‘‘That's backbone,’’ says Marlow.

The Clerk
See The Chief Accountant

The Company Manager
See The Manager

The Doctor
The Doctor measures Marlow's head before he sets out on his journey. He say he does that for everyone who goes “out there,” meaning Africa, but that he never sees them when they return. The Doctor asks Marlow if there's any madness in his family and warns him above all else to keep calm and avoid irritation in the tropics.

The Fireman
The Fireman is an African referred to as “an improved specimen.” He has three ornamental scars on each cheek and teeth filed to points. He is very good at firing the boiler, for he believes evil spirits reside within and it is his job to keep the boiler from getting thirsty.

The Foreman
The Foreman is a boilermaker by trade and a good worker. He is a bony, yellow-faced, bald widower with a waist-length beard and six children. His passion is pigeon flying. By performing a jig and getting Marlow to dance it with him, he shows that the lonely, brutalizing life of the interior of Africa can make people behave in bizarre ways.

Captain Fresleven
Fresleven, a Danish captain, was Marlow's predecessor. He had been killed in Africa when he got into a quarrel over some black hens with a village chief. He battered the chief over the head with a stick and was in turn killed by the chief's son. Fresleven had always been considered a very quiet and gentle man. His final actions show how drastically a two-year stay in Africa can alter a European's personality.

The Helmsman
A native, the Helmsman is responsible for steering Marlow's boat. Marlow has little respect for the man, whom he calls “the most unstable kind of fool,” because he swaggers in front of others but becomes passive when left alone. He becomes frightened when the natives shoot arrows at the boat and drops his pole to pick up a rifle and fire back. The Helmsman is hit in the side by a spear. His blood fills Marlow's shoes. His eyes gleam brightly as he stares intently at Marlow and then dies without speaking.

The Intended
The Intended is the woman to whom Kurtz is engaged and whom he had left behind in Belgium. One year after his death, she is still dressed in mourning. She is depicted as naive, romantic, and, in the opinion of Victorian men of the day, in need of protection. She says she knew Kurtz better than anyone in the world and that she had his full confidence. This is an obviously ironic statement, as Marlow's account of Kurtz makes clear. Her chief wish is to go on believing that Kurtz died with her name on his lips, and in this, Marlow
obliges her.

**The Journalist**
The Journalist comes to visit Marlow after Marlow has returned from Africa. He says Kurtz was a politician and an extremist. He says Kurtz could have led a party, any party. Marlow agrees and gives the journalist a portion of Kurtz's papers to publish.

**Mr. Kurtz**
Kurtz, born of a mother who was half-English and a father who was half-French, was educated in England. He is an ivory trader who has been alone in the jungles of Africa for a long time. No one has heard from him in nine months. The Company Manager says Kurtz is the best ivory trader he has ever had, although he suspects him of hoarding vast amounts of ivory. Marlow is sent to rescue him, although he has not asked for help. The word “kurtz” means “short” in German, but when Marlow first sees the man, seated on a stretcher with his arms extended toward the natives and his mouth opened wide as if to swallow everything before him, he appears to be about seven feet tall. Though gravely ill, Kurtz has an amazingly loud and strong voice. He commands attention. Kurtz, previously known to Marlow by reputation and through his writings on “civilizing” the African continent, is revealed upon acquaintance to be a dying, deranged, and power-mad subjugator of the African natives. Human sacrifices have been made to him. Rows of impaled human heads line the path to the door of his cabin. Kurtz is both childish and fiendish. He talks to the very end. His brain is haunted by shadowy images. Love and hate fight for possession of his soul. He speaks of the necessity of protecting his “intended” and says she is “out of it,” a sentiment Marlow will later echo. Kurtz's final words, uttered as he lies in the dark waiting for death, are: “The horror! The horror!” With this utterance, Kurtz presumably realizes the depth to which his unbridled greed and brutality have brought him. That realization is transferred to Marlow, who feels bound to Kurtz both through the common heritage of their European background and the infinite corruptibility of their natures as men.

**Kurtz's Cousin**
Kurtz's Cousin is an organist. He tells Marlow that Kurtz was a great musician. Marlow doesn't really believe him but can't say exactly what Kurtz's profession was. Marlow and the Cousin agree Kurtz was a “universal genius.”

**The Manager**
The Manager, a man of average size and build with cold blue eyes, inspires uneasiness in Marlow, but not outright mistrust. He is an enigma. He is smart, but cannot keep order. His men obey him but do not love or respect him. The Manager has been in the heart of Africa for nine years, yet is never ill. Marlow considers the Manager's greatness to lie in that he never gives away the secret of what controls him. Marlow speculates that perhaps there is nothing inside him, and maybe that is why he is never ill. The Manager says Kurtz is the best agent he ever had; yet he also says Kurtz's method is unsound and that he has done more harm than good to the Company. When Marlow discovers his ship is in need of repair, the Manager tells him the repairs will take three months to complete. Marlow considers the man “a chattering idiot,” but his three-month estimate turns out to be exactly right.

**The Manager's boy**
The Manager's “boy,” an African servant, delivers the book's famous line, “Mistah Kurtz—he dead.”

**The Manager's Uncle**
The Manager's Uncle, a short, paunchy man whose eyes have a look of “sleepy cunning,” is the leader of the group of white men who arrive at the Central Station wearing new clothes and tan shoes. The group calls itself the “Eldorado Exploring Expedition,” and uses the station as a base from which to travel into the jungle and plunder from its inhabitants. Marlow observes that they steal from the land “with no more moral purpose at the back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe.” The Manager's Uncle and the Manager refer to
Kurtz as ‘‘that man.’’

Charlie Marlow

Marlow, a seaman and a wanderer who follows the sea, relates the tale that makes up the bulk of the book. He is an Englishman who speaks passable French. He sits in the pose of a preaching Buddha as he tells a group of men aboard the *Nellie*, a cruising yawl in the River Thames, the story of his journey into the interior of the Congo. Marlow had previously returned from sailing voyages in Asia and after six years in England decided to look for another post. He speaks of his boyhood passion for maps and of his long fascination with Africa, that ‘‘place of darkness.’’ Through the influence of his aunt, Marlow is appointed captain of a steamer and charged with going up river to find Kurtz, a missing ivory trader, and bring him back. Marlow says he is acquainted with Kurtz through his writing and admires him. His trip upriver is beset with difficulties. Marlow encounters several acts of madness, including a French man-of-war relentlessly shelling the bush while there appears to be not a single human being or even a shed to fire upon. Later, he comes upon a group of Africans who are blasting away at the land, presumably in order to build a railway, but Marlow sees no reason for it, there being nothing in the way to blast. Everywhere about him, he sees naked black men dying of disease and starvation.

Revulsion grows within him over the white man's dehumanizing colonization of the Congo. It reaches a peak when Marlow finally meets Kurtz and sees the depths of degradation to which the man has sunk. Nevertheless, Marlow feels an affinity toward Kurtz. He sees in him both a reflection of his own corruptible European soul and a premonition of his destiny. Although Kurtz is already dying when Marlow meets him, Marlow experiences him as a powerful force. When Kurtz says, ‘‘I had immense plans,’’ Marlow believes the man's mind is still clear but that his soul is mad. Marlow takes the dying Kurtz aboard his steamer for the return trip down river. He feels a bond has been established between himself and Kurtz and that Kurtz has become his ‘‘choice of nightmares.’’ When Marlow hears Kurtz's last words—‘‘The horror! The horror!’’—he takes them to be Kurtz's final judgment on his life on earth. Seeing a kind of victory in that final summing up, Marlow remains loyal to Kurtz. One year after Kurtz's death, Marlow visits Kurtz's fiancée, who has been left behind in Brussels. He finds her trusting and capable of immense faith. Marlow believes he must protect her from all the horrors he witnessed in Africa in order to save her soul. When the girl asks to hear Kurtz's final words, Marlow lies and says he died with her name on his lips. Marlow then ceases his tale and sits silently aboard ship in his meditative pose.

The Narrator

The Narrator remains unidentified throughout the book. He tells the reader the story Charlie Marlow told to him and three other men (the captain or Director of the Companies, the accountant, and the lawyer) as they sat aboard the becalmed *Nellie* on London's River Thames, waiting for the tide to turn. The Narrator is an attentive listener who does not comment on or try to interpret the tale. He is, instead, a vessel through which Marlow's story is transmitted, much as Conrad is a vessel through whom the entire book is transmitted. When Marlow finishes speaking, the Narrator looks out at the tranquil river and reflects that it ‘‘seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness.’’

The Official

The Official demands that Marlow turn over Kurtz's papers to him, saying the Company has the right to all information about its territories. Marlow gives him the report on ‘‘Suppression of Savage Customs,’’ minus Kurtz's final comment recommending extermination, and says the rest is private. The Official looks at the document and says it's not what they '‘had a right to expect.’’

The Pilgrim in Pink Pajamas

See The Pilgrim
The Pilgrim
The Pilgrim is a fat white man with sandy hair and red whiskers. He wears his pink pajamas tucked into his socks. He cannot steer the boat. He assumes Kurtz is dead and hopes many Africans, whom he and all the other white people refer to as “savages,” have been killed to avenge Kurtz's death. Marlow tells the Pilgrim he must learn to fire a rifle from the shoulder. The pilgrims fire from the hip with their eyes closed.

The Pilgrims
The Pilgrims are the European traders who accompany Marlow into the jungle. They fire their rifles from the hip into the air and indiscriminately into the bush. They eventually come to look with disfavor upon Marlow, who does not share their opinions or interests. When they bury Kurtz, Marlow believes the Pilgrims would like to bury him as well.

The Poleman
See The Helmsman

The Russian
The Russian is a twenty-five-year-old fair-skinned, beardless man with a boyish face and tiny blue eyes. He wears brown clothes with bright blue, red, and yellow patches covering them. He looks like a harlequin—a clown in patched clothes—to Marlow. As he boards Marlow's boat, he assures everyone that the “savages” are “simple people” who “meant no harm” before he corrects himself: “Not exactly.” The Russian dropped out of school to go to sea. He has been alone on the river for two years, heading for the interior, and chatters constantly to make up for the silence he has endured. The Towson's Book on seamanship, which Marlow had discovered previously, belongs to the Russian. Marlow finds the Russian an insoluble problem. He admires and envies him. The Russian is surrounded by the “glamour” of youth and appears unscathed to Marlow. He wants nothing from the wilderness but to continue to exist. The Russian describes Kurtz as a great orator. He says one doesn't talk with him, one listens to him. He says Kurtz once talked to him all night about everything, including love. “This man has enlarged my mind,” he tells Marlow. The Russian presents Marlow with a great deal of information about Kurtz, chiefly that Kurtz is adored by the African tribe that follows him, that he once nearly killed the Russian for his small supply of ivory, and that it was Kurtz who ordered the attack on the steamer to scare them away.

The Savages
“Savages” is the blanket term the white traders use to refer to all African natives, despite their differing origins. The savages range from the workers dying of starvation and disease at the Outer Station to the cannibals who man Marlow's boat to the tribe who worships Kurtz. For the most part Marlow comes to consider all the natives savages, although he expresses some admiration for the cannibals, who must be very hungry but have refrained from attacking the few white men on the boat because of “a piece of paper written over in accordance with some farcical law or other.” When Marlow first arrives in Africa, he is appalled by the whites’ brutal treatment of the natives, and never expresses agreement with the pilgrims who eagerly anticipate taking revenge on the savages. He also seems to be shocked by the addendum to Kurtz's report that says, “Exterminate all the brutes!” Nevertheless, Marlow never sees beyond the surface of any of the natives. He compares watching the boat's fireman work to “seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind-legs,” and shocks the pilgrims when he dumps the body of the helmsman overboard instead of saving it for burial. For Marlow, the native “savages” serve only as another illustration of the mystery Africa holds for Europeans, and it is because of this dehumanization that several critics consider Heart of Darkness a racist work.

The Swedish Captain
The Swedish Captain is the captain of the ship that takes Marlow toward the mouth of the Congo. He tells Marlow that another Swede has just hanged himself by the side of the road. When Marlow asks why, the Swedish Captain replies, “Who knows? The sun too much for him, or the country perhaps.”
The Woman
The Woman is the proud, “wild-eyed and magnificent” African woman with whom Kurtz has been living while in the interior. She is the queen of a native tribe. When she sees Marlow's steamer about to pull away and realizes she will never see Kurtz again, she stands by the river's edge with her hands raised high to the sky. She alone among the natives does not flinch at the sound of the ship's whistle. Marlow considers her a tragic figure.

The Young Agent
The Young Agent has been stationed at the Central Station for one year. He affects an aristocratic manner and is considered the Manager's spy by the other agents at the station. His job is to make bricks, but Marlow sees no bricks anywhere about the station. The Young Agent presses Marlow for information about Europe, then believes his answers are lies and grows bored. The Young Agent tells Marlow that Kurtz is Chief of the Inner Station. He refers to Kurtz as “a prodigy … an emissary of pity and of science and progress.” The Young Agent establishes a connection between Kurtz and Marlow by saying that the same group of people who sent Kurtz into Africa also recommended Marlow to come and get him out.

Critical Essays: Sample Essay Outlines

• Topic #1
Marlow’s conflicting feelings toward Kurtz depend on a number of things. Sometimes he admires him, other times he denounces him. Write an essay analyzing these opposing feelings.

Outline
I. Thesis Statement: Based on Kurtz’s actions and ideas, Marlow’s feelings toward him alternate between admiration and reprehension.

II. Feelings of admiration
A. Kurtz’s talents
1. Obtained ivory
2. Organized the natives to work for him
3. Wrote of his experience and honestly evaluated them
B. Idolatry for Kurtz
1. Natives performed sacrifices in his honor
2. The Russian worships him
3. Marlow honors Kurtz’s memory to protect him

III. Feelings of reprehension
A. Kurtz abandoned morality
1. Killed people who opposed him (heads on poles)
2. Threatened to kill the Russian over ivory
B. Kurtz shows little restraint
1. Covets ivory and its importance
2. Regards the natives as inferior people—“Exterminate all the brutes” he wrote in his report
3. His methods are “unsound”

IV. Conclusion: Depending on what aspect of Kurtz Marlow considers, his feelings vary from one extreme to the opposite, from respect to revulsion.

• Topic #2
Who is the main character in Heart of Darkness, Marlow or Kurtz? Develop an argument showing how each one can be viewed as the main character.
Outline
I. Thesis Statement: Marlow and Kurtz each can be considered the main character. One cannot exist without the other.

II. Kurtz is the main character
A. He is Marlow’s goal
1. Marlow becomes obsessed with meeting Kurtz along the journey
2. Kurtz represents a side of Marlow that he is afraid to become
B. All the people and action revolve around Kurtz
1. The chief accountant, manager, and other company workers deal with Kurtz
2. All the ivory trading goes back to Kurtz

III. Marlow is the main character
A. As narrator, Marlow’s story is more important
1. Marlow’s feelings and judgment govern what the reader knows
2. The story shows his change after the journey
3. Marlow is in the entire novella, Kurtz isn’t
B. Marlow makes Kurtz a great figure
1. Only Marlow admires Kurtz in an extreme way
2. After Kurtz’s death, Marlow keeps him alive by preserving his memory

IV. Conclusion: An argument can be made for either Marlow or Kurtz as the main character.

• Topic #3
Heart of Darkness shows how the forces of nature control man. The jungle exposes man’s weakness. Write an essay showing how nature dominates all the people in the jungle.

Outline
I. Thesis Statement: The jungle influences everyone’s behavior. It not only affects them physically, but also mentally. It exposes man’s weakness in many ways.

II. Nature’s power
A. The forest’s trees and heat
1. Makes it difficult for the boats to sail
2. Blocks the natives and seamen from each other
B. Affects men physically and mentally
1. Causes the helmsman’s death
2. Marlow’s fever
3. Kurtz’s insanity

III. Man’s weakness
A. Man must adapt to survive
1. Lack of food and water affects their behavior
2. Breakdown leads to violence

IV. Conclusion: Nature’s power overwhelms man, exposing many weaknesses. Either mentally or physically, all the characters in Heart of Darkness succumb to nature’s force.

• Topic #4
The title Heart of Darkness refers to Africa as well as a psychological side of man. Develop these two meanings of the title.
Outline
I. Thesis Statement: Heart of Darkness is both a metaphor for an internal side of man, and a literal allusion to Africa. It simultaneously suggests a physical and mental reference.

II. It is a literal place
A. Africa is the dark continent
   1. Savages live there
   2. Dense jungle shades the land
   3. It is separated from the civilized world
B. Inequalities of power
   1. Whites control the natives
   2. Abuse of power for ivory and wealth
   3. Marlow despises the whites and empathizes with the natives

III. It is a psychological reference
A. Suggests man’s dark side
   1. Kurtz’s irrational acts
   2. Marlow’s illness after meeting Kurtz in Africa
   3. Natives’ extreme devotion to Kurtz, a mad god

IV. Conclusion: Heart of Darkness refers to both physical and mental aspects of the novella. These external and internal worlds influence each other.

- Topic #5
Women play a prominent role in Marlow’s experience in Africa. Without them, his story is incomplete.

Outline
I. Thesis Statement: Though in the background, the three women who appear in Heart of Darkness play an important role in Marlow’s journey to and from Africa.

II. Marlow’s aunt
A. She is the only “family” Marlow mentions
B. She helps him secure his position in the company
C. He visits her before he leaves for Africa
D. She refers to him as an “emissary of light”
E. She nurses him through his illness when he returns

III. Kurtz’s black mistress
A. She is Kurtz’s love in the jungle
B. Marlow admires her physical beauty
C. She never speaks, unlike Kurtz, who Marlow says is a “voice”
D. She follows Kurtz when they take him to the boat
E. The pilgrims shoot her as they leave

IV. Kurtz’s Intended
A. She contrasts Kurtz’s black mistress
   1. She lives in Europe
   2. She talks
   3. She shows her emotions
B. Marlow visits her after meeting Kurtz
   1. Marlow gives her Kurtz’s important papers
2. Marlow lies to protect her from the truth

V. Conclusion: In a predominantly male world, Marlow’s aunt, Kurtz’s black mistress, and Kurtz’s Intended affect him before, during, and after his experience in Africa.

- **Topic #6**
  The three sections in *Heart of Darkness* serve as borders around Marlow’s journey from London to Africa and back.

**Outline**
I. Thesis Statement: *Though Conrad uses a non-chronological narration, he separates Heart of Darkness into three sections to show Marlow’s emotional and literal progression as he journeys to Africa to meet Kurtz.*

II. Section I establishes Marlow’s introduction to Kurtz
A. Marlow joins the company and undergoes a physical
B. He works his way from the Outer to the Inner Station
C. He hears about Kurtz for the first time from the manager and accountant

III. Section II develops Marlow’s interest in meeting Kurtz
A. Marlow thinks of his journey in terms of speaking to Kurtz
B. He gets closer to Kurtz’s station
C. The natives attack Marlow’s boat from their proximity
D. Marlow meets the Russian at Kurtz’s station

IV. Section III culminates in Marlow finally meeting Kurtz
A. The Russian speaks of Kurtz’s greatness
B. Marlow meets Kurtz and speaks with him privately
C. Marlow shares in Kurtz’s death
D. Marlow preserves Kurtz’s memory when he meets Kurtz’s Intended

V. Conclusion: Each section of *Heart of Darkness* establishes a deeper relationship between Marlow and Kurtz.

- **Topic #7**
  Conrad incorporates many symbols. As with most symbols, their meanings vary with different interpretations or approaches.

**Outline**
I. Thesis Statement: *Through the use and frequency of symbols in Heart of Darkness, Conrad deepens the meaning of the story. Taken separately or in pairs, they add another level of analysis beneath the surface narrative.*

II. Objects as symbols
A. Kurtz’s painting of the blindfolded woman
B. Heads on poles outside of Kurtz’s hut
C. Shoes
   1. Marlow’s shoes
   2. The Russian’s shoes
D. Books
   1. *An inquiry into Points of Seamanship*
   2. Kurtz’s writings
III. Animals (non-humans) as symbols
A. Black hens at Fresleven’s death
B. Snake in reference to the river on the map
C. Hippos/hippo meat
D. Flies over the dying agent, then over Kurtz

IV. Places as symbols
A. Europe
B. Africa
C. Thames River
D. Jungle River

V. Conclusion: Conrad’s symbols embody more meanings other than their actual reference. By interpreting them in different ways, we expand the profundity of Heart of Darkness.

Critical Essays: Suggested Essay Topics

Section I
1. From the very opening on the Thames in Heart of Darkness, when day mixes with night, Conrad uses images of light and dark. Traditionally, light represents “good” and dark represents “bad.” Does Conrad use these interpretations in the same way? What do his constant references to light and dark suggest about Marlow’s story? Remember, Africa is the “dark continent,” where the black natives live.

2. Conrad alters his narration by making Marlow jump back and forth in time. Marlow mentions people and events we won’t know about until later. Cite examples when he does this, and explain how it affects the story. What advantages are there in breaking the sequence of events? Why does he tell us some things, while withholding others?

3. In a sense, two narrators speak—a nameless “I” and Charlie Marlow. The narrator introduces Marlow, then tells us some of his ideas. When Marlow speaks, we see everything from his perspective. Suppose someone else told Marlow’s story? Say, perhaps, the narrator or, possibly, one of the people Marlow meets along his journey. How would the story change? Would the information and details be different?

4. After taking the steamer captained by the Swede, Marlow sees the blacks for the first time. Why does the sight of them appall him? Why is he bothered by the way they are treated? No one else seems to be disturbed by their condition, so why is Marlow?

5. Section I contains a number of shorter episodes, as Marlow switches steamers and heads deeper into the jungle. What does he see and experience at each temporary stop over? Is there a progression as he moves from one boat to another? Does each stop affect Marlow’s attitude and opinion toward what he sees?

Section II
1. Marlow hears about Kurtz when other people talk about him. The accountant, brickmaker, manager, and the manager’s uncle speak of Kurtz to each other and/or Marlow. He pieces together their offhand remarks to form his opinion of Kurtz. From their references, characterize Kurtz. Is he admirable, a good ivory-agent, successful? Is it possible their positions influence their feelings toward Kurtz?

2. Marlow’s journey to Africa enables him to meet for the first time the natives, people unlike him in many ways. How does Marlow, as well as the other white men, contrast with the blacks? Focus not only on their physical differences, but their behavior and general way of life. Are they representative of their distinct
cultures, since one group comes from “civilized” Europe and the other comes from the “dark” continent?

3. A few times during Section I, Marlow mentions how he anticipates meeting Kurtz. Why does Kurtz intrigue him? Has the gossip about Kurtz fueled his interest? Is there any logical reason why he becomes obsessed with meeting Kurtz, a white man like himself?

4. The conversation between Marlow and the manager in Section I, and the talk between the manager and his uncle at the beginning of Section II, establish the manager’s character. According to Marlow, he has no good qualities. Show how the manager is greedy, self-centered, and more of a hindrance to Marlow than a help. Remember, the manager envies Kurtz, a man Marlow longs to meet. Could this account for Marlow’s unflattering picture of him?

5. Conrad ends Section I between when the manager’s uncle arrives and the manager talks to his uncle about Kurtz. Section II ends right after the Russian greets Marlow and tells them preliminary information about himself and Kurtz. Why does Conrad end these sections here? Are they important breaks in the plot? Would Heart of Darkness have been different if Conrad had left the novella as one chapter, with no separate sections?

Section III
1. From what the Russian says, he worships Kurtz. He always praises him, even justifying Kurtz’s barbaric killings. Marlow admires Kurtz also. How, though, does their admiration for Kurtz differ? Is the Russian’s more exaggerated, and Marlow’s more controlled? Since the Russian already knows Kurtz and has spoken to him, and Marlow has not met Kurtz yet, can that influence their respective feelings?

2. There are many indications of Kurtz’s mental illness. The decapitated heads on poles outside his home, his “exterminate all the brutes” philosophy, and his obsessive quest for ivory show his “unsound method,” as the manager terms it. Is Kurtz mad, or has he simply adapted to a barbaric society? Is he just playing by the rules of the jungle, which differ from those of a civilized society?

3. Though seemingly minor, the three women are important to Marlow’s adventure. His aunt, Kurtz’s black mistress, and Kurtz’s Intended influence the story in various ways. Compare the three of them. What does each one represent? Include how they come from different parts of society with separate values and beliefs, especially Kurtz’s two loves.

4. Kurtz appears in Heart of Darkness for a very short time. He does and says little. Why then is he so important to the story? Why didn’t Conrad expand his actual role? Does his limited appearance detract from his importance?

5. Describe the three people who visit Marlow to get Kurtz’s papers after he returns to Europe from Africa. What do their positions and interest in Kurtz say about Kurtz’s reputation? Why is Marlow so reluctant about giving them Kurtz’s papers? What are his personal reasons for protecting them?

6. Besides Marlow and Kurtz, Conrad identifies all the characters who appear by description, not name. We see the chief accountant, the manager, the manager’s uncle, the helmsman, the Russian, etc. Why does Conrad use these vague references? By not giving them names, does he shift the emphasis away from them, even though they all contribute to Marlow’s journey? Is their function, as suggested through their title, more important than their name?
Critical Essays: Critical Evaluation

In one sense, *Heart of Darkness* is a compelling adventure tale of a journey into the heart of the Belgian Congo. The story presents attacks by indigenous peoples, descriptions of the jungle and the river, and characterizations of Europeans who, sometimes idealistically and sometimes simply for profit, invade the jungles to bring out ivory. The journey into the heart of the Congo, however, is also a symbolic journey into the darkness central to the heart and soul of humanity, a journey deep into primeval passion, superstition, and lust. Those such as the district manager who undertake this journey simply to rob the Congolese of their ivory without any awareness of the importance of the central darkness can survive. Similarly, Marlow, who is only an observer, never centrally involved, can survive to tell the tale; but those such as Mr. Kurtz who are aware of the darkness, who hope with conscious intelligence and a concern for all humanity to bring light into the darkness, are doomed. They are themselves swallowed up by the darkness and evil they had hoped to penetrate.

Joseph Conrad manages to make his point, a realization of the evil at the center of human experience, without ever breaking the pattern of his narrative or losing the compelling atmospheric and psychological force of the tale. The wealth of natural symbols, the clear development of character, and the sheer fascination of the story make this a novella that has been frequently praised and frequently read ever since its publication in 1899. *Heart of Darkness* is, in style and insight, a masterpiece.

Christened Jósef Teodor Konrad Nacz Korzeniowski by his Polish parents, Conrad was able to write of the sea and sailing from firsthand knowledge. He left the cold climate of Poland early in his life to travel to the warmer regions of the Mediterranean, where he became a sailor. He began reading extensively and chose the sea as a central shaping metaphor for the ideas that were forming in his imagination. He traveled a great deal: to the West Indies, Latin America, Africa. Eventually, he settled in England and perfected (through the elaborate process of translating from Polish into French into English) a remarkably subtle yet powerful literary style.

Criticism of Conrad’s work in general and of *Heart of Darkness* in particular has been extensive and varied. Many critics concern themselves with Conrad’s style; others focus on the biographical aspects of his fiction; some see the works as social commentaries; some are students of Conrad’s explorations into human psychology; many are interested in the brooding, shadowy symbolism and philosophy that hovers over all the works. It is easy to see, therefore, that Conrad is a distinctively complex literary genius. E. M. Forster censured him as a vague and elusive writer who never quite clearly discloses the philosophy that lies behind his tales. Such a censure ignores Conrad’s notion about the way some fiction can be handled. Partly as Conrad’s mouthpiece, the narrator of *Heart of Darkness* states in the first few pages of the novel: The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted), and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of those misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine.

The mention of the narrator brings up one of the most complex and intriguing features of *Heart of Darkness*: its carefully executed and elaborately conceived point of view. Readers can detect (if careful in their reading) that the novel is in truth two narratives, inexorably woven together by Conrad’s masterful craftsmanship. The outer frame of the story—the immediate setting—involves the unnamed narrator who is apparently the only one on The Nellie who is profoundly affected by Marlow’s tale, the inner story that forms the bulk of the novella. Marlow narrates, and the others listen. The narrator’s closing words demonstrate his feelings at the conclusion of Marlow’s recounting of the events in the Congo: Marlow ceased, and sat apart, indistinct and silent, in the pose of a meditating Buddha. Nobody moved for a time. “We have lost the first of the ebb,” said
the Director suddenly. I raised my head. The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil
waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed somber under an overcast sky—seemed to lead
into the heart of an immense darkness.

Since Marlow’s narrative is devoted primarily to a journey to the mysterious “dark” continent (Africa), a
superficial view of the tale is simply that it is essentially an elaborate story involving confrontation with
exotic natives, treacherous dangers of the jungle, brutal savagery, and even cannibalism. Such a view,
however, ignores larger meanings with which the work is implicitly concerned—namely, its social and
cultural implications, the psychological workings of the cultivated European mind confronting an uncivilized
wilderness, and the richly colored fabric of symbolism that emerges slowly but inevitably from beneath the
surface.

*Heart of Darkness* portrays a perverted version of the “white man’s burden” in the philosophy adopted by the
ivory hunters at the inner station. Kurtz’s “Exterminate the brutes!” illustrates the tendency of Europeans to
exploit and oppress indigenous peoples. The figure of a gunboat on the coast futilely shelling the jungle itself,
rather than any specific target within it, also vividly portrays the useless, brutal, and absurd attitude adopted
by a nominally stronger culture toward a nominally weaker culture that it is unable to control.

The psychological characteristics of Marlow’s tale emerge most forcefully in the figure of Kurtz, a man
relieved of all social and civilized restraints, who goes mad after committing himself to the total pursuit of
evil and depravity. His final cry, “The horror! the horror!” suggests his ultimate realization of the
consequences of his life. Marlow also realizes this and is allowed (because he forces restraint upon himself) to
draw back his foot from the precipice of madness. The experience leaves Marlow sober, disturbed, meditative,
and obsessed with relating his story in much the same way Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s ancient mariner must
also relate his tale.

On a symbolic level, the story is rich; many books have been written on this facet of the novel. Some of the
major symbols employed in the text include the Congo River, which reminds Marlow of a snake as it uncoils
into the darkness of Africa and furnishes him with an uncontrollable “fascination of the abomination”; the
symbolic journey into Marlow’s own heart of darkness, revealing blindingly the evil of human nature and the
human capacity for evil; and the irony of the fact that truth is portrayed as bringing not light but rather total
darkness. The entire symbolic character of the work is summarized at the end of Marlow’s tale, when he is
forced to lie to Kurtz’s intended spouse in order to preserve her illusions; the truth appears to Marlow as an
inescapable darkness, and the novel ends with the narrator’s own observation of darkness.

*Heart of Darkness* is one of literature’s most somber fictions. It explores the fundamental questions about
human nature: the capacity for evil, the necessity of restraint, the effects of isolation, and the necessity of
relinquishing pride to achieve spiritual salvation. E. M. Forster’s censure of Conrad may be correct in many
ways, but it refuses to admit that through such philosophical ruminations Conrad allowed generations of
readers to ponder humanity’s heart of darkness.

## Critical Essays: Heart of Darkness

The central story is related by Marlow, a sailor and adventurer who appears in other Conrad works such as
*Lord Jim*. Marlow recalls his experiences as the captain of a steamboat in the Congo, far from the safety of
civilization. There, at a station on the edge of the jungle, he hears rumors of a Mr. Kurtz, a remarkable,
admired white man who operates a trading post located deep in the wilderness. The more Marlow learns of
Kurtz, the more interested he becomes, for Kurtz has cut off contact with the outside world, and there are
suggestions that he is seriously ill.
After numerous delays, Marlow steams up the winding, snakelike river toward Kurtz’s trading post. Marlow feels that he is heading into a prehistoric time. Along the way, his boat is attacked by savages, and when they finally reach Kurtz’s station, Marlow is shocked to see a display of human heads, the spoils of cannibal war. Kurtz himself is clearly demented and dying, and Marlow slowly realizes that the man is regressing to a primitive state, consumed by his own inner capacity for savageness.

Before Kurtz dies, he recognizes the extent of his change and is appalled. When Marlow returns to England, he lies to protect Kurtz’s good name. Like Kurtz, Marlow has seen the heart of darkness within all men.

Conrad first published the story of Kurtz in 1899 as “The Heart of Darkness” for Blackwood’s Magazine, but he revised it heavily for inclusion in Youth: A Narrative, And Two Other Stories in 1902. The tale has influenced writers as different as T. S. Eliot and William Faulkner, and it was the major inspiration for Francis Ford Coppola’s 1979 Vietnam War film, Apocalypse Now.

Bibliography:


Hay, Eloise K. The Political Novels of Joseph Conrad. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963. Presents the view that Heart of Darkness is not the masterpiece critical acclaim would suggest. Explores the social events and political climate of the time to show some of the influences on the plot and style.


Critical Essays: Critical Overview

When published in 1902 in a volume with two other stories (Youth and The End of the Tether), Heart of Darkness was praised for its portrayal of the demoralizing effect life in the African wilderness supposedly had on European men. One respected critic of the time, Hugh Clifford, said in the Spectator that others before Conrad had written of the European's decline in a “barbaric” wilderness, but never “has any writer till now succeeded in bringing … it all home to sheltered folk as does Mr. Conrad in this wonderful, this magnificent, this terrible study.” Another early reviewer, as quoted in Leonard Dean's Joseph Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness': Backgrounds and Criticisms, called the prose “brilliant” but the story “unconvincing.”

In his review published in Academy and Literature in 1902, Edward Garnett called the volume's publication “one of the events of the literary year.” Garnett said when he first read Heart of Darkness in serial form, he thought Conrad had “here and there, lost his way.” But upon publication of the novel in book form, he retracted that opinion and now held it “to be the high-water mark of the author's talent.” Garnett went on to
call *Heart of Darkness* a book that “enriches English literature” and a “psychological masterpiece.” Garnett was particularly taken with Conrad's keen observations of the collapse of the white man's morality when he is released from the restraints of European law and order and set down in the heart of Africa, given free reign to trade for profit with the natives. For sheer excitement, Garnett compared *Heart of Darkness* favorably to *Crime and Punishment*, published by the great Russian novelist Dostoyevsky in 1866. Garnett calls *Heart of Darkness* “simply a piece of art, fascinating and remorseless.”

Kingsley Widmer noted in *Concise Dictionary of British Literary Biography* that Conrad's literary reputation declined sharply in the mid-1920s after the publication of *Victory*, which Widmer flatly called a “bad novel.” But the following generation gave rise to a revival of interest in Conrad's work, centering largely on a few works written between 1898 and 1910 and including *Heart of Darkness*, *The Secret Agent*, and *Lord Jim*, which were given the status of modern classics.

Widmer concluded that although “much of Conrad's fiction is patently poor,” his sea stories contain a “documentary fascination in their reports of dying nineteenth-century merchant marine sailing experience.” Widmer faults Conrad for gross sentimentality, shoddy melodrama, and chauvinism. But he acknowledges that Conrad's best fiction, among which he counts *Heart of Darkness*, *Nostromo*, *The Secret Sharer*, and *The Secret Agent*, which he says may be “Conrad's most powerful novel,” achieves a modernism that undercuts those heavy-handed Victorian characteristics and provides the basis on which Conrad's reputation justifiably rests.

In more recent years, *Heart of Darkness* has come under fire for the blatantly racist attitudes it portrays. Some critics have taken issue with the matter-of-fact tone in which Marlow describes Africans as “savages” and “niggers” and portrays African life as mysterious and inhuman. Noted Nigerian author Chinua Achebe for instance, argued in a *Massachusetts Review* article that “the question is whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art. My answer is: No, it cannot.” Other critics, however, have reasoned that Conrad was merely portraying the views and attitudes of his time, and others have even suggested that by presenting racist attitudes the author was ironically holding them up for ridicule and criticism.

Despite such controversy, *Heart of Darkness* has withstood the test of time and has come to be seen as one of Conrad's finest works. The way in which Conrad presents themes of moral ambiguity in this novel, never taking a side but forcing the reader to decide the issues for him or herself, is considered a forerunner of modern literary technique. Frederick Karl, in *Joseph Conrad: The Three Lives*, calls *Heart of Darkness* the work in which “the nineteenth century becomes the twentieth.” Others have called it the best short novel in the English language. “The Secret Sharer and *Heart of Darkness*,” said Albert J. Guerard in his introduction to the novel, “are among the finest of Conrad's short novels, and among the half-dozen greatest short novels in the English language.” The book continues to this day to be taught in high schools, colleges, and universities and to be held up as an example of great literature.

**Essays and Criticism: Colonial Exploitation and Human Nature**

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is both a dramatic tale of an arduous trek into the Belgian Congo (the heart of darkest Africa) at the turn of the twentieth century and a symbolic journey into the deepest recesses of human nature. On a literal level, through Marlow's narration, Conrad provides a searing indictment of European colonial exploitation inflicted upon African natives. Before he turns to an account of his experience in Africa, Marlow provides his companions aboard the *Nellie* a brief history lesson about the ancient Roman invasion and occupation of Britain. He claims that the Romans were “no colonists” for “they grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. It was for robbery and violence, aggravated murder on a great scale.”
The reader is initially encouraged to consider that enlightened European colonists of Marlow's day were motivated by objectives far loftier than those of the Romans. Thus, Marlow's aunt who arranged his commission with the Company proclaims that the white man's purpose in Africa is to wean the continent's ignorant savages from their "horrid ways." Marlow himself says that modern efficiency and the "unselfish idea" of conquering the earth, rather than some "sentimental pretense," is what "redeems" the colonial enterprise in which he has been enlisted.

But when Marlow arrives at the mouth of the Congo River, it becomes immediately apparent that uplifting the natives from their savagery is not the driving force behind the European mission. At the Company's Outer Station, Marlow sees six black men yoked together and realizes that these pathetic figures "could not be called enemies, nor were they criminals." They are, in fact, brutalized victims "brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient and were them allowed to crawl away and rest." In its actual practice, the controlling value of efficient colonial administration consists primarily of working the natives until they die and then replacing them with still more victims. The European pilgrims that Marlow encounters are equipped with modern weaponry for the ostensible purpose of defending themselves against feral savages. In fact, the natives pose very little threat to the white conquerors. As Marlow's craft steams up the Congo River toward the Inner Station, they are attacked from the shore by a group of natives who shoot arrows and hurl spears at the craft. Yet as the narrator recalls this assault, "the action was far from being aggressive—it was not even defensive, in the usual sense: it was undertaken under the stress of desperation, and in its essence was purely protective." We later learn that the purpose of this attack was merely to prevent the party aboard from taking the tribe's "god," Mr. Kurtz, away from them. With the exception of a few "improved specimens" who are transformed into cogs in the machinery of exploitation, the European colonists are engaged in their own form of "murder on a great scale," showing no interest at all in bettering the lot of the Congo's inhabitants.

Hypocrisy is a salient theme in *Heart of Darkness*. Marlow's account repeatedly highlights the utter lack of congruence between the Company's rhetoric about "enlightening" the natives with its actual aims of extracting ivory, minerals and other valued commodities. As one of the fevered pilgrims whom he meets on his overland trek tells Marlow, it is not a virtuous idea or even efficiency per se that moves the colonists to treat the natives as members of an inferior species: it is, instead "'to make money, of course.'"

The colonial enterprise extends beyond the Company to an International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs. Marlow is told that this organization entrusted Kurtz to prepare a report for its future guidance. In it, Kurtz's dutifully acknowledges the importance of attaining maximum efficiency in the prosecution of the ivory trade, and he advocates creating the illusion that whites are supernatural beings in the minds of the child-like natives. As Marlow tells his listeners, while reading through Kurtz's proposal he found "at the end of that moving appeal to every altruistic sentiment it blazed at you, luminous and terrifying, life a flash of light in a serene sky: 'Exterminate all the brutes!'" From Kurtz's perspective, the most efficient way of suppressing savage customs among the natives is to simply annihilate them. Upon his return to Europe, Marlow presents the deceased Kurtz's report to the Company's manager. The latter seems to be disturbed by the sheer brutality of its conclusion, saying that "'this is not what we had a right to expect.'" It is not, however, that the Company manager takes issue with Kurtz's opinion that the natives are entirely expendable; it is that he disagrees with and is offended by the candid expression of this view. The time is not yet ripe for the Company to disclose its true colors, and the Company objections to Kurtz's barbarous methods are based on the damage that they might inflict upon its carefully crafted propaganda campaign about bringing Christian civilization to people who live in darkness. The Company and, indeed, all Europe is engaged in a fundamentally hypocritical endeavor, rationalizing their savagery on the pretext of alleviating the natives of their amoral primitivism.

The Central Station manager says to Marlow, "'you are of the new gang—the gang of virtue.'" By doing so, he directly implicates Conrad's narrator into the broader hypocrisies of European colonialism. Although it is
through his private account aboard the Nellie that the abominations being perpetrated against the Africans are
detailed, Marlow is by no means virtuous in the active sense of that term. He is, at bottom, a paid employee of
the Company. While he attempts to distance himself from the other pilgrims invading Africa through a muted,
retrospective indignation, at no point in his story does Marlow make any effort to intervene in the crimes that
he witnesses. Even upon his return to Europe, he consciously refrains publicizing what is actually occurring in
Colonial Africa. He even goes so far as to safeguard Mr. Kurtz's reputation. Thus, Marlow lies to Kurtz's
fiancée, reporting that Kurtz's “end … was in every way worthy of his life,” and then adding that Kurtz's
final words were her name.

Kurtz's dying words were, of course, “The horror! The horror!”; and Heart of Darkness is centrally
preoccupied with the problem of horror, of unmitigated evil. Marked by successive stages from the outer to
the central to the inner stations, Marlow's journey closely resembles the descent into hell that Dante undertook
in his epic poem the Inferno, finding the beast Satan at the center of Hell. The manager of the Central Station
apprises Marlow that Mr. Kurtz is “is an emissary of pity, and science, and progress, and the devil knows
what else.” It is this last association that has some truth to it. Kurtz is a diabolical figure, a surrogate of the
devil himself. When Marlow finally reaches the Inner Station where Kurtz presides, he finds that the “various
rumors” of Kurtz's evil reign are, if anything, understatements. He sees a row of severed heads impaled on
sticks and learns that they were taken from natives who rebelled against Kurtz's absolute dominion. Not only
does Kurtz brook no dissent to his reign, the natives that have gathered around him worship Kurtz as if he
were a god. Kurtz does not limit the scope of his monstrous actions to the natives. The misplaced Russian who
has attached himself to Kurtz recounts that after Kurtz stole his ivory, his idol then declared that he would
shoot him “because he could do so, and had a fancy for it, and there was nothing on earth to prevent him
killing whom he jolly well pleased.” Kurtz is a megalomaniac; he exerts life-and-death power for its own
sake, he engages in evil simply because it is possible for him to do so. Marlow concludes that Kurtz is insane,
but Kurtz himself insists on two separate occasions that he is perfectly conscience of his actions.

Whether Kurtz can be equated with Satan is, however, another matter altogether. He is both fiendish and
childish, and as Marlow comes to suspect, he may be “hollow at the core.” In the words of the Company's
chief accountant, Mr. Kurtz is “a very remarkable person,” yet, even before he meets Kurtz, Marlow
observes that “I am not prepared to affirm the fellow was exactly worth the life we lost in getting to him.”
When he finally comes face to face with Kurtz, Marlow finds an unnaturally elongated sickly figure stretched
as “an image of death carved out of old ivory.” Not only is Kurtz a physically unimpressive being, he is not a
genius nor was he ever an especially noble individual even when he had all of his mental faculties. Kurtz is
both grand and pathetic.

The disparity between the epic scale of Kurtz's evil and his seeming hollowness is but one example of the
discordant notes that arise throughout Marlow's story. Ambiguity and contradiction abound in the Heart of
Darkness. There are numerous instances in which seemingly inexplicable events occur. Before departing for
Africa, Marlow undergoes a physical examination that has no real purpose. He then witnesses a European
warship firing its guns into the bush along the African coast for no apparent reason, and the pilgrims who
accompany him on the overland segment of his journey routinely discharge their rifles along the way without
aiming. The colonists are engaged in massive projects that alter the natural landscape for no rhyme or reason,
digging a huge pit that seems to have no purpose. There is absolutely no explanation for the admiration that
the Russian sailor extends towards Kurtz. The figure of the native woman (or queen) who appears along the
riverbank as Kurtz is taken from his people is a complete enigma. Conrad's story is filled with unexplained
details, and the reader gains the suspicion that they may be meaningless and that this journey into the Heart of
Darkness is, in fact, devoid of any lessons.

Reinforcing this motif of ambiguity, doubt, and the meaningless, Conrad's text appears to challenge the very
premise that human experience can be related in words. In a sense, Heart of Darkness is about the act of
story-telling itself. The framing of the tale, with an external narrator describing Marlow sitting aboard the
Nellie, highlights the status of his story as an act of narration. Although Marlow as narrator is competent to perform the task at hand, holding his audience in rapture, at several points in his story, he falters and appears to be at a loss for words, telling his listeners, for example, that it is “impossible” to convey the feelings that he experienced. Marlow says that Kurtz presided over “unspeakable rituals” (that he does not describe) and that in the Congo the “earth seems unearthly.” At each of these junctures, Conrad suggests that words are inadequate, that normal communication is somehow futile, and that, at bottom, human experience itself is without meaning and, like Kurtz, hollow at its core. Like Marlow's listeners, at the conclusion of his story, the reader is apt to sit in silence, pondering what, if anything, has been revealed.

Essays and Criticism: The Intertwining of Philosophical and Colonial Themes

The original publication of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* was a three-part serialization in London's *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1899. It was subsequently published in a collection of three stories by Conrad in 1902. The date of *Heart of Darkness* should be noted, for it provides a historical context which illuminates the story's relation to both the contemporary turn-of-the-century world to which Conrad responds in the tale, and also the influential role Conrad plays in the subsequent progress of twentieth-century literary history.

Traditionally there have been two main ways of approaching the interpretation of *Heart of Darkness*. Critics and readers have tended to focus on either the implications of Conrad's intense fascination with European colonialism in Africa and around the world, or they have centered on his exploration of seemingly more abstract philosophical issues regarding, among other things, the human condition, the nature of Good and Evil, and the power of language. The former interpretive choice would concentrate on the ways Conrad presents European colonialism (of which he had much firsthand experience, being a sailor himself), while the latter would primarily investigate Conrad's exposition of philosophical questions. Even a cursory reading of the tale makes it clear that there is ample evidence for both of these interpretive concerns. What is perhaps less obvious, but equally important, is the way the historical reality which Conrad takes as his subject matter and the philosophical meditation to which Kurtz's story gives rise are intrinsically connected to one another.

The turn of the twentieth century was a period of intense colonial activity for most of the countries of Europe. Conrad refers to European colonialism countless times in *Heart of Darkness*, but perhaps the most vivid instance is when Marlow, while waiting in the office of the Belgian Company, sees “a large shining map [of colonial Africa], marked with all the colours of the rainbow. There was,’’ he says, “a vast amount of red—good to see at any time, because one knows that some real work is done there, a deuce of a lot of blue, a little green, smears of orange, and, on the East Coast, a purple patch…. However, I wasn't going into any of these. I was going into the yellow.’’ These colors, of course, correspond to the territorial claims made on African land by the various nations of Europe: red is British, blue French, green Italian, orange Portuguese, purple German, and yellow Belgian. The map bears noting. On the one hand it establishes the massive geographical scale of Europe's colonial presence in Africa, but it also symbolically sets this presence up in relation to another central thematic concern of the novella: the popular conception of colonialism in Europe.

Conrad links the colored maps to the childlike ignorance and apathy of the European public as to what really goes on in the colonies. Just a few moments before describing the map in the office in Brussels Marlow had recalled his childhood, saying: “Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say, ‘When I grow up I will go there.’” Much of *Heart of Darkness* is then a grim and detailed exposition of the real “glories of exploration” which Marlow observes firsthand, but in these opening moments before Marlow has left for Africa Conrad has given his assessment of the perspective on the colonies from the point of view of the common European: on public display in the
Another example of the distance between the popular conception of the colonies and their reality can be found in the frequent reference made to the purportedly civilizing aspect of colonial conquest. Marlow's aunt speaks of "weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways" and Kurtz's early pamphlet ominously claims that "by the simple exercise of [the colonists'] will [they] can exert a power for good practically unbounded." Marlow's direct experience of the trading stations in the Congo, and Kurtz's scrawled note "Exterminate all the brutes" at the end of the pamphlet put the lie to these European pretensions to civilizing charity. And to Conrad's British readers of 1900 these revelations may have been shocking. There was, it should be noted, a growing anti-colonial campaign being waged by dissidents throughout Europe at the time, and Conrad's novella can be considered a part of that campaign.

But in addition to the aggressive presentation of the grim conditions which existed in Europe's colonies—which Conrad succeeds in making very vivid—Heart of Darkness also creates a theme from certain philosophical problems which become central to the dawning literary movement called Modernism. Conrad shows the way the European public is profoundly ignorant (perhaps willfully) of what goes on in their colonies, but he also suggests that that very separation reveals a problematic relation between belief and reality, between representation and truth, which can also be investigated as a philosophical question. Keeping in mind the way this problem has been introduced in the novella (i.e. the specific relation between Europe and its colonies), let us briefly sketch out the philosophical and literary attempts to address the problem of representation in Modernism.

Roughly speaking Modernism had its peak in the years between World War I and World War II. The great canonical Modernists include such writers as James Joyce Ezra Pound Gertrude Stein Virginia Woolf William Faulkner and others. In most accounts of the period what links the Modernist writers loosely together is their intensive formal experimentation with literary and linguistic techniques; that is to say, their experimentation with the actual modes of literary representation. Stein's experiments with syntax, Joyce's melding of languages and myths, Faulkner's endless sentences, can all be seen as various ways of working through difficult questions raised about the very nature of language and how it works. Language in Modernist literature is no longer seen as a stable vehicle for the communication of meaning, but rather it is put up for radical questioning in itself. Modernist experimentation, one might say, arises out of the doubt that language (at least language as it has been used in the past) is able to communicate or sufficient to represent meaning or truth. And the seeds of this very doubt, to bring us back to Conrad, can be seen in Heart of Darkness. Some of the most illustrative examples of how Conrad introduces these Modernistic concerns can be seen at the points of Marlow's narration where the actual question of meaning explicitly arises.

Clearly Marlow has no trouble narrating events; he is indeed quite a storyteller. Yet, at various times in the narration the flow of his speech is interrupted and he seems at a loss for words. If we pick one of these moments we can see the way Conrad is creating a theme from the very instability and inadequacy of language itself ("words," "names," the "story") to contain and convey what one might call "truth," "meaning," or "essence" (Marlow calls it all three). At a point well into his tale Marlow says:

"At the time I did not see [Kurtz]—you understand. He was just a word for me. I did not see the man in the name any more than you do. Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream—making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is the very essence of dreams...."

He sat silent for a while.
“… No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence—that which makes its truth, its meaning—its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream—alone…”

Conrad has set up a clear opposition in Marlow's speech here: the opposition is between language on the one hand and truth or meaning on the other. In the quoted passage Marlow is exasperated because when faced with the task of communicating something deeper than just the narrative of events he is at a loss for words—or more precisely, the words themselves fail him. His pronouncement that it is “impossible” for language to do certain things—for language to hold the essence of things as they exist—foreshadows the dilemma at the center of Modernist and indeed much of twentieth-century philosophical thought. But what he is trying to tell is not just “the Truth” in the abstract, but rather the truth about Kurtz, the truth of his experience of the European colonies. This suggests the way that the philosophical themes of the tale are intertwined with if not identical to the colonial themes. Conrad has the two coexisting in such close proximity that they in fact appear to be two sides of the same coin.

The debate, then, over whether Heart of Darkness should be interpreted in terms of either colonial and historical or philosophical questions misses Conrad's insight that the two are in fact inseparable. As the complex textual fusion of the two in Heart of Darkness implies, the seemingly abstract philosophical problems concerning language and truth arise only out of concrete problems (such as colonialism) which exist in the social world, while at the same time the concrete problems of colonial domination at the turn of the twentieth century have extensive philosophical implications.

Source: Kevin Attell, in an essay for Novels for Students, Gale, 1997. Attell is a doctoral candidate at the University of California-Berkeley.

Essays and Criticism: An Image of Africa

Heart of Darkness projects the image of Africa as “the other world,” the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where a man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality. The book opens on the River Thames, tranquil, resting peacefully “at the decline of day after ages of good service done to the race that peopled its banks.” But the actual story takes place on the River Congo, the very antithesis of the Thames. The River Congo is quite decidedly not a River Emeritus. It has rendered no service and enjoys no old-age pension. We are told that “going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginning of the world.”

Is Conrad saying then that these two rivers are very different, one good, the other bad? Yes, but that is not the real point. What actually worries Conrad is the lurking hint of kinship, of common ancestry. For the Thames, too, “has been one of the dark places of the earth.” It conquered its darkness, of course, and is now at peace. But if it were to visit its primordial relative, the Congo, it would run the terrible risk of hearing grotesque, suggestive echoes of its own forgotten darkness, and of falling victim to an avenging recrudescence of the mindless frenzy of the first beginnings.

I am not going to waste your time with examples of Conrad's famed evocation of the African atmosphere. In the final consideration it amounts to no more than a steady, ponderous, fake-ritualistic repetition of two sentences, one about silence and the other about frenzy. An example of the former is, “It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention,” and of the latter, “The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy.” Of course, there is a judicious change of adjective from time to time so that instead of “inscrutable,” for example, you might have “unspeakable,” etc., etc.
The eagle-eyed English critic, F. R. Leavis, drew attention nearly thirty years ago to Conrad's "adjectival insistence upon inexpressible and incomprehensible mystery." That insistence must not be dismissed lightly, as many Conrad critics have tended to do, as a mere stylistic flaw. For it raises serious questions of artistic good faith. When a writer, while pretending to record scenes, incidents and their impact, is in reality engaged in inducing hypnotic stupor in his readers through a bombardment of emotive words and other forms of trickery, much more has to be at stake than stylistic felicity. Generally, normal readers are well armed to detect and resist such underhand activity. But Conrad chose his subject well—one which was guaranteed not to put him in conflict with the psychological predisposition of his readers or raise the need for him to contend with their resistance. He chose the role of purveyor of comforting myths.

The most interesting and revealing passages in *Heart of Darkness* are, however, about people. I must quote a long passage from the middle of the story in which representatives of Europe in a steamer going down the Congo encounter the denizens of Africa:

"We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet. We could have fancied ourselves the first of men taking possession of an accursed inheritance, to be subdued at the cost of profound anguish and of excessive toil. But suddenly, as we straggled round a bend, there would be a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass-roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage. The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy. The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us—who could tell? We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings; we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse. We could not remember because we were travelling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign—and no memories.

The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there—there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly, and the men were—No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you—you so remote from the night of first ages—could comprehend.

Herein lies the meaning of *Heart of Darkness* and the fascination it holds over the Western mind: "What thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours.... Ugly."

Having shown us Africa in the mass, Conrad then zeros in on a specific example, giving us one of his rare descriptions of an African who is not just limbs or rolling eyes:

"And between whiles I had to look after the savage who was fireman. He was an improved specimen, he could fire up a vertical boiler. He was there below me, and, upon my word, to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind legs. A few months of training had done for that really fine chap. He squinted at the steam gauge and at the water gauge with an evident effort of intrepidity—and he had filed his teeth, too, the poor devil, and the wool of his pate shaved into queer patterns, and three ornamental scars on each of his cheeks. He ought to have been clapping his hands and"
stamping his feet on the bank, instead of which he was hard at work, a thrall to strange witchcraft, full of improving knowledge.

As everybody knows, Conrad is a romantic on the side. He might not exactly admire savages clapping their hands and stamping their feet but they have at least the merit of being in their place, unlike this dog in a parody of breeches. For Conrad, things (and persons) being in their place is of the utmost importance.

Towards the end of the story, Conrad lavishes great attention quite unexpectedly on an African woman who has obviously been some kind of mistress to Mr. Kurtz and now presides (if I may be permitted a little imitation of Conrad) like a formidable mystery over the inexorable imminence of his departure:

She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent…. She stood looking at us without a stir and like the wilderness itself, with an air of brooding over an inscrutable purpose.

This Amazon is drawn in considerable detail, albeit of a predictable nature, for two reasons. First, she is in her place and so can win Conrad's special brand of approval; and second, she fulfills a structural requirement of the story; she is a savage counterpart to the refined, European woman with whom the story will end:

She came forward, all in black with a pale head, floating towards me in the dusk. She was in mourning…. She took both my hands in hers and murmured, ‘‘I had heard you were coming.’’… She had a mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering.

The difference in the attitude of the novelist to these two women is conveyed in too many direct and subtle ways to need elaboration. But perhaps the most significant difference is the one implied in the author's bestowal of human expression to the one and the withholding of it from the other. It is clearly not part of Conrad's purpose to confer language on the ‘‘rudimentary souls’’ of Africa. They only ‘‘exchanged short grunting phrases’’ even among themselves but mostly they were too busy with their frenzy. There are two occasions in the book, however, when Conrad departs somewhat from his practice and confers speech, even English speech, on the savages. The first occurs when cannibalism gets the better of them:

‘‘Catch 'im,'’ he snapped, with a bloodshot widening of his eyes and a flash of sharp white teeth—‘‘catch 'im. Give 'im to us.’’ ‘‘To you, eh?’’ I asked; ‘‘what would you do with them?’’ ‘‘Eat 'im!’’ he said curtly….

The other occasion is the famous announcement.

Mistah Kurtz—he dead.

At first sight, these instances might be mistaken for unexpected acts of generosity from Conrad. In reality, they constitute some of his best assaults. In the case of the cannibals, the incomprehensible grunts that had thus far served them for speech suddenly proved inadequate for Conrad's purpose of letting the European glimpse the unspeakable craving in their hearts. Weighing the necessity for consistency in the portrayal of the dumb brutes against the sensational advantages of securing their conviction by clear, unambiguous evidence issuing out of their own mouth, Conrad chose the latter. As for the announcement of Mr. Kurtz's death by the ‘‘insolent black head of the doorway,’’ what better or more appropriate finis could be written to the horror story of that wayward child of civilization who willfully had given his soul to the powers of darkness and ‘‘taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land’’ than the proclamation of his physical death by the forces he had joined?

It might be contended, of course, that the attitude to the African in Heart of Darkness is not Conrad's but that of his fictional narrator, Marlow, and that far from endorsing it Conrad might indeed be holding it up to irony.
and criticism. Certainly, Conrad appears to go to considerable pains to set up layers of insulation between himself and the moral universe of his story. He has, for example, a narrator behind a narrator. The primary narrator is Marlow but his account is given to us through the filter of a second, shadowy person. But if Conrad's intention is to draw a cordon sanitaire between himself and the moral and psychological malaise of his narrator, his care seems to me totally wasted because he neglects to hint however subtly or tentatively at an alternative frame of reference by which we may judge the actions and opinions of his characters. It would not have been beyond Conrad's power to make that provision if he had thought it necessary. Marlow seems to me to enjoy Conrad's complete confidence—a feeling reinforced by the close similarities between their careers.

Marlow comes through to us not only as a witness of truth, but one holding those advanced and humane views appropriate to the English liberal tradition which required all Englishmen of decency to be deeply shocked by atrocities in Bulgaria or the Congo of King Leopold of the Belgians or wherever. Thus Marlow is able to toss out such bleeding-heart sentiments as these:

> They were all dying slowly—it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now—nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. Brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest.

The kind of liberalism espoused here by Marlow/Conrad touched all the best minds of the age in England, Europe, and America. It took different forms in the minds of different people but almost always managed to sidestep the ultimate question of equality between white people and black people. That extraordinary missionary, Albert Schweitzer, who sacrificed brilliant careers in music and theology in Europe for a life of service to Africans in much the same area as Conrad writes about, epitomizes the ambivalence. In a comment which I have often quoted but must quote one last time Schweitzer says: “The African is indeed my brother but my junior brother.” And so he proceeded to build a hospital appropriate to the needs of junior brothers with standards of hygiene reminiscent of medical practice in the days before the germ theory of disease came into being. Naturally, he became a sensation in Europe and America. Pilgrims flocked, and I believe still flock even after he has passed on, to witness the prodigious miracle in Lamberene, on the edge of the primeval forest.

Conrad's liberalism would not take him quite as far as Schweitzer's, though. He would not use the word “brother” however qualified; the farthest he would go was “kinship.” When Marlow's African helmsman falls down with a spear in his heart he gives his white master one final disquieting look.

> And the intimate profundity of that look he gave me when he received his hurt remains to this day in my memory—like a claim of distant kinship affirmed in a supreme moment.

It is important to note that Conrad, careful as ever with his words, is not talking so much about distant kinship as about someone laying a claim on it. The black man lays a claim on the white man which is well-nigh intolerable. It is the laying of this claim which frightens and at the same time fascinates Conrad, “… the thought of their humanity—like yours…. Ugly.”

The point of my observations should be quite clear by now, namely, that Conrad was a bloody racist. That this simple truth is glossed over in criticism of his work is due to the fact that white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely undetected. Students of Heart of Darkness will often tell you that Conrad is concerned not so much with Africa as with the deterioration of one European mind caused by solitude and sickness. They will point out to you that Conrad is, if anything, less charitable to the Europeans in the story than he is to the natives. A Conrad student told me in Scotland last year that Africa is merely a setting for the disintegration of the mind of Mr. Kurtz.
Which is partly the point: Africa as setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor. Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril. Of course, there is a preposterous and perverse kind of arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the breakup of one petty European mind. But that is not even the point. The real question is the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world. And the question is whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art. My answer is: No, it cannot. I would not call that man an artist, for example, who composes an eloquent instigation to one people to fall upon another and destroy them. No matter how striking his imagery or how beautiful his cadences fall, such a man is no more a great artist than another may be called a priest who reads the mass backwards or a physician who poisons his patients. All those men in Nazi Germany who lent their talent to the service of virulent racism whether in science, philosophy or the arts have generally and rightly been condemned for their perversions. The time is long overdue for taking a hard look at the work of creative artists who apply their talents, alas often considerable as in the case of Conrad, to set people against people. This, I take it, is what Yevtushenko is after when he tells us that a poet cannot be a slave trader at the same time, and gives the striking example of Arthur Rimbaud who was fortunately honest enough to give up any pretenses to poetry when he opted for slave trading. For poetry surely can only be on the side of man's deliverance and not his enslavement; for the brotherhood and unity of all mankind and against the doctrines of Hitler's master races or Conrad's "rudimentary souls." …

[Conrad] was born in 1857, the very year in which the first Anglican missionaries were arriving among my own people in Nigeria. It was certainly not his fault that he lived his life at a time when the reputation of the black man was at a particularly low level. But even after due allowances have been made for all the influences of contemporary prejudice on his sensibility, there remains still in Conrad's attitude a residue of antipathy to black people which his peculiar psychology alone can explain. His own account of his first encounter with a black man is very revealing:

A certain enormous buck nigger encountered in Haiti fixed my conception of blind, furious, unreasoning rage, as manifested in the human animal to the end of my days. Of the nigger I used to dream for years afterwards.

Certainly, Conrad had a problem with niggers. His inordinate love of that word itself should be of interest to psychoanalysts. Sometimes his fixation on blackness is equally interesting as when he gives us this brief description:

A black figure stood up, strode on long black legs, waving long black arms.

As though we might expect a black figure striding along on black legs to have white arms! But so unrelenting is Conrad's obsession.

As a matter of interest Conrad gives us in A Personal Record what amounts to a companion piece to the buck nigger of Haiti. At the age of sixteen Conrad encountered his first Englishman in Europe. He calls him "my unforgettable Englishman." and describes him in the following manner:

[his] calves exposed to the public gaze … dazzled the beholder by the splendor of their marble-like condition and their rich tone of young ivory…. The light of a headlong, exalted satisfaction with the world of men illumined his face…and triumphant eyes. In passing he cast a glance of kindly curiosity and a friendly gleam of big, sound, shiny teeth … his white calves twinkled sturdily.
Irrational love and irrational hate jostling together in the heart of that tormented man. But whereas irrational love may at worst engender foolish acts of indiscretion, irrational hate can endanger the life of the community….

Whatever Conrad's problems were, you might say he is now safely dead. Quite true. Unfortunately, his heart of darkness plagues us still. Which is why an offensive and totally deplorable book can be described by a serious scholar as ‘‘among the half dozen greatest short novels in the English language,’’ and why it is today perhaps the most commonly prescribed novel in the twentieth-century literature courses in our own English Department here. Indeed the time is long overdue for a hard look at things.

There are two probable grounds on which what I have said so far may be contested. The first is that it is no concern of fiction to please people about whom it is written. I will go along with that. But I am not talking about pleasing people. I am talking about a book which parades in the most vulgar fashion prejudices and insults from which a section of mankind has suffered untold agonies and atrocities in the past and continues to do so in many ways and many places today. I am talking about a story in which the very humanity of black people is called in question. It seems to me totally inconceivable that great art or even good art could possibly reside in such unwholesome surroundings.

Secondly, I may be challenged on the grounds of actuality. Conrad, after all, sailed down the Congo in 1890 when my own father was still a babe in arms, and recorded what he saw. How could I stand up in 1975, fifty years after his death and purport to contradict him? My answer is that as a sensible man I will not accept just any traveller's tales solely on the grounds that I have not made the journey myself. I will not trust the evidence even of a man's very eyes when I suspect them to be as jaundiced as Conrad's…..

But more important by far is the abundant testimony about Conrad's savages which we could gather if we were so inclined from other sources and which might lead us to think that these people must have had other occupations besides merging into the evil forest or materializing out of it simply to plague Marlow and his dispirited band. For as it happened, soon after Conrad had written his book an event of far greater consequence was taking place in the art world of Europe. This is how Frank Willett, a British art historian, describes it [in African Art, 1971]:

Gaugin had gone to Tahiti, the most extravagant individual act of turning to a non-European culture in the decades immediately before and after 1900, when European artists were avid for new artistic experiences, but it was only about 1904-5 that African art began to make its distinctive impact. One piece is still identifiable, it is a mask that had been given to Maurice Vlaminck in 1905. He records that Derain was ‘‘speechless’’ and ‘‘stunned’’ when he saw it, bought it from Vlaminck and in turn showed it to Picasso and Matisse, who were also greatly affected by it. Ambroise Vollard then borrowed it and had it cast in bronze…. The revolution of twentieth century art was under way!

The mask in question was made by other savages living just north of Conrad's River Congo. They have a name, the Fang people, and are without a doubt among the world's greatest masters of the sculptured form. As you might have guessed, the event to which Frank Willett refers marked the beginning of cubism and the infusion of new life into European art that had run completely out of strength.

The point of all this is to suggest that Conrad's picture of the people of the Congo seems grossly inadequate even at the height of their subjection to the ravages of King Leopold's International Association for the Civilization of Central Africa. Travellers with closed minds can tell us little except about themselves. But even those not blinkered, like Conrad, with xenophobia, can be astonishingly blind…..
As I said earlier, Conrad did not originate the image of Africa which we find in his book. It was and is the
dominant image of Africa in the Western imagination and Conrad merely brought the peculiar gifts of his own
mind to bear on it. For reasons which can certainly use close psychological inquiry, the West seems to suffer
deep anxieties about the precariousness of its civilization and to have a need for constant reassurance by
comparing it with Africa. If Europe, advancing in civilization, could cast a backward glance periodically at
Africa trapped in primordial barbarity, it could say with faith and feeling: There go I but for the grace of God.
Africa is to Europe as the picture is to Dorian Gray—a carrier onto whom the master unloads his physical and
moral deformities so that he may go forward, erect and immaculate. Consequently, Africa is something to be
avoided just as the picture has to be hidden away to safeguard the man's jeopardous integrity. Keep away from
Africa, or else! Mr. Kurtz of Heart of Darkness should have heeded that warning and the prowling horror in
his heart would have kept its place, chained to its lair. But he foolishly exposed himself to the wild irresistible
allure of the jungle and lo! the darkness found him out.

In my original conception of this talk I had thought to conclude it nicely on an appropriately positive note in
which I would suggest from my privileged position in African and Western culture some advantages the West
might derive from Africa once it rid its mind of old prejudices and began to look at Africa not through a haze
of distortions and cheap mystification but quite simply as a continent of people—not angels, but not
rudimentary souls either—just people, often highly gifted people and often strikingly successful in their
enterprise with life and society. But as I thought more about the stereotype image, about its grip and
pervasiveness, about the willful tenacity with which the West holds it to its heart; when I thought of your
television and the cinema and newspapers, about books read in schools and out of school, of churches
preaching to empty pews about the need to send help to the heathen in Africa, I realized that no easy optimism
was possible. And there is something totally wrong in offering bribes to the West in return for its good
opinion of Africa. Ultimately, the abandonment of unwholesome thoughts must be its own and only reward.
Although I have used the word willful a few times in this talk to characterize the West's view of Africa it may
well be that what is happening at this stage is more akin to reflex action than calculated malice. Which does
not make the situation more, but less, hopeful.

Source: Chinua Achebe “An Image of Africa,” in The Massachusetts Review, Vol. XVIII, No. 4, Winter,
1977, pp. 782-94. Achebe is a noted Nigerian novelist whose works include Things Fall Apart and Anthills of
the Savannah; he has frequently lectured in the United States and served as a professor at the University of
Massachusetts—Amherst in 1987-88.

Essays and Criticism: Ingress to the Heart of Darkness

The tragedy of Kurtz and the education of Marlow fuse into one story, since for Marlow that tragedy
represents his furthest penetration into the heart of darkness. As Marlow enters the forest to intercept Kurtz on
the way toward the ceremonial blaze he senses the fascination which the savage ritual possesses. In the light
of Conrad's other tales we know that it is because he is guided by well-established habits that he is able to
complete his mission and carry Kurtz back to his cot, though not before he himself has apprehended the lure
of the primitive. He has duplicated in his own experience enough of Kurtz's sensations to have good reason to
wonder what is real and what is a false trick of the imagination. It was this fascination and bewilderment that
Conrad aimed to suggest, and the presenting of Kurtz at the most intense moment of his yielding to it was to
transcend time and bring a unity of impression.

When Marlow, soon after, hears the dying pronouncement, “the horror, the horror!” he has more than a mere
intellectual awareness of what the words mean; and as we have vicariously shared Marlow's quasi-hysterical
emotion on the trip toward the camp fire, we feel likewise the completeness with which Kurtz has savorcd
degradation. He is a universal genius because he has had both the dream of sweetness and sacrifice in a cause
shared by others and the disillusionment of being, in the very midst of the savage adoration, irretrievably

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alone, devoid of all standards, all hopes that can give him a sense of kinship with anything in the universe. Now, as he faces the last darkness of all, he cannot even know that Marlow understands and that he feels no right to condemn.…

Conscious will was, in the novelist's opinion, not merely fallible, but often dangerous. Reliance upon it could lead one completely away from human sentiments. In *Heart of Darkness* itself Kurtz twice replies to Marlow that he is "perfectly" conscious of what he is doing; his sinister actions are deliberate. This fact does not in the least, however, mean that Conrad wished for a condition devoid of will. He believed that man had the power to pursue the interpretation of experience with deliberate intent and by conscious endeavor to reduce it to proportions. The imagination would bring up the images and incidents, but the reason could help select and arrange them until they became the essence of art. In his trip up the Congo and in his rapid descent Marlow is protected by habits which tend to preserve sanity, but the experience is of the imagination and emotions. Were he to stop short with the mere sensations, he would have no power to distinguish reality from the unreal, to speculate, with touchstones for reference, about life. What we are coming to is the obvious question, If Kurtz's dictum represents the deepest penetration into one aspect of the mind, why did Conrad not stop there; why did he have Marlow tell the girl that Kurtz died pronouncing her name? Is the ending tacked on merely to relieve the horror, or has it a function in the conscious interpretation of life in the proportions of art?…

The fact is that Conrad, fully capable of building to a traditional climax and stopping, wanted to put Kurtz's life in the perspective which it must have for Marlow *sub specie aeternitatis*. Marlow does not have a final answer to life, but after we have shared with him the steady penetration to the brink of degradation we have almost forgotten what life otherwise is like. It is now that Conrad's method of chronological reversal is invaluable. We are quickly returned to Europe, where the marvel of Kurtz's genius still remains, as if he had left but yesterday.

The scene in which Marlow conceals from the girl the nature of Kurtz's death is really a study of the nature of truth. If he had told the girl the simple facts, he would have acknowledged that the pilgrims in their cynicism had the truth, that goodness and faith were the unrealities. Marlow appreciates this temptation, and we are hardly to suppose that sentimental weakness makes him resist it. He does not preach to us about the wisdom he has achieved, in fact he deprecates it, and now he says merely that to tell her would be "too dark altogether." He is still perplexed as to the ethics of his deception and wishes that fate had permitted him to remain a simple reporter of incidents instead of making him struggle in the realm of human values. Yet in leaving in juxtaposition the fiancée's ideal, a matter within her own heart, and the fact of Kurtz's death, Marlow succeeds in putting before us in his inconclusive way the two extremes that can exist within the human mind, and we realize that not one, but both of these are reality.

When Marlow ends his monologue, his audience [is] aware that the universe around them, which, when we began the story, seemed an ordinary, familiar thing, with suns rising and setting according to rule and tides flowing and ebbing systematically for man's convenience, is, after all, a thing of mystery. It is a vast darkness in that its heart is inscrutable. What, then, has Marlow gained, since he has ended with this conclusion which we might, *a priori*, accept as a platitude? He has certainly helped us eliminate the false assumptions by which day to day we act as if the universe were a very simple contrivance, even while, perhaps, we give lip service to the contrary. Moreover, instead of letting one faculty of the mind dominate and deny the pertinence of the others, he has achieved a reconciliation in which physical sensation, imagination, and that conscious logic which selects and arranges have lost their apparent qualities of contradiction. He has achieved an orderly explanation, conscious and methodical, of the strange purlieus of the imagination. Because those recesses harbor shadows, the exploration must not be labeled conclusive; but the greatness of the darkness, instead of leaving a sense of the futility of efforts to dispel it, has drawn the artist to use his utmost conscious skill. Life itself, if we agree with Conrad, may tend to seem to us as meaningless and chaotic as were many of Marlow's sensations at the moment of his undergoing them, and the will may often appear to play no part at all, or a false part, in guiding us. But the genius of art was for Conrad that it accepted the most intense and seemingly
reason-defying creations of the imagination and then discovered within them, rather than superimposed upon them, a symmetry coherent and logical.

Through Marlow's orderly narrative, with its perfect identity of fact and symbol, with its transformation of time and space into emotional and imaginative intensity, the shadows have contracted, and we are better able than before to speculate on the presences which seem to inhabit the very heart of darkness. Time is telescoped and we have as if in the same moment the exalted enthusiast and the man who denied all except horror; and we realize that they are and always have been the same man. We perceive that Africa itself, with its forests, its heat, and its mysteries, is only a symbol of the larger darkness, which is in the heart of man.


Heart of Darkness, Joseph Conrad: Introduction

Heart of Darkness Joseph Conrad

(Born Josef Teodor Konrad Nalecz Korzeniowski) Polish-born English novelist, short story and novella writer, essayist, dramatist, and autobiographer.

The following entry presents criticism of Conrad's novella Heart of Darkness (1902) from 1985 to 2001. See also, "The Secret Sharer" Criticism and Joseph Conrad Criticism.

Heart of Darkness is considered one of the greatest novellas in the English language. On the surface it is a dreamlike tale of mystery and adventure set in central Africa; however, it is also the story of a man's symbolic journey into his own inner being. A profusion of vivid details that are significant on both literal and symbolic levels contributes to the ambiguity of Conrad's narrative and has led to conflicting interpretations of its meaning. Written in 1899, Heart of Darkness was initially published in serial form in Blackwood's magazine and finally published in book form in Youth: A Narrative, and Two Other Stories (1902). It was later published separately in 1942.

Plot and Major Characters

Throughout Conrad's career Heart of Darkness remained one of his most popular and highly regarded works. The novella details the story of the seaman Marlow who, fresh from Europe, is sent on a boat journey up the Congo River to relieve Kurtz, the most successful trader in ivory working for the Belgian government. Prior to their personal encounter, Marlow knows and admires Kurtz through his reputation and his writings regarding the civilizing of the African continent and sets out on the journey excited at the prospect of meeting him. However, Marlow's experience in Africa inspires revulsion at the dehumanizing effects of colonialism, a disgust that culminates when he discovers that Kurtz has degenerated from an enlightened civilizer into a vicious, power-hungry subjugator of the African natives. Marlow's journey forces him to confront not only Kurtz's corruption but also those elements within himself that are subject to the same temptations that affected Kurtz. When Marlow finally meets Kurtz, the mythical figure is near death, ravaged by disease and dissipation. After Kurtz's death, Marlow returns to Belgium and is visited by Kurtz's fiancée. During the visit he lies to her about Kurtz's activities and falsely claims that he called her name before he died. Critics have debated the motives behind this last deception: some feminist critics view the lie as an act of condescension; other commentators contend that Marlow wants to preserve his own illusions about Kurtz; and yet others perceive the lie as a compassionate act that functions to contrast Marlow's humanity with Kurtz's inhumanity.
Major Themes

Like many of Conrad's novels and short stories, *Heart of Darkness* is based in part upon the author's personal experiences. In 1890, after more than a decade as a seaman, Conrad requested the command of a Belgian steamer sailing for Africa. A diary kept during the subsequent voyage provides evidence that many of the characters, incidents, and impressions recalled in *Heart of Darkness* have factual bases. Contemporary critics, however, contend that Conrad's manipulation of the African environment in the novel, and the portraits of greed, destruction, and psychological regression that he creates, should be credited solely to his imaginative genius. Moreover, the relationship of Conrad to his character Marlow has been a fertile area of critical discussion. Marlow has been variously perceived as the spokesman for Conrad, a complex and separate creation, and as a combination of both. The affinity between Marlow and Kurtz is considered the most crucial relationship between characters in the story. Critics identify Kurtz's death scene and Marlow's lie to Kurtz's fiancée as seminal scenes in the novella; these scenes have been subject to a wide range of critical interpretations.

Many critics have commented on Conrad's evocative powers in *Heart of Darkness*, paying particular attention to his use of imagery, which manages to evoke a sinister atmosphere through the accretion of objectively described details of the African jungle and natives. The visual imagery, which heavily depends upon contrasting patterns of light and dark, contributes most appreciably to the consistently ambiguous tone of the work. To demonstrate the moral uncertainty of this world and of life in general, Conrad consistently alters common symbolic conceptions of light and dark. Thus, white is not synonymous with good, nor black with evil, but rather both symbols are interchangeable. Throughout the novella, white and black characters are alternately examples of acute suffering, civilized dignity, moral refinement, or violent savagery, demonstrating that no race is wholly good or evil, and that all human beings are a confusing mixture of propensities for all types of behavior. While some critics consider Conrad's imagery vague and confused in a manner that does not present a clear picture of the principal characters and events, most find that the ambiguity of description lends a psychological depth to the story that demands the close attention and involvement of the reader.

The political significance of *Heart of Darkness* has also received much critical attention. Social Darwinism and a strong belief in the Carlylean work ethic are two of the Victorian standards that are attacked in the novella. The first served to justify European exploitation of Africa and other areas of the world by purporting that the indigenous peoples were in need of the superior technological and religious knowledge of Europe. In *Heart of Darkness*, the hypocrisy of these aims is illustrated by the all-consuming scramble for wealth by the Europeans, who destroy the land and people without remorse. Critics contend that by contrasting the harmony that exists between the native Africans and their natural environment with the lazy, brutish grotesques that white imperialists become in Africa, Conrad proves that it is the Africans who are the fittest to survive in their native land and that Darwin's theory was in fact never intended to be applied to races or nations. In similar fashion, the work ethic that Marlow seems to embrace, praising its effectiveness in keeping his mind free of undesirable thoughts, is in fact instrumental in blinding him to the events around him. Throughout the novella, Conrad's portrayal of the failure of various European ideologies in Africa suggests the consequent failure and moral bankruptcy of Europe.

Critical Reception

*Heart of Darkness* remains a work popular with critics and readers alike. It has been studied from feminist, psychoanalytical, racial, and political perspectives. Conrad's consciously ambiguous presentation of the relative nature of truth and morality, which compels the reader to take an active part in understanding the novella, is often considered a forerunner of many modernist literary techniques. For this reason Frederick R. Karl has called *Heart of Darkness* the work in which “the nineteenth century becomes the twentieth.” The novella's artistic cohesion of image and theme, its intricately vivid evocation of colonial oppression, and its
detailed portrait of psychological duplicity and decay have inspired critics to call *Heart of Darkness* the best novella in the English language.

**Heart of Darkness, Joseph Conrad: Principal Works**

*Tales of Unrest* 1898

*Typhoon* 1902

*Youth: A Narrative, and Two Other Stories* 1902

*Typhoon, and Other Stories* 1903

*A Set of Six* 1908

*‘Twixt Land and Sea* 1912

*Within the Tides* 1915

*Tales of Hearsay* 1925

*The Sisters* 1928

*The Complete Short Stories of Joseph Conrad* 1933


*Congo Diary, and Other Uncollected Pieces* (diary and short stories) 1978

*Almayer's Folly* (novel) 1895

*An Outcast of the Islands* (novel) 1896

*The Children of the Sea* (novel) 1897; also published as *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”*, 1898

*Lord Jim* (novel) 1900

*The Inheritors* [with Ford Madox Ford] (novel) 1901

*Romance* [with Ford Madox Ford] (novel) 1903

*Nostromo* (novel) 1904

*One Day More* (drama) 1904

*The Mirror of the Sea* (autobiography) 1906

*The Secret Agent* (novel) 1907
Criticism: J. Hillis Miller (essay date 1985)


[In the following essay, Miller views Heart of Darkness as a parabolic and apocalyptic text.]

I begin with three questions: Is it a senseless accident, result of the crude misinterpretation or gross transformation of the mass media, that the cinematic version of Heart of Darkness is called Apocalypse Now, or is there already something apocalyptic about Conrad's novel in itself? What are the distinctive features of an apocalyptic text? How would we know when we had one in hand?

I shall approach an answer to these questions by the somewhat roundabout way of an assertion that if Heart of Darkness is perhaps only problematically apocalyptic, there can be no doubt that it is parabolic. The distinctive feature of a parable, whether sacred or secular, is the use of a realistic story, a story in one way or another based firmly on what Marx calls man's “real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind,” to express another reality or truth not otherwise expressible. When the disciples ask Jesus why he speaks to the
multitudes in parables, he answers, “Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand” (Matthew 13:13). A little later Matthew tells the reader that “without a parable spake he not unto them: That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying, I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter things which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world” (Matthew 13:34-35). Those things which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world will not be revealed until they have been spoken in parable, that is, in terms which the multitude who lack spiritual seeing and hearing nevertheless see and hear, namely, the everyday details of their lives of fishing, farming, and domestic economy. Though the distinction cannot be held too rigorously, if allegory tends to be oriented toward the past, toward first things, and toward the repetition of first things across the gap of a temporal division, parable tends to be oriented toward the future, toward last things, toward the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven and how to get there. Parable tends to express what Paul at the end of Romans, in echo of Matthew, calls “the revelation of the mystery, which was kept secret since the world began, but now is made manifest” (Romans 16:25-26). Parable, one can see, has at least this in common with apocalypse: it too is an act of unveiling.

What might it mean to speak of *Heart of Darkness* as parabolic in form? Here it is necessary to turn again to that definition by the primary narrator of *Heart of Darkness* of the difference between Marlow's tales and the tales of ordinary seamen. This passage has often been commented on, quite recently, for example, by Ian Watt in his magisterial *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*. Watt's discussion of *Heart of Darkness* seems also the definitive placing of that novel in the historical context of the parabolic story it tells. That context is nineteenth-century world-dominating European imperialism, specifically the conquest and exploitation of western Africa and the accompanying murder of large numbers of Africans. Watt's book, along with work by Frederick Karl, Norman Sherry, and other biographers, tells us all that is likely to be learned of Conrad's actual experience in the Congo, as well as of the historical originals of Kurtz, the particolored Harlequin-garbed Russian, and other characters in the novel. If parables are characteristically grounded in representations of realistic or historical truth, *Heart of Darkness* admirably fulfills this requirement of parable.

My contention is that *Heart of Darkness* fits, in its own way, the definitions of both parable and apocalypse, and that much illumination is shed on it by interpreting it in the light of these generic classifications. As Marlow says of his experience in the heart of darkness: “It was sombre enough, too—… not very clear either. No, not very clear. And yet it seemed to throw a kind of light.” A narrative that sheds light, that penetrates darkness, that clarifies and illuminates—this is one definition of that mode of discourse called apocalyptic, but it might also serve to define the work of criticism or interpretation. All criticism claims to be enlightenment, *Aufklärung*.

Conrad's narrator distinguishes between two different ways in which a narrative may be related to its meaning:

*The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted), and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside [MS: outside in the unseen], enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of those misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine.*

(p. 5)

The narrator's distinction is made in terms of two figures, two versions of the relation of inside to outside, outside to inside. The hermeneutics of parable is presented here parabolically, according to a deep and unavoidable necessity. The meanings of the stories of most seamen, says the narrator, are inside the narration like the kernal of a cracked nut. I take it the narrator means the meanings of such stories are easily expressed,
detachable from the stories and open to paraphrase in other terms, as when one draws an obvious moral: “Crime doesn't pay,” or “Honesty is the best policy,” or “The truth will out,” or “Love conquers all.” The figure of the cracked nut suggests that the story itself, its characters and narrative details, are the inedible shell which must be removed and discarded so the meaning of the story may be assimilated. This relation of the story to its meaning is a particular version of the relation of container to thing contained. The substitution of contained for container, in this case meaning for story, is one version of that figure called in classical rhetoric synecdoche, but this is a metonymic rather than a metaphorical synecdoche. The meaning is adjacent to the story, contained within it as nut within shell, but the meaning has no intrinsic similarity or kinship to the story. The same meaning could be expressed as well in other terms. Its relation to the story that contains it is purely extrinsic or contingent. The one happens to touch the other, as shell surrounds nut, or as shrine case its iconic image.

It is far otherwise with Marlow's stories. Their meaning is outside, not in. It envelops the tale rather than being enveloped by it. The relation of container and thing contained is reversed. The meaning now contains the tale. Moreover, perhaps because of that enveloping containment, or perhaps for more obscure reasons, the relation of the tale to its meaning is no longer that of dissimilarity and contingency. The tale is the necessary agency of the bringing into the open or revelation of that particular meaning. It is not so much that the meaning is like the tale. It is not. But the tale is in preordained correspondence to or in resonance with the meaning. The tale magically brings the “unseen” meaning out and makes it visible.

Conrad has the narrator express this subtle concept of parabolic narration according to the parabolic “likeness” of a certain atmospheric phenomenon. “Likeness”: the word is a homonym of the German “Gleichnis.” Both are terms for figure or parable. The meaning of a parable does not appear as such. It appears in the “spectral” “likeness” of the story that reveals it, or rather, it appears in the likeness of an exterior light surrounding the story, just as the narrator's theory of parable appears not as such but in the “likeness” of the figure he proposes. The figure is supposed to illuminate the reader, give him insight into that of which the figure is the phantasmal likeness. The figure does double duty, both as a figure for the way Marlow's stories express their meaning and as a figure for itself, so to speak, that is, as a figure for its own mode of working. This is according to a mind-twisting torsion of the figure back on itself that is a regular feature of such figures of figuration, parables of parable, or stories about storytelling. The figure both illuminates its own workings and at the same time obscures or undermines it, since a figure of a figure is an absurdity, or, as Wallace Stevens puts it, there is no such thing as a metaphor of a metaphor. What was the figurative vehicle of the first metaphor automatically becomes the literal tenor of the second metaphor.

Let us look more closely at the exact terms of the metaphor Conrad's narrator proposes. To Marlow, the narrator says, “the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of those spectral illuminations of moonshine.” The first simile here (“as a glow”) is doubled by a second, similitude of a similitude (“in the likeness of …”). The “haze” is there all around on a dark night, but, like the meaning of one of Marlow's tales, it is invisible, inaudible, intangible in itself, like the darkness, or like that “something great and invincible” Marlow is aware of in the African wilderness, something “like evil or truth, waiting patiently for the passing away of this fantastic invasion” (p. 23), or like the climactic name for that truth, the enveloping meaning of the tale, “the horror,” those last words of Kurtz that seem all around in the gathering darkness when Marlow makes his visit to Kurtz's Intended and tells his lie: “The dusk was repeating them in a persistent whisper all around us, in a whisper that seemed to swell menacingly like the first whisper of a rising wind. ‘The horror! The horror!’” (p. 79).

The working of Conrad's figure is much more complex than perhaps it at first appears, both in itself and in the context of the fine grain of the texture of language in Heart of Darkness as a whole, as well as in the context of the traditional complex of figures, narrative motifs, and concepts to which it somewhat obscurely alludes. The atmospheric phenomenon that Conrad uses as the vehicle of his parabolic metaphor is a perfectly real
one, universally experienced. It is as referential and as widely known as the facts of farming Jesus uses in the parable of the sower. If you sow your seed on stony ground it will not be likely to sprout. An otherwise invisible mist or haze at night will show up as a halo around the moon. As in the case of Jesus' parable of the sower, Conrad uses his realistic and almost universally known facts as the means of expressing indirectly another truth less visible and less widely known, just as the narrative of Heart of Darkness as a whole is based on the facts of history and on the facts of Conrad's life but uses these to express something transhistorical and transpersonal, the evade and elusive “truth” underlying both historical and personal experience.

Both Jesus' parable of the sower and Conrad's parable of the moonshine in the mist, curiously enough, have to do with their own efficacy, that is, with the efficacy of parable. Both are posited on their own necessary failure. Jesus' parable of the sower will give more only to those who already have and will take away from those who have not even what they have. If you can understand the parable you do not need it. If you need it you cannot possibly understand it. You are stony ground on which the seed of the word falls unavailing. Your eyes and ears are closed, even though the function of parables is to open the eyes and ears of the multitude to the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. In the same way, Conrad, in a famous passage in the preface to The Nigger of the “Narcissus,” tells his readers, “My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see.” No reader of Conrad can doubt that he means to make the reader see not only the vivid facts of the story he tells but the evade truth behind them, of which they are the obscure revelation, what Conrad calls, a bit beyond the famous phrase from the preface just quoted, “that glimpse of truth of which you have forgotten to ask.” To see the facts, out there in the sunlight, is also to see the dark truth that lies behind them. All Conrad's work turns on this double paradox, first the paradox of the two senses of seeing, seeing as physical vision and seeing as seeing through, as penetrating to or unveiling the hidden invisible truth, and second the paradox of seeing the darkness in terms of the light. Nor can the careful reader of Conrad doubt that in Conrad's case too, as in the case of the Jesus of the parable of the sower, the goal of tearing the veil of familiarity from the world and making us see cannot be accomplished. If we see the darkness already we do not need Heart of Darkness. If we do not see it, reading Heart of Darkness or even hearing Marlow tell it will not help us. We shall remain among those who “seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand.” Marlow makes this clear in an extraordinary passage in Heart of Darkness, one of those places in which the reader is returned to the primary scene of narration on board the Nellie. Marlow is explaining the first lie he told for Kurtz, his prevarication misleading the bricklayer at the Central Station into believing he (Marlow) has great power back home:

“I became in an instant as much of a pretence as the rest of the bewitched pilgrims. This simply because I had a notion it somehow would be of help to that Kurtz whom at the time I did not see—you understand. He was just a word for me. I did not see the man in the name any more than you do. Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream—making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is of the very essence of dreams …”

He was silent for a while.

“… No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence—that which makes its truth, its meaning—its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream—alone …”

He paused again as if reflecting, then added:

“Of course in this you fellows see more than I could then. You see me, whom you know …”
It had become so pitch dark that we listeners could hardly see one another. For a long time already he, sitting apart, had been no more to us than a voice. There was not a word from anybody. The others might have been asleep, but I was awake. I listened, I listened on the watch for the sentence, for the word, that would give me the clue to the faint uneasiness inspired by this narrative that seemed to shape itself without human lips in the heavy night-air of the river.

(pp. 27-28)

The denial of the possibility of making the reader see by means of literature is made here through a series of moves, each one ironically going beyond and undermining the one before. When this passage is set against the one about the moonshine, the two together bring out into the open, like a halo in the mist, the way *Heart of Darkness* is posited on the impossibility of achieving its goal of revelation, or, to put this another way, the way it is a revelation of the impossibility of revelation.

In Conrad's parable of the moonshine, the moon shines already with reflected and secondary light. Its light is reflected from the primary light of that sun which is almost never mentioned as such in *Heart of Darkness*. The sun is only present in the glitter of its reflection from this or that object, for example, the surface of that river which, like the white place of the unexplored Congo on the map, fascinates Marlow like a snake. In one passage it is moonlight, already reflected light, which is reflected again from the river: “The moon had spread over everything a thin layer of silver—over the rank grass, over the mud, upon the wall of matted vegetation standing higher than the wall of a temple, over the great river I could see through a sombre gap glittering, glittering, as it flowed broadly by without a murmur” (p. 27). In the case of the parable of the moonshine too that halo brought out in the mist is twice-reflected light. The story, according to Conrad's analogy, the facts that may be named and seen, is the moonlight, while the halo brought out around the moon by the reflection of the moonlight from the diffused, otherwise invisible droplets of the mist, is the meaning of the tale, or rather, the meaning of the tale is the darkness which is made visible by that halo of twice-reflected light. But of course the halo does nothing of the sort. It only makes visible more light. What can be seen is only what can be seen. In the end this is always only more light, direct or reflected. The darkness is in principle invisible and remains invisible. All that can be said is that the halo gives the spectator indirect knowledge that the darkness is there. The glow brings out the haze, the story brings out its meaning, by magically generating knowledge that something is there, the haze in one case, the meaning of the story, inarticulate and impossible to be articulated, in any direct way at least, in the other. The expression of the meaning of the story is never the plain statement of that meaning but is always no more than a parabolic “likeness” of the meaning, as the haze is brought out “in the likeness of one of those misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine.”

In the passage in which Marlow makes explicit his sense of the impossibility of his enterprise he says to his auditors on the *Nellie* first that he did not see Kurtz in his name any more than they do. The auditors of any story are forced to see everything of the story “in its name,” since a story is made of nothing but names and their adjacent words. There is nothing to see literally in any story except the words on the page, the movement of the lips of the teller. Unlike Marlow, his listeners never have a chance to see or experience directly the man behind the name. The reader, if he happens at this moment to think of it (and the passage is clearly an invitation to such thinking, an invocation of it), is in exactly the same situation as that of Marlow's auditors, only worse. When Marlow appeals to his auditors Conrad is by a kind of ventriloquism appealing to his readers: “Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream—making a vain attempt.” Conrad speaks through Marlow to us. The reader too can reach the truth behind the story only through names, never through any direct perception or experience. In the reader's case it is not even names proffered by a living man before him, only names coldly and impersonally printed on the pages of the book he holds in his hand. Even if the reader goes behind the fiction to the historical reality on which it is based, as Ian Watt and others have done, he or she will only confront more words on more pages,
Conrad's letters or the historical records of the conquest and exploitation of the Congo. The situation of the auditors even of a living speaker, Marlow says, is scarcely better, since what a story must convey through names and other words is not the fact but the “life-sensation” behind the fact “which makes its truth, its meaning—its subtle and penetrating essence.” This is once more the halo around the moon, the meaning enveloping the tale. This meaning is as impossible to convey by way of the life-facts that may be named as the “dream-sensation” is able to be conveyed through a relation of the bare facts of the dream. Anyone knows this who has ever tried to tell another person his dream and has found how lame and flat, or how laughable, it sounds, since “no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation.” According to Marlow's metaphor or proportional analogy: as the facts of a dream are to the “dream-sensation,” so the facts of a life are to the “life-sensation.” Conrad makes an absolute distinction between experience and the interpretation of written or spoken signs. The sensation may only be experienced directly and may by no means, oral or written, be communicated to another: “We live, as we dream, alone.”

Nevertheless, Marlow tells his auditors, they have one direct or experimental access to the truth enveloping the story: “You fellows see more than I could then. You see me, whom you know.” There is a double or even triple irony in this. To see the man who has had the experience is to have an avenue to the experience for which the man speaks, to which he bears witness. Marlow's auditors see more than he could then, that is, before his actual encounter with Kurtz. Ironically, the witness cannot bear witness for himself. He cannot see himself or cannot see through himself or by means of himself, in spite of, or in contradiction of, Conrad's (or Marlow's) assertion a few paragraphs later that work is “the chance to find yourself. Your own reality—for yourself, not for others—what no other man can ever know. They can only see the mere show, and never can tell what it really means” (p. 29). Though each man can only experience his own reality, his own truth, the paradox involved here seems to run, he can only experience it through another or by means of another as witness to a truth deeper in, behind the other. Marlow's auditors can only learn indirectly, through Marlow, whom they see. They therefore know more than he did. Marlow could only learn through Kurtz, when he finally encountered him face to face. The reader of Heart of Darkness learns through the relation of the primary narrator, who learned through Marlow, who learned through Kurtz. This proliferating relay of witnesses, one behind another, each revealing another truth further in which turns out to be only another witness corresponds to the narrative form of Heart of Darkness. The novel is a sequence of episodes, each structured according to the model of appearances, signs, which are also obstacles or veils. Each veil must be lifted to reveal a truth behind which always turns out to be another episode, another witness, another veil to be lifted in its turn. Each such episode is a “fact dazzling, to be seen, like the foam on the depths of the sea, like a ripple on an unfathomable enigma” (p. 43), the fact for example that though the cannibal Africans on Marlow's steamer were starving, they did not eat the white men. But behind each enigmatic fact is only another fact. The relay of witness behind witness behind witness, voice behind voice behind voice, each speaking in ventriloquism through the one next farther out, is a genre of the apocalypse. The book of Revelation, in the Bible, is the paradigmatic example in our tradition, though of course it is by no means the only example. In Revelation God speaks through Jesus, who speaks through a messenger angel, who speaks through John of Patmos, who speaks to us.

There is another reason beyond the necessities of revelation for this structure. The truth behind the last witness, behind Kurtz for example in Heart of Darkness, is, no one can doubt it, death, “the horror”; or, to put this another way, “death” is another name for what Kurtz names “the horror.” No man can confront that truth face to face and survive. Death or the horror can only be experienced indirectly, by way of the face and voice of another. The relay of witnesses both reveals death and, luckily, hides it. As Marlow says, “the inner truth is hidden—luckily, luckily” (p. 34). This is another regular feature of the genre of the apocalypse. The word apocalypse means “unveiling,” “revelation,” but what the apocalypse unveils is not the truth of the end of the world which it announces, but the act of unveiling. The unveiling unveils unveiling. It leaves its readers, auditors, witnesses, as far as ever from the always not quite yet of the imminent revelation—luckily. Marlow says it was not his own near-death on the way home down the river, “not my own extremity I remember best,” but Kurtz’s “extremity that I seem to have lived through.” Then he adds, “True, he had made that last stride,
he had stepped over the edge, while I had been permitted to draw back my hesitating foot. And perhaps this is the whole difference; perhaps all the wisdom, and all truth, and all sincerity, are just compressed into that inappreciable moment of time in which we step over the threshold of the invisible. Perhaps!” (p. 72). Marlow, like Orpheus returning without Eurydice from the land of the dead, comes back to civilization with nothing, nothing to witness to, nothing to reveal but the process of unveiling that makes up the whole of the narration of Heart of Darkness. Marlow did not go far enough into the darkness, but if he had, like Kurtz he could not have come back. All the reader gets is Marlow's report of Kurtz's last words, that and a description of the look on Kurtz's face: “It was as though a veil had been rent. I saw on that ivory face the expression of sombre pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror—of an intense and hopeless despair” (pp. 70-71).

I have said there is a triple irony in what Marlow says when he breaks his narration to address his auditors directly. If the first irony is the fact that the auditors see more than Marlow did because they see Marlow, whom they know, or as Conrad elsewhere puts this, “the onlookers see most of the game,” the second irony is that we readers of the novel, if we happen to think at this moment of our own situation, realize that we must therefore see nothing. We see and can see no living witness, not the primary narrator, not Marlow, not Kurtz, not even Conrad himself, who is now only a voice from the dead for us. We see only the lifeless words on the page, the names Marlow, Kurtz, and so on, Conrad's name on the title page. By Marlow's own account that is not enough. Seeing only happens by direct experience, and no act of reading is direct experience. The book's claim to give the reader access to the dark truth behind appearance is withdrawn by the terms in which it is proffered.

The third irony in this relay of ironies behind ironies is that Marlow's auditors of course do not see Marlow either. It is too dark. They hear only his disembodied voice. “It had become so pitch dark,” says the narrator, “that we listeners could hardly see one another. For a long time already he, sitting apart, had been no more to us than a voice.” Marlow's narrative does not seem to be spoken by a living incarnate witness, there before his auditors in the flesh. It is a “narrative that seemed to shape itself without human lips in the heavy night-air of the river.” This voice can be linked to no individual speaker or writer as the ultimate source of its message, not to Marlow, nor to Kurtz, nor to the first narrator, nor even to Conrad himself. The voice is spoken by no one to no one. It always comes from another, from the other of any identifiable speaker or writer. It traverses all these voices as what speaks through them. It gives them authority and at the time dispossesses them, deprives them of authority, since they only speak with the delegated authority of another. As Marlow says of the voice of Kurtz and of all the other voices, they are what remain as a dying unanimous and anonymous drone or clang that exceeds any single identifiable voice and in the end is spoken by no one: “A voice. He was very little more than a voice. And I heard him—it—this voice—other voices—all of them were so little more than voices—and the memory of that time itself lingers around me, impalpable, like a dying vibration of one immense jabber, silly, atrocious, sordid, savage, or simply mean, without any kind of sense, Voices, voices—…” (p. 49).

For the reader too Heart of Darkness lingers in the mind or memory chiefly as a cacophony of dissonant voices. It is as though the story were spoken or written not by an identifiable narrator but directly by the darkness itself, just as Kurtz's last words seem whispered by the circumambient dusky air when Marlow makes his visit to Kurtz's Intended, and just as Kurtz himself presents himself to Marlow as a voice, a voice which exceeds Kurtz and seems to speak from beyond him: “Kurtz discoursed. A voice! a voice! It rang deep to the very last. It survived his strength to hide in the magnificent folds of eloquence the barren darkness of his heart” (p. 69). Kurtz has “the gift of expression, the bewildering, the illuminating, the most exalted and the most contemptible, the pulsating stream of light, or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness” (p. 48). Kurtz has intended to use his eloquence as a means of “wringing the heart of the wilderness,” but “the wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion” (p. 59). The direction of the flow of language reverses. It flows from the darkness instead of toward it. Kurtz is “hollow at the core” (p. 59), and so the wilderness can speak through him, use him so to speak as a ventriloquist's dummy through which its terrible messages may be broadcast to the world:
“Exterminate all the brutes!” “the horror!” (pp. 51, 71). The speaker to is spoken through. Kurtz's disembodied voice, or the voice behind voice behind voice of the narrators, or that “roaring chorus of articulated, rapid, breathless utterance” (p. 68) shouted by the natives on the bank, when Kurtz is taken on board the steamer—these are in the end no more direct a testimony of the truth than the words on the page as Conrad wrote them. The absence of a visible speaker of Marlow's words and the emphasis on the way Kurtz is a disembodied voice function as indirect expressions of the fact that Heart of Darkness itself is words without person, words which cannot be traced back to any single personality. This is once more confirmation of my claim that Heart of Darkness belongs to the genre of the apocalypse. This novel is an apocalyptic parable or a parabolic apocalypse. The apocalypse is after all a written not an oral genre, and it turns on the “Come” spoken or written always by someone other than the one who seems to utter or write it.3

A full exploration of the way Heart of Darkness is an apocalypse would need to be put under the multiple aegis of the converging figures of irony, antithesis, catachresis, synecdoche, aletheia, and prosopopoeia. Irony is a name for the pervasive tone of Marlow's narration, which undercut as it affirms. Antithesis identifies the division of what is presented in the story in terms of seemingly firm oppositions which always ultimately break down. Catachresis is the proper name for a parabolic revelation of the darkness by means of visible figures that do not substitute for any possible literal expression of that darkness. Synecdoche is the name for the questionable relation of similarity between the visible sign, the skin of the surface, the foam on the sea, and what lies behind it, the pulsating heart of darkness, the black depths of the sea. Unveiling or aletheia labels that endless process of apocalyptic revelation which never quite comes off. The revelation is always future. We must always go on watching and waiting for it, as the primary narrator remains wakeful, on the watch for the decisive clue in Marlow's narration. Personification, finally, is a name for the consistent presentation of the darkness in terms of the trope prosopopoeia. The reader encounters the darkness always as some kind of living creature with a heart, ultimately as a woman who unmans all those male questors who try to dominate her. This pervasive personification is more dramatically embodied in the native woman, Kurtz's mistress: “the immense wilderness, the colossal body of the fecund and mysterious life seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul” (p. 62).

Heart of Darkness is perhaps most explicitly apocalyptic in announcing the end, the end of Western civilization, or of Western imperialism, the reversal of idealism into savagery. As is always the case with apocalypses, the end is announced as something always imminent, never quite yet. Apocalypse is never now. The novel sets women, who are out of it, against men, who can live with the facts and have a belief to protect them against the darkness. Men can breathe dead hippo and not be contaminated. Male practicality and idealism reverse, however. They turn into their opposites because they are hollow at the core. They are vulnerable to the horror. They are the horror. The idealistic suppression of savage customs becomes, “Exterminate all the brutes!” Male idealism is the same thing as the extermination of the brutes. The suppression of savage customs is the extermination of the brutes. This is not just wordplay but actual fact, as the history of the white man's conquest of the world has abundantly demonstrated. This conquest means the end of the brutes, but it means also, in Conrad's view of history, the end of Western civilization, with its ideals of progress, enlightenment, and reason, its goal of carrying the torch of civilization into the wilderness and wringing the heart of the darkness. Or it is the imminence of that end which has never quite come as long as there is someone to speak or write of it.

I claim to have demonstrated that Heart of Darkness is not only parabolic but also apocalyptic. It fits that strange genre of the apocalyptic text, the sort of text that promises an ultimate revelation without giving it, and says always “Come” and “Wait.” But there is an extra twist given to the paradigmatic form of the apocalypse in Heart of Darkness. The Aufklärung or enlightenment in this case is of the fact that the darkness can never be enlightened. The darkness enters into every gesture of enlightenment to enfeeble it, to hollow it out, to corrupt it and thereby to turn its reason into unreason, its pretense of shedding light into more darkness. Marlow as narrator is in complicity with this reversal in the act of identifying it in others. He too claims, like the characteristic writer of an apocalypse, to know something no one else knows and to be qualified on that
basis to judge and enlighten them. “I found myself back in the sepulchral city,” says Marlow of his return from the Congo, “resenting the sight of people hurrying through the streets to filch a little money from each other, to devour their infamous cookery, to gulp their unwholesome beer, to dream their insignificant and silly dreams. They trespassed upon my thoughts. They were intruders whose knowledge of life was to me an irritating pretence because I felt so sure they could not possibly know the things I knew” (p. 72).

The consistent tone of Marlow’s narration is ironical. Irony is truth telling or a means of truth telling, of unveiling. At the same time it is a defense against the truth. This doubleness makes it, though it seems so coolly reasonable, another mode of unreason, the unreason of a fundamental undecidability. If irony is a defense, it is also inadvertently a means of participation. Though Marlow says, “I have a voice too, and for good or evil mine is the speech that cannot be silenced” (p. 37), as though his speaking were a cloak against the darkness, he too, in speaking ironically, becomes, like Kurtz, one of those speaking tubes or relay stations through whom the darkness speaks. As theorists of irony from Friedrich Schlegel and Søren Kierkegaard to Paul de Man have argued, irony is the one trope that cannot be mastered or used as an instrument of mastery. Any ironic statement is essentially indeterminate or undecidable in meaning. The man who attempts to say one thing while clearly meaning another ends up by saying the first thing too, in spite of himself. One irony leads to another. The ironies proliferate into a great crowd of little conflicting ironies. It is impossible to know in just what tone of voice one should read one of Marlow’s sardonic ironies. Each is uttered simultaneously in innumerable conflicting tones going all the way from the lightest and most comical to the darkest, most somber and tragic. It is impossible to decide exactly which quality of voice should be allowed to predominate over the others. Try reading a given passage aloud and you will see this. Marlow’s description of the clamor of native voices on the shore or of the murmur of all those voices he remembers from that time in his life also functions as an appropriate displaced description of the indeterminations of tone and meaning in his own discourse. Marlow’s irony makes his speech in its own way another version of that multiple cacophonous and deceitful voice flowing from the heart of darkness, “a complaining clamour, modulated in savage discords,” or a “tumultuous and mournful uproar,” another version of that “one immense jabber, silly, atrocious, sordid, savage, or simply mean, without any kind of sense,” not a voice, but “voices” (pp. 40, 49). In this inextricable tangle of voices and voices speaking within voices, Marlow’s narration fulfills, no doubt without deliberate intent on Conrad’s part, one of the primary laws of the genre of the apocalypse.

The final fold in this folding in of complicities in these ambiguous acts of unveiling is my own complicity as demystifying commentator. Behind or before Marlow is Conrad, and before or behind him stands the reader or critic. My commentary unveils a lack of decisive unveiling in Heart of Darkness. I have attempted to perform an act of generic classification, with all the covert violence and unreason of that act, since no work is wholly commensurate with the boundaries of any genre. By unveiling the lack of unveiling in Heart of Darkness, I have become another witness in my turn, as much guilty as any other in the line of witnesses of covering over while claiming to illuminate. My Aufklärung too has been of the continuing impenetrability of Conrad’s Heart of Darkness.

Notes

2. Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness, ed. Robert Kimbrough (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963), p. 7. Further references will be indicated by page numbers from this edition, which includes variants from the manuscript.
Criticism: Michael Levenson (essay date 1988)


[In the following essay, Levenson traces the development of Heart of Darkness, maintaining that “it is clear that Conrad markedly altered his conception” of the story as he was writing it.]

Although the point has been strangely neglected, it is clear that Conrad markedly altered his conception of Heart of Darkness during the period of its composition. His act of writing was at the same time a discovery of his subject. This issue possesses independent interest, but it will be pursued here as a way of approaching a problem in the interpretation of the tale. Heart of Darkness does not simply record the unfolding of an action; it unfolds its own mode of understanding, and by the time it has reached its conclusion it has redrawn its own boundaries, redescribed its facts, and revaluated its values.

In a letter to William Blackwood dated 31 December 1898, Conrad refers to a new story that he is preparing for Blackwood's Magazine, “a narrative after the manner of Youth” that is already “far advanced.” He discloses his working title, The Heart of Darkness, but quickly adds that “the narrative is not gloomy. The criminality of inefficiency and pure selfishness when tackling the civilizing work in Africa is a justifiable idea.” He remarks that “the subject is of our time distinctly” and compares it to “my Outpost of Progress,” noting, however, that the new work is “a little wider—is less concentrated upon individuals.”

Two days later he tells David Meldrum, Blackwood's representative, that the story would have been finished the day before had his son not fallen ill and that he anticipates that the finished work will be under twenty thousand words. During the first week of January he completes the portion of the story that will ultimately become the first installment of the published work and that conforms well to the initial outline offered to Blackwood. The bitter evocation of imperialism merits the description “of our time,” and the rapidly shifting attention among characters and incidents explains why Conrad thought of his story as somewhat diffuse. This early section, as carefully managed as it is, nevertheless remains within the relatively humble boundaries that Conrad had mentioned, a kind of Youth-cum- “An Outpost of Progress” in which the agency of Marlow is brought to bear upon the Social Question.

The early proposal contains no mention of Kurtz and no reference to the motif of atavism. If Conrad could write at the end of December that his tale was almost finished, that it would expose criminality, inefficiency, and selfishness, and that it would not focus upon particular characters, then he was doubtless envisioning a story in which the preponderant stress would continue to fall upon the abuses of imperialism. Heart of Darkness, in other words, was conceived in distinctly social and political terms, and well into its composition Conrad thought of it in this way. A work which has become perhaps the leading example of modern psychological fiction began with an expressed disregard for the fate of individuals.

Part One not only emphasizes the political question; it stays close to the historical facts. Conrad draws heavily on events he had witnessed; and given the initial statements to Blackwood, it is highly likely that he first projected the tale as a reasonably faithful rendering of the European entanglement in Africa, a series of sordid misadventures culminating in the pointless death of a European trader. Conrad's own experience with the trader Klein remains obscure; we know that Klein was brought aboard the Roi des Belges at Stanley Falls and that he died during the trip downriver; but we have no reason to suppose that Conrad's encounter with him bore any significant resemblance to Marlow's uncanny confrontation with Kurtz. Indeed the dissimilarity gives us a way to understand why Conrad thought that he would finish the story so quickly and why he assumed, even when it was well advanced, that it would not go much beyond the present end of Part One. For
if he had continued to trace the pattern of his own unpleasant ordeal in the Congo, the meeting with Kurtz would doubtless have been rendered in far more modest terms and would have served more as a pendant to the angry social critique, a final senseless misfortune in a long sequence of unnecessary blunders. In fact, it is difficult to see how Conrad could have achieved much else within the boundaries he had first planned. Certainly he could not have anticipated the force of Kurtz's provocation when on 2 January 1899, having not yet finished what would become Part One, he claimed that his account of European criminality in Africa was almost complete.

Because the manuscript remained almost entirely free of revision, *Heart of Darkness* stands not only as a narrative of Marlow's adventure in the Congo but as a record of Conrad's adventure in the English countryside, his own struggle to define his conception while hurrying to meet a deadline with *Blackwood's.* Hence, its present form retains traces of the changing design. In the first mention of Kurtz, and almost certainly first in order of composition, Marlow identifies him as “the poor chap.” Surely it is not as a “poor chap” that we remember him, and by the end of the tale Marlow will describe his dark career in far more lurid terms. This at least raises the possibility that Kurtz was envisioned more as a victim than as a monster and thus closer to that unfortunate Klein, whose last days Conrad had witnessed; indeed, in the manuscript Conrad had written “Klein” on the first four occasions that he referred to Kurtz by name.

**Halfway through Part One** Marlow roundly denounces the European presence in Africa.

> I've seen the devil of violence, and the devil of greed, and the devil of hot desire; but by all the stars these were strong, lusty, red-eyed devils that swayed and drove men—men, I tell you. But as I stood on this hillside I foresaw that in the blinding sunshine of that land I would become acquainted with a flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly. How insidious he could be too I was only to find out several months later and a thousand miles farther.

The last comment furnishes a second reference to Kurtz's fall, but we should pay careful attention to the context. Speaking from his retrospective standpoint on the *Nellie,* Marlow invokes Kurtz as the most “insidious” manifestation of the “flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil.” And yet “flabby,” “pretending” and “weak-eyed” are perhaps the last attributes one would bestow on Kurtz, whose moral descent will far exceed the connotations of “folly.” Furthermore, in this early passage Marlow opposes the corruption he will meet upriver to the “manly” devils of violence, greed, desire, and lust. But Kurtz, let us recall, will appear precisely as a man who “lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lust,” who indulged “forgotten and brutal instincts,” “gratified and monstrous passions.”

In other words, this early reference suggests that Kurtz's afflictions will be thoroughly continuous with the criminality of imperialism, that there will be no “choice of nightmares,” only one increasingly appalling phantasm. Within this conception Kurtz would pose no distinctly psychological problem; he would represent merely the most extreme, the most “insidious” example of the general corruption. At this point it even remains unclear whether Conrad had anticipated the celebrated motif of voluntary reversion to the primitive. No doubt he intended Kurtz to succumb to the “fascination of the abomination,” but there is as yet no hint—in a tale which persistently offers hints—that this will go any further than the miserable plight of Kayerts and Carlier in “An Outpost of Progress,” no further, that is, than “a flabby, pretending, weak-eyed” descent into criminal folly. The crucial transformation occurs when Conrad wrenches Kurtz free from the prevailing folly and recognizes in him an independent problem of monstrous proportions.

On 9 January 1899 Conrad sent off everything that he had written up to the day before, the body of material that would become Part One of the story. It is possible then to discern a second stage in the process of composition, whose beginning coincides with the beginning of Part Two. Apparently Conrad found himself at an impasse as he tried to continue beyond this point. On 13 January he wrote a frustrated letter to Garnett in
which he referred to the “rotten stuff” he was preparing for Blackwood’s: “Ah if I could only write! If I could write, write, write! But I cannot.” Four days later, however, his tone has changed. He tells Meldrum, “I don’t think [the tale] will be bad,” remarking that “the thing has grown on me.”

What has grown evidently is Kurtz. Part Two begins with Marlow half asleep on the deck of his steamer, catching snatches of a conversation between the Manager and his uncle. The former bitterly describes how Kurtz had traveled hundreds of miles downriver with his ivory and then had abruptly decided to paddle a small dugout back into the wilderness. “As for me,” says a waking Marlow, “I seemed to see Kurtz for the first time.” In the light of Conrad's own struggles with the story, it is tempting to suppose that the “I” has a double reference, that the author, like his character, feels that he is seeing Kurtz for the first time, and that in the image of the “lone white man turning his back suddenly on the headquarters,” Conrad experienced a turn in his conception of the tale.

This last supposition must of course remain speculative, but the general point should now be evident: that as the tale of “20,000 words” grew to almost twice that length, Conrad found himself far exceeding the boundaries of his initial design. By the time we arrive at the further reaches of Kurtz's degradation, “poor chap” and “flabby … devil” have long since ceased to apply; the tale is no longer “of our time distinctly”; and once Kurtz has uttered his final words and Marlow has lied to the Intended, no one would dream of saying that the subject of the work is “inefficiency.” Indeed, Conrad himself came to acknowledge a transformation in his story. After Cunninghame Graham read Part One in Blackwood's he sent Conrad words of enthusiastic praise. Conrad was delighted, but he cautioned the socialist Graham that the next two installments might not please him so well. “So far,” he wrote, “the note struck chimes in with your convictions—mais après? This is an après.” This remark establishes the problem that we must now pursue. How does a tale of imperialist exploitation generate an après? And why such an après as this?

I

Criticism of the novel has always, and naturally, focused upon the conclusion, that après which is the fiction's crux. The jungle, the horror, the return, the lie—these no doubt pose the most absorbing problems of the work. But part of our purpose is to see how the opening of the tale engenders its culmination, and if we rush too quickly to the conclusion we miss its motivation and diminish its force. We miss, for one thing, the extent to which Heart of Darkness is a drama of officialdom. Imperialism presents itself to Conrad as an affair of inefficient clerks, disaffected functionaries, envious subordinates, and defensive superiors—all arrayed within a strict hierarchy whose local peak is the General Manager and whose summit is the vague “Council in Europe.” The Company gives identities, establishes purposes, assigns destinies, and with its bizarre configuration of Central and Inner Stations even constructs geography. The accumulation of ivory is the material goal, but it interests Conrad less than its social consequence, the scramble for position within the institution, which creates its own flabby passions and even its own flabby pentameter: “Am I the Manager—or am I not?”

The absurdist aspect of these early sections emerges in the empty assertion of an institutional formalism in the face of violently anti-institutional facts. The Company scrupulously pays brass wire to its nearly starving native employees; the accountant makes “perfectly correct transactions” while fifty feet away loom “the still tree-tops of the grove of death.” The incongruity between the Company and the wilderness is a particular instance of that more general Conradian incongruity between value and fact, between the system of meanings that we devise and the world reluctant to accept them.

Here we may invoke Max Weber—not, of course, in order to provide a Weberian reading of Heart of Darkness, if such a thing is even conceivable, but to generate a distinction that may clarify Conrad's arrangement of values. Weber and Conrad were close contemporaries, and from the unlikely points of Germany, Protestantism, and sociology, Weber came to an intellectual bearing and a moral demeanor close to
Conrad's own. In particular, his theory of social organization contains implications for a theory of modern character. He should help to illuminate Conrad, but no more than Conrad should help to illuminate him.

Certainly among Weber's most important contributions to sociological thought was his analysis of bureaucracy as one of three fundamental types of social authority, and the one under which he had the misfortune to live. Within a general system of legal domination bureaucracy becomes the “means of transforming social action into rationally organized action.” It presupposes a formal hierarchy, written regulation, and clearly defined relations of authority and subordination, all of which make the individual “a small cog in a ceaselessly moving mechanism which prescribes to him an essentially fixed route of march.”

For Weber this social form extends well beyond governmental organization to inform every mode of modern authority. At the limit bureaucracy represents the triumph of reasoned method and “the exclusion of love, hatred, and every purely personal, especially irrational and incalculable, feeling from the execution of official tasks.”

Hence, from Weber's own historical standpoint the Bureaucrat ceases to be one type among others and becomes the representative figure of the modern age. Lacking both reverence for tradition and hope of revolutionary change, content to sustain the prevailing hierarchy, committed to discipline and routine, willing to follow directives from above but incapable of devising independent initiatives, the Bureaucrat has history on his side and can wait patiently while his dominion extends into every aspect of contemporary life. From the perspective of a “value-free” sociology Weber dispassionately charts the rise of the bureaucratic sensibility, but a detectable bitterness enters his tone, and outside his formal studies it erupts into derision and contempt.

It is horrible to think that the world could one day be filled with nothing but those little cogs, little men clinging to little jobs and striving towards bigger ones. … This passion for bureaucracy … is enough to drive one to despair. … That the world should know no men but these: it is in such an evolution that we are already caught up, and the great question is therefore not how we can promote and hasten it, but what can we oppose to this machinery in order to keep a portion of mankind free from this parcelling-out of the soul, from this supreme mastery of the bureaucratic way of life.

Under the same historical pressures Conrad came to much the same perception, and we need to recall a point too often neglected, namely, that after Kafka, Conrad is our most searching critic of bureaucracy. Like Weber he consistently sought a principle of opposition to social machinery, and in the view offered here it is a Weberian rather than a Freudian insight that lies at the origin of Heart of Darkness—at its origin, not at its end.

Within this set of concerns the Manager is the exemplary figure, and we simply misread the work if we neglect the importance of this character who typifies the vulgar sensibility of petty officialdom and who incarnates the criminality, inefficiency, and selfishness that Conrad first set out to expose. A man with “no learning, and no intelligence,” “neither civil nor uncivil,” the Manager “was obeyed, yet he inspired neither love nor fear, nor even respect.” He jealously guards “trad secrets,” depreciates “unsound method” and coldly submits human welfare to institutional requirements. The epitome of the bureaucrat, he “originated nothing, he could keep the routine going—that's all.” In important respects the Manager is the displaced center of Heart of Darkness who would have held pride of place in the shorter work that Conrad had first conceived. Conrad's own bitter experiences in Africa involved his conflict with Camille Delcommune, upon whom the Manager is based, and we need only set off Part One from the rest of the story in order to recognize that Conrad's lingering antipathy toward Delcommune and his contempt for European inefficiency would have provided sufficient motive for the story that he originally forecast to Blackwood.

Not only the origins of the tale but its structure must be understood in the context of Conrad's revulsion from the bureaucratic sensibility. Kurtz enters the work, and perhaps entered Conrad's imagination as an antithesis
to the Manager, as though he were summoned into being through the strength of Conrad's repugnance. Marlow first hears his name from the chief accountant, who describes him as “a first-class agent,” and then, noting Marlow's disappointment, adds that Mr. Kurtz “is a very remarkable person.” The distinction between “agent” and “person” is fundamental; for in its initial movement the tale dramatizes the attempt to recover personality from a world of impersonal functionaries, an activity that begins within a strictly institutional context. Kurtz initially represents that distinctly modern figure, the organizational *wunderkind* who rapidly ascends the corporate ladder, destined to “be a somebody in the Administration before long.” Furthermore, he has “moral ideas” and when he is still “just a word,” Marlow posits him as the ethical alternative to economic privacy. *Heart of Darkness* begins, that is, by identifying a bureaucratic conflict, the struggle between the good and the bad official and, by implication, a struggle between moral and immoral forms of social organization.

These, of course, are not the struggles that we ultimately witness. But the transformation in the narrative must be understood against the background of this original problem—the need to find a perspective from which to oppose institutionalized depravity. Kurtz's turn to the wilderness, whatever else it becomes, is first of all a gesture of social rebellion. The Tribe is rejoinder to the Company. Under Kurtz's domination the Tribe possesses a seamless unity that avoids the endless articulations of bureaucracy; it knows no legal formalism, no reliance on a vague “They, above,” whose lofty intentions dissipate in the long descent through hierarchy. For Conrad the inefficiency of imperialism is not one defect among many: it is a measure of the awful distance between intention and action so inimical to coherent social purpose. Within the Tribe authority exists not as a remote official dispatching instructions through the mail but as a visible body and a living voice—a “real presence.” The distance between the will and its realization is overcome; inefficiency disappears as a problem; Kurtz makes the canoes run on time.

In Weberian sociology the antonym to the rule of bureaucracy is the rule of charisma, the “gift” that is invested in a leader whose authority depends on neither tradition nor law, who indeed overturns every traditional and legal norm in the name of a personal calling acknowledged by an entire society. Other forms of authority, argues Weber, accommodate themselves to history; they exist to satisfy quotidian needs and to permit stability in communal life. Charismatic leadership is “alien to all regulation and tradition”; it is “not a continuous institution, but in its pure type the very opposite.”

In radical contrast to bureaucratic organization, charisma knows no formal and regulated appointment or dismissal, no career, advancement or salary, no supervisory or appeals body, no local or purely technical jurisdiction, and no permanent institutions in the manner of bureaucratic agencies, which are independent of the incumbents and their personal charisma. Charisma is self-determined and sets its own limits. Its bearer seizes the task for which he is destined and demands that others obey and follow him by virtue of his mission. Because it violates all custom and tradition and because it offers no justification but itself, charisma always appears supernatural and its edicts have divine warrant. All value emanates from the bearer of the “gift,” and all social activity originates in the will of the leader. A community under charismatic domination necessarily breaks with its past, and for this reason Weber calls charisma “the specifically creative revolutionary force of history.”

It will have become obvious that this notion of “the gift” bears closely on Marlow's portrayal of “the gifted Kurtz”: “The point was in his being a gifted creature. … I laid the ghost of his gifts at last with a lie.” What Weber hypothesized, Conrad imagined: a social order dependent on one center, one value, one will. The Russian reports that the natives “would not stir until Mr. Kurtz gave the word. His ascendancy was extraordinary. … [T]he chiefs came every day to see him. They would crawl.” There is no need to accumulate examples; it is already clear that this is not like being “a somebody in the Administration.” The point, which Weber lets us see clearly, is that a distinction between social orders generates a distinction between paradigms.
of character epitomized by the Manager and Kurtz. Indeed, all through our century the civil servant and the charismatic leader have served as representative types, competing extremes for the modern temperament. The one surrenders personality, the other accumulates too much. Following Weber, we may think of the difference in terms of contrasting modes of modern authority. Following Marlow, we may recognize it as a choice of nightmares, two besetting temptations for the contemporary world.

Within this configuration Kurtz himself retains a powerful ambiguity. On the one hand, he is the reductio of imperialism. He stands at the point where rational acquisition becomes irrational hoarding, where economic routine becomes primitive ritual, where a commodity becomes a fetish, and where indirect violence becomes overt barbarism. In this respect Conrad presents Kurtz as the suppressed truth of European immorality, a point well emphasized in the eagerness of the Company to exploit his sordid achievement. Moreover, from what we know of the composition of the story, this emphasis is thoroughly consistent with Conrad's original design. Insofar as Kurtz discloses the concealed logic of imperialism, then he indeed represents the most “insidious” example of a “rapacious and piteless folly.”

On the other hand, even as Kurtz takes the logic of accumulation to its unthinkable extreme, he discloses another logic altogether; folly reaches the point at which it becomes folie; and in presenting European abuses at their grotesque limit, he furnishes a principle of opposition to them. This is the complexity in Conrad's final conception. Kurtz represents both the reductio of imperialism and its antithesis. And it is when Conrad thought past the former possibility (the degradation of a virtuous man—“the poor chap”—which reveals the depravity of a social form) and when he recognized voluntary atavism as the nightmare from which it was possible to awake, that Heart of Darkness took its longest step and disclosed another region of experience.

II

There is a revealing lacuna in Weber's analysis of charisma. Having defined the concept and having named some historical instances, Weber proceeds quickly to the subject that dominates his analysis: the waning of charisma, its inevitable subordination to the forces of law and tradition, and its appropriation by those who seek to legitimize their power. In other words, as soon as charisma appears in Weber's own analysis it begins to recede. Social life under charismatic domination occupies just one paragraph of that immense tome, Economy and Society, and a phenomenon that Weber regarded as one of the three fundamental types of social authority almost completely escapes description.

It is not difficult to see why this is so. Charismatic leadership, ex hypothesi, breaks with rules and norms. In its pure form, holds Weber, it cannot be understood as a social organization in any customary sense. By definition it is “extra-ordinary,” the product of the Gifted One who suspends all those conventions, institutions, and traditions that sociology takes as its proper subject. Charisma thus exists at the limit of Weber's sociological understanding. It is where the study of the group must become the study of the exceptional individual who molds the group according to his will. Sociology passes into psychology.

What is a puzzle for the system of academic disciplines—where does society stop and the mind begin?—is an opportunity for the literary imagination. Conrad, too, describes the limitations of bureaucracy; he, too, conceives a charismatic alternative; and to this point the analogy with Weber is extensive and heuristic. But because he is bound neither by theoretical presupposition nor by historical fact, Conrad willingly follows the movement from social to psychological experience. A tale that begins with bureaucratic folly imagines a ghastly alternative in tribal violence; and in carrying through that insight, it imagines the point at which social life passes into the life of the instincts. In Heart of Darkness and immediately afterward in Lord Jim Conrad built a theater for the psyche, not in an isolated individual, but in a social configuration that gave the mind an expanse on which to play itself out. When the Russian withholds ivory, Kurtz threatens to shoot him, “because he could do so, and had a fancy for it, and there was nothing on earth to prevent him killing whom he jolly well pleased.” Conrad, in other words, envisions that form of community in which social organization
becomes psychological expression.

After the Russian tells Marlow that the heads impaled on stakes are the heads of rebels, Marlow laughs skeptically: “Rebels! What would be the next definition I was to hear. There had been enemies, criminals, workers—and these were—rebels.” But the next definition, the psychological definition, will indeed be telling. The story in effect offers a succession of concepts under which to sort human character, a series of definitions that unfold from one another and that lead Marlow to change his very categories of description. Through its own strenuous logic *Heart of Darkness* pursues the representation of bureaucracy until it becomes the representation of a monstrous passion; and fully to appreciate the tale as a psychological fiction is to appreciate the way it must excavate a place for the mind. Here is Conrad's promised *après*: the psyche is a sequel to society.

What is more, it is an alternative to society. As *Heart of Darkness* invents for itself a genre of psychological narrative, it discovers a standpoint from which to contest grotesque political abuse. Politics and the psyche are not two levels; they are two antagonists; *Heart of Darkness* challenges the structure of institutions with the structure of the mind. One must not be misled by the novel's most celebrated words. The unredeemable horror in the tale is the duplicity, cruelty, and venality of European officialdom. Kurtz himself, in *speaking* horror, immediately renders himself less horrible. He ensures his standing as “a remarkable man,” a man who has “summed up” and so achieved “a moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats, by abominable terrors, by abominable satisfactions.”

III

This last quotation already intimates another change in this continually changing design. Kurtz is not only modern Psychological Man; he becomes, improbably, unexpectedly, Moral Man. The end of his lust, his greed, his terror, his satisfaction is a “moral victory,” and this curious begetting establishes the final problem that this essay will pursue. To this point I have considered how Conrad's social conception transformed to a psychological conception, how the institutional self metamorphosed to the instinctual self. But in this last phase of the argument I want to discuss a further and equally consequential transformation, namely, from mental life to moral life, from psychology to ethics.

It is clear, first of all, that Kurtz's fall is not merely due to the surge of instinct that routs social values; it is due to a failure of the values themselves. The prelapsarian Kurtz had talked of pity, science, progress, love, justice, and the conduct of life—“burning noble words,” Marlow calls them. They constitute an ideology of enlightenment, a collective moral inheritance that, plainly enough, arouses virtuous aspiration and then proves unequal to the passion it excites. Kurtz's words fall under the heading of “principles” that “fly off at the first good shake.” But the failure of principle does not mark the demise of value in *Heart of Darkness*, only a change in its source. If value cannot descend from social ideals, it must ascend from the psychic abyss.

A perception of the distance between fact and value is fundamental to Conrad's assault on prevailing social conventions. The incongruity between the sound of moral words and the spectacle of sordid deeds excites his contempt and gives urgency to the representation of anarchic instinct. Certainly, a familiar approach to *Heart of Darkness* considers it a rejection of the values of progress and enlightenment in the name of such facts as passion, greed, and violence. But we need to acknowledge a third category of Conradian concepts that is distinct from both the class of groundless ideals and the class of amoral instincts.

During Kurtz's final crisis Marlow watches “the inconceivable mystery of a soul that knew no restraint, no faith, and no fear, yet struggling blindly with itself.” Here is Conrad's improbable image for the foundation of morality, an image that locates the moral source not in social convention but in an inconceivably mysterious gesture of the individual mind. Kurtz, a man without restraint, struggles to restrain himself. It is a primitive psychological movement, the self confronting the self, an act of will originating *ex nihilo*. The importance of
restraint in *Heart of Darkness* is thoroughly obvious but perhaps not thoroughly perspicuous. Restraint, after all, is a psychological concept that in itself implies no ethical norm; it presupposes no moral code and commits one to no opinions about love, progress, or the conduct of life. How, then, are we to understand its prominence?

When Marlow encounters the unlikely self-control of the hungry cannibals aboard his ship, he stands amazed: “Restraint! I would just as soon have expected restraint from a hyena prowling amongst the corpses of a battlefield.” Then he immediately adds, “But there was the fact facing me—the fact, dazzling, to be seen, like the foam on the depths of the sea.” “Restraint” thus possesses a strategic ambiguity. It belongs to the domain of objective description (“the fact facing me”), but it is already imbued with value (“dazzling to be seen”). It names a concrete perceptible datum and at the same time a basic virtue. Along with other subtle devices that we will consider in a moment, “restraint” gives Marlow a way to overcome the distance between description and evaluation. He need not struggle any longer to apply transcendent ethical concepts to refractory experience; now he can locate moral value within individual experience. A notion such as restraint suggests the possibility of natural basis for ethics, a nonmoral ground for morality, a reconciliation between fact and value.

As he watches the natives who howl and dance on the banks of the river, Marlow wonders what motives and impulses sway them. And what is most notable about the possibilities he considers—“joy, fear, sorrow, devotion, valour, rage”—is the casual compounding of emotions and virtues. States of mind (joy, rage) are not clearly distinguished from moral states (devotion, valor). Similarly, in his reflections on Kurtz's final words Marlow sees them as the expression of “belief,” “candour,” “revolt,” “truth,” “desire,” and “hate,” the sum of which, as we know, is a “moral victory.” Perhaps as deep as any urge in Conrad is the desire to let evaluation emerge spontaneously out of description in accordance with his high aesthetic conviction that when he has described the world faithfully he will also have described his faith. Much like “restraint,” terms such as “devotion,” “belief,” and “candour” suggest to Conrad both mental facts and moral values, and they suggest too that in the right circumstances the psychic life can lead naturally, almost imperceptibly, into ethical life.

In this way *Heart of Darkness* again transcends its own principles of structure. Having begun with a distinction between the good and the bad bureaucrat, and having rudely supplanted it with a nightmarish choice between social venality and passionate license, it ends by offering the individual moral psyche as a slim third term between these weighty alternatives. Marlow is the one who seeks to cultivate this vulnerable site; and to consider the fate of moral value in *Heart of Darkness* is finally to consider Marlow's fate. To conclude, then, we must ask how his fragile autonomy can be sustained. After the bureaucrat, after the atavist, how can he find a character of his own? How can Marlow by himself secure values for himself?

In an early expression of disgust at the feckless plotting of Company agents, Marlow observes that “there is something after all in the world allowing one man to steal a horse while another must not look at a halter.” In its context the judgment seems unexceptionable, but it represents a precept difficult to sustain. What is this “something” that distinguishes the worthy horse thief from the wicked obeyer of laws? Marlow does not elaborate, but he persistently relies on this form of reasoning. He misleads the brickmaker merely in the hope that it might “somehow” help Kurtz. And in explaining his aversion to lies, he invokes no general canon but a personal response, even an eccentricity: Lying “makes me miserable and sick like biting something rotten would do. Temperament, I suppose.” Marlow never shrinks from judgment, but he judges without abstract ideals, without general principles, indeed without consistency.

Kurtz had spoken to the Russian of love “in general,” and later when he appears in the jungle surrounded by a thousand armed natives, Marlow comments bitterly, “Let us hope that the man who can talk so well of love in general will find some particular reason to spare us this time.” This is the foundation of Marlow’s moral sense: a contempt for ethics “in general” and a demand for the “particular reason.” He derides moral absolutes and willingly suspends universal in favor of concrete discriminations. We know that he abominates lies and that
he recognizes justice as Kurtz's due, but when he meets the Intended, he complies with neither the maxim of honesty nor the claim of justice. Instead he acts as the Practical Moralist who overturns general ethical conceptions without overturning ethics.

When Marlow describes his “particular reason” for lying to Kurtz's Intended, he makes no appeal to those tainted ideas: progress, pity, conduct of life. He says simply that the truth “would have been too dark—too dark altogether.” But what kind of moral concept is “darkness”? Clearly it is none at all; it is, if you will, a moral sensation—like the “flavour of mortality” Marlow finds in lies. In offering an image for the human predicament, Marlow describes the world as a place in which one must “breathe dead hippo so the speak and not be contaminated.” When he discovers that Kurtz has left his cabin in the middle of the night, he experiences a “moral shock,” and when he makes his choice of nightmares, he turns to Kurtz “for relief—positively for relief.” Shock, relief, and the smell of dead hippo are further instances of moralized sensations that take the place of abstract principle. And the most decisive example is Kurtz's own valediction. “Horror” is the culminating instance of these almost punning Conradian concepts that engender an unmistakable moral assessment out of an intuitive psychic spasm. In each of these cases the act of judgment appears more as a reflex than a verdict—thus Kurtz's “summing up” is not a deliberation but a “cry.” The moral sense becomes an immediate expression of the individual sensibility, existing not beyond but beneath good and evil.

Conrad longs to overcome the separation between fact and value; he longs to see value lodged securely in fact—“the redeeming facts of life”—so that the individual need not rely on the rickety apparatus of social ethics. “Darkness” is the perfect moral term, a term that at once suggests a perception and a value and hence satisfies the impulse to merge description and appraisal. The transitions from the literal gloom of the African jungle to Kurtz's gloomy horror, from the obscurity of the Intended's drawing room to Marlow's obscure dread, from the black bank of clouds above the Thames to the heart of darkness appear almost seamless. They do so, of course, only because this darkness is a metaphor which so reliably links facts and values. It is indeed almost a dead metaphor. Its ethical associations are so highly conventional and Marlow repeats them so often that it scarcely seems a figure of speech at all. And yet it is just to Conrad's purpose that darkness be a dying metaphor. The more hackneyed the figure, the more secure is the association between literal and moral obscurity, and the more inevitable seems the link between perception and evaluation. By the end of the tale an event as natural as the darkening sky stands as a somber moral warning. Facts are inlaid with value until judgment has become a task for the senses.

Conradian Impressionism is habitually regarded as an epistemological event, an attempt to restore the priority of the sensory apparatus in the literary representation of knowledge. But we do not need to disregard Conrad's epistemology in order to recognize that his Impressionism is at least as significant a moral event. As Heart of Darkness moves from an institutional to an instinctual domain, it implicitly asks what lies between these warring regions, and it responds by offering the Impressionist temperament as itself a basis for individual moral autonomy. The ascent from Kurtzian horror is an ascent to a region of experience in which virtue and vice disclose themselves in sight and sound, taste and smell. Between fragile social conventions and blind passions morality finds a place in the educated impressions of the Practical Moralist. The world shimmers with value as it shimmers with color, and there is no need to rely on independent (and dubious) acts of the ethical mind once one has learned to trust intelligent sensations.

Thus the Practical Moralist makes a curious approach to the Working Artist—“too dark,” after all, is something that a painter might observe of an unsatisfactory canvas. To say this is not to imply that there is anything frivolous in Marlow's convictions, only to suggest that a final consequence of the attempt to embed value in fact is that one comes to rely on intuitive perceptions of consonance and dissonance. “Somehow” and “something,” “relief,” “shock,” “flavour” and “horror”—all reflect the desire to locate the moral sense so firmly within individual experience that no skein of ethical reflections need ever distract judgment. One simply inspects the world and arranges a balance in the shades of contrast. Darkness becomes the raw material
of this aestheticized morality, an almost palpable substance that can be kneaded into form and then disposed according to intuitions of ethical fitness. Marlow takes it from Kurtz, flourishes it before the Manager, withholds it from the Intended, confers it upon his shipmates. Each of these acts has a reason, but they are all “particular reasons,” so particular indeed, so securely lodged in individual circumstance, that they reveal Marlow as no moral metaphysician, only, perhaps, a sculptor in darkness.

Notes

3. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Robert Kimbrough, Norton Critical Edition, 3rd ed. (New York: Norton, 1987). At the beginning of his narrative Marlow recalls the Roman conquest of Britain, and in a brief vignette that is often taken to prefigure Kurtz's plight, he conjures the image of a young Roman soldier repelled by the English wilderness. Certainly the perception of a fundamental estrangement between nature and culture bears on the European experience in Africa, but it does not begin to capture the peculiarities of Kurtz's condition. Of the Roman, Marlow says that “there's no initiation … into such mysteries. He has to live in the midst of the incomprehensible which is also detestable.” Kurtz, on the other hand, will experience a “devilish initiation” into the secrets of the jungle, and Marlow will speak of him as an “initiated wraith from the back of Nowhere.” The idea of an “initiation” provides a useful way to think about the changing perspective in the tale; the only weakness more grave than the inability to comprehend turns out to be comprehension itself. When Marlow looks upon the wild mob of shouting natives, he asks Kurtz, “Do you understand this?” to which the latter chillingly replies, “Do I not?” At this point we have left the uncomprehending Roman far behind.
6. Indeed, it is noteworthy that a break in the composition occurred just before this moment of recognition. At the end of that portion of the manuscript that Conrad dispatched on 9 January 1899, Marlow remains in a state of drowsy confusion, unable to make anything of the conversation he is hearing. Only when Conrad resumes work on the story does Marlow come to waking consciousness and “see Kurtz for the first time.” Consider, too, Edward Garnett's recollection: “Some time before [Conrad] wrote this story of his Congo experience, he narrated it at length one morning while we were walking up and down under a row of Scotch firs that leads down to the Cearne. I listened enthralled while he gave me in detail a very full synopsis of what he intended to write. To my surprise when I saw the printed version I found that about a third of the most striking incidents had been replaced by others of which he had said nothing at all” (Edward Garnett, introd., *Letters from Joseph Conrad, 1895-1924*, p. 14). [See p. 196, above—Editor.]
7. Conrad seems unduly apologetic in his response to Cunninghame Graham. He suggests that his original “idea” has become increasingly “wrapped up in secondary notions”—a reversal of the metaphor in which the meaning of Marlow's tale is said to be “outside” like a haze rather than inside like a kernel—and insists that Graham will still be able to find the “right intention” if he examines the episodes carefully. It is almost as though Conrad, startled at how far he has strayed, were trying to reclaim the story for his original political design (*Joseph Conrad's Letters to R. B. Cunninghame Graham*, ed. C. T. Watts [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1969], p. 116). [See pp. 207-8, above—Editor.]
8. The other two types of social domination are patriarchal (or traditional) authority and charismatic authority. See Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, trans.
13. Weber, *Economy and Society*, III, 1117. Yet the pathos of charisma, and the pathos of Weber's sociology, is that quotidian needs make an inexorable return: “Every charisma is on the road from a turbulently emotional life that knows no economic rationality to a slow death by suffocation under the weight of material interests: every hour of its existence brings it nearer to this end” (III, 1120). Moments of ecstasy yield to enduring social structures. Institutions reform and traditions reestablish themselves. There occurs a “routinization of charisma,” in which it “recedes as a creative force” (III, 1146) and changes “from a unique, transitory gift of grace … into a permanent possession of everyday life” (III, 1121). No longer a supernatuarl endowment disclosed by revelation, it is appropriated by the king, the priest, or the bureaucrat who invokes its aura in virtue of his office, not in virtue of his mission.
15. Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Knopf, 1984), p. 250, writes as follows: “More than a masterful, summary, victorious articulation, “The horror!” appears as minimal language, language on the verge of reversion to savagery, on the verge of a fall from language.” Brooks is certainly right to point to the liminal character of Kurtz's final words, but we can see them as ascent quite as readily as descent, language as it emerges from sensation, from wordless reflex to reflexive word.
16. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1981), pp. 231, 230, has written of the “perceptual vocation of [Conrad's] style,” which “offers the exercise of perception and the perceptual recombination of sense data as an end in itself.” No doubt the activity of perception carries its own justification for Conrad, but that activity receives sufficient warrant only through its contribution to the moral vocation of the style. Marlow may not be an articulate moralist, but he has a moral style.

**Criticism: Robert Hampson (essay date spring 1990)**


*[In the following essay, Hampson investigates the role of racism in Heart of Darkness.]*

James Clifford, in an insightful essay on Conrad and Malinowski, at one point observes:

> It would be interesting to analyze systematically how, out of the heteroglot encounters of fieldwork, ethnographers construct texts whose prevailing language comes to override, represent, or translate other languages.¹

As Clifford notes, behind this observation lies Talal Asad's conception of ‘a persistent, structured inequality of languages’ within the process of ‘cultural translation’. In Asad's own words:
The anthropological enterprise of cultural translation may be vitiated by the fact that there are asymmetrical tendencies and pressures in the languages of dominated and dominant societies.\(^2\)

Elsewhere in the same essay, Clifford refers, in passing, to ‘the many complexities in the staging and valuing of different languages in *Heart of Darkness*’.\(^3\) I would like to take this perception and the observations about the problems of ‘cultural translation’ as the starting-point for an investigation of racism in *Heart of Darkness*.

I

In *Heart of Darkness*, as in reports of ethnographic fieldwork, heteroglot experience is rendered into a largely monoglot text.\(^4\) As Marlow says:

‘An appeal to me in this fiendish row—is there? Very well; I hear; I admit, but I have a voice, too, and for good or evil mine is the speech that cannot be silenced.’\(^5\)

There are two or three places where this largely monoglot text is broken into by other languages, and these instances are highly instructive. For example, Marlow ends his account of the two women knitting outside the door of the Company offices with the following apostrophe:

‘Ave! Old knitter of black wool. *Morituri te salutant!*’

(p. 57)

The Latin tag points to the common culture of Marlow and his audience: a culture grounded in the shared educational background of English public schools.\(^6\) The two other instances occur in the same part of the text, but serve a different function. When Marlow recounts his meeting with the ‘great man’ who runs the Company, he observes:

‘He shook hands, I fancy, murmured vaguely, was satisfied with my French. *Bon voyage.*’

(p. 56)

Then, after his medical examination, the Doctor concludes:


(p. 58)

These passages indicate that, though Marlow's narrative is in English, many of the encounters that he subsequently recounts are to be imagined as originally taking place in French. Yet, apart from these two speeches, no attempt is made to indicate that French is generally the medium of communication, except in so far as explicit references to English dialogue serve this end. Marlow is careful to specify that English was the medium for his conversations with the Swedish captain (who spoke ‘English with great precision and considerable bitterness’, p. 63); that he made a speech in English ‘with gestures’ to his African bearers (p. 71); and that English was one of the links between Marlow and Kurtz (he ‘could speak English to me’ since he ‘had been educated partly in England’, p. 117). But in what language are we to imagine Marlow and the Russian conversing? The Russian could certainly read English (as his annotated copy of Towson's *Inquiry* shows) and he tells Marlow that he had ‘served some time in English ships’ (p. 123), but would English or French have been the medium for their conversations?\(^7\) The indeterminacy is itself significant, since it
suggests that English and French are granted similar status within the narrative.

By comparison, Russian and African languages are present in the text in ways that suggest they have been assigned a lower position in an implicit hierarchy of languages. Russian is encountered in written form in the annotations to Towson's *Inquiry*:

“… the notes pencilled in the margin, and plainly referring to the text. I couldn't believe my eyes! They were in cipher! Yes, it looked like cipher!”

(p. 99)

The annotations, though not actually decipherable by Marlow, are recognised as potentially meaningful. They have the same status as the Russian's signature on the board found with the firewood:

“We came to the bank, and on the stack of firewood found a flat piece of board with some faded pencil-writing on it. When deciphered it said: “Wood for you. Hurry up. Approach cautiously.” There was a signature, but it was illegible—not Kurtz—a much longer word.”

The Russian annotations are not decipherable because Marlow cannot read the script. Marlow's failure to even recognise Cyrillic script opens a gap between Marlow and Conrad, and suggests that the text's hierarchy of languages is Marlow's rather than Conrad's. This is particularly important in relation to the representation of African languages in the text.

Where Russian exists in the text as script, as a written code that is potentially meaningful, African languages are present only as sound. They appear as ‘a burst of yells’ (p. 96); ‘angry and warlike yells’ (p. 112); ‘tumultuous and mournful uproar’ (p. 102); ‘a tremulous and prolonged wail (p. 112); ‘complaining clamour, modulated in savage discords’ (p. 102). They are represented consistently as pre-verbal, pre-syntactic sound—as sound that is the direct expression of emotion, as sound that is pure sound (akin to music), as sound that is utterance without meaning:

‘… they shouted periodically together strings of amazing words that resembled no sounds of human language … all that wild mob took up the shout in a roaring chorus of articulated, rapid, breathless utterance.’

(pp. 145-6)

This representation is in accord with the emphasis, elsewhere in the text, on gesture. I have already mentioned Marlow's speech in English to his African bearers. His account implied that it was not the speech that communicated his meaning but rather the accompanying gestures ‘not one of which was lost to the sixty pairs of eyes before me’ (p. 71). More significant still is Marlow's account of the first appearance of Kurtz’s African mistress:

‘Suddenly she opened her bared arms and threw them up rigid above her head …’

(p. 136)

Marlow produces this iconic image of the African woman, communicating by dramatic gesture, but it is followed by a very different representation of her in the Russian's brief, inset account of an incident involving her and Kurtz:
“She got in one day and kicked up a row about those miserable rags I picked up in the storeroom to mend my clothes with … At least it must have been that, for she talked like a fury to Kurtz for an hour, pointing at me now and then. I don't understand the dialect of this tribe.”

(p. 137)

Instead of an iconic ‘noble savage’, the Russian presents a domestic drama; instead of pre-verbal Africans, the Russian presents discursive speech; instead of undifferentiated sound, there is an awareness of language and the ability to discriminate between different African dialects. Marlow reduces Russian script to cipher and African speech to noise, but, for the Russian, both have the status of language. The text's hierarchy of languages is again clearly Marlow's, and is presented as the product of Marlow's specifically English incomprehension.

II

The African drumming and Marlow's use of the ship's steam-whistle can usefully be examined in this context of non-verbal means of communication. Drumming is part of Marlow's account of Africa from his description of his first experience of the jungle during his journey to the Central Station:

‘A great silence around and above. Perhaps on some quiet night the tremor of far-off drums, sinking, swelling, a tremor vast, faint; a sound weird, appealing, suggestive, and wild—and perhaps with as profound a meaning as the sound of bells in a Christian country.’

(p. 71)

We might compare this with W. Holman Bentley's account of his first journey to Kinshasa in 1881:

We had heard drums before, but until now had not thought much of them. From this time they became an intolerable nuisance. As we passed along, one town would beat a warning to the next.

Bentley's narrative assigns a reasonable purpose to the drumming: it functions as a method of communication within what is perceived as an organised social system. Marlow's representation of the signal-drums is of a piece with his representation of African spoken language: their communicative function is supplanted by his emotional response to what he does not understand. On the other hand, Marlow plays in this passage with the idea of cultural equivalence. In its context, this is clearly part of a narrative strategy designed to undermine the ethnocentricity of his audience. Generally, the drumming becomes the heart-beat of the ‘heart of darkness’ and signifies ‘forgotten and brutal instincts’:

‘This alone, I was convinced, had driven him out to the edge of the forest, to the bush, towards the gleam of fires, the throbbing of drums, the drone of weird incantations; this alone had beguiled his unlawful soul beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations.’

(p. 114)

Here Marlow's narrative has clearly moved from notation of reality to projection and the demonization of the other. Bentley, too, slips easily into representing Africans as devils. For example, as he and his companions approached Kinshasa for the first time, they came under attack from the inhabitants of the area (‘men, hideous in war paint, armed with spears, guns, and knives, rushed out’), and Bentley comments: ‘Perfect fiends they appeared, howling and yelling’. Later, after describing the punishment of a man and woman at Manzi, he
observes:

Fiendish cruelty and heartlessness have made their home in these dark places.\textsuperscript{20}

This casual demonizing of the ‘other’ suggests the unthinking metaphors of stereotyping. It is facilitated by Bentley’s missionary project in Africa and his frame of reference as a Christian. (Bentley, for example, regards both Stanley and Leopold II as agents of Providence.) Where Bentley uses the stereotype unthinkingly, unreflectingly and unreflectively, Marlow makes this devilish stereotype the basis for a phantasmagoria:

‘We were within thirty yards from the nearest fire. A black figure stood up, strode on long black legs, waving long black arms, across the glow. It had horns—antelope horns, I think—on its head … it looked fiend-like enough.’

(p. 143)\textsuperscript{21}

The metaphor calls attention to itself as the scene takes on the overtones of Faustian pact or Walpurgisnacht. This might be criticised as a more pernicious because more powerful presentation of the stereotype: the stereotype empowered by Conrad’s superior literary skills and resources. Alternatively, the passage can be approached in terms of Marlow’s deployment of the categories of perception of European culture—as Marlow drawing upon the resources of a literary culture that includes Dante and Goethe in his attempt to represent and comprehend this non-European experience. ‘All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz’ (p. 117), and ‘all Europe’ contributes to Marlow’s narrative. Marlow’s narrative displays the cultural resources that are part of his bond with Kurtz, and Conrad sets that culture up for analysis through its confrontation with Africa in Marlow’s narration. One result of this confrontation is, as Marx had put it,—

The profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilisation lies unveiled before our eyes, turning from its home, where it assumes respectable forms, to the colonies, where it goes naked.\textsuperscript{22}

The ship’s steam-whistle could be seen as a European equivalent of the African use of signal-drums as a non-verbal means of communication, but, where the drumming is represented as a language used by the Africans which the Europeans cannot understand, the steam-whistle is used in \textit{Heart of Darkness} only as a signal from the Europeans to the Africans. The Russian advises Marlow on the effectiveness of the steam-whistle as a means of dispersing hostile crowds:

‘“One good screech will do more for you than all your rifles. They are simple people.”’

(p. 123)

Marlow’s narrative has already supplied a demonstration:

‘With one hand I felt above my head for the line of the steam whistle, and jerked out screech after screech hurriedly. The tumult of angry and warlike yells was checked instantly …’

(p. 112)

The word ‘screech’ converts the steam-whistle into an animal or bird, just as the ‘yells and screams’ dehumanise the Africans and reduce them to animals or demons. The immediate response of the Africans to Marlow’s use of the steam-whistle reinforces this dehumanisation: the subliminal message is of communication on an animal level, but this message does not reduce the Europeans. On the contrary, it
re-affirms the superiority of the Europeans, since Marlow has shown his ability to communicate skilfully even on this level, while the Africans have demonstrated their incomprehension of European technology. Norman Sherry has argued that, although there is ample evidence of the use of steam-whistles to disperse armed Africans, such a tactic would be unlikely to have been effective on the Congo in Conrad's time, since steamers and steam-whistles would have been commonplace.23 Certainly, to judge by Bentley's account, steamers were far more frequent than Marlow's narrative suggests. Bentley, however, also records an incident similar to the one Marlow describes. Grenfell, on board the steamship *Peace*, was exploring the Congo between Stanley Pool and Stanley Falls. He entered one of its northern affluents, the Lubi river, and at Mosaku the following occurred:

The chief was very friendly, and made us a small present, venturing on board to do so. He was evidently greatly impressed by the white man's fine canoe; when one of our men, not thinking what the result would be, suddenly opened one of the steam valves, this impression was so profoundly deepened, that his kingship and all his satellites jumped overboard, as well as the occupants of some twenty or thirty canoes alongside, and swam ashore.24

The Africans' response to the steam-whistle (in *Heart of Darkness*) accords with the representation of their response to the steamer generally. For example, Marlow gives the following account of the steamer's departure:

'I steamed up a bit, then swung downstream, and two thousand eyes followed the evolutions of the splashing, thumping, fierce river-demon beating the water with its terrible tail and breathing black smoke into the air.'

(p. 145)

Even the African fireman on board the steamer is represented as approaching his work in terms of 'the evil spirit inside the boiler' (p. 98). This emphasis on animistic responses to European technology is in line with stereotypes of 'primitive' behaviour and 'primitive' ways of thinking:

‘Primitive’ man … spent his whole life in fear of spirits and mystical beings … he worshipped animals and trees, tried to control the mystical forces of nature by means of ceremony, ritual, taboos and sacrifices, and explained the wonders of the universe in imaginative but ‘unscientific’ myths.25

Indeed, an animistic representation of the ‘primitive’ response to European technology is a recurrent trope in Victorian fiction.26 It would be possible to ascribe these stereotypes to Marlow rather than to Conrad, except that, like the Africans' response to the steam-whistle, they are inscribed as events into the narrative. The departure of the steamer is attended by the display of a fetish (p. 145); the African fireman wears a charm ‘made of rags, tied to his arm’ (p. 98) to protect him from ‘the evil spirit inside the boiler’ (p. 98). In these instances, it seems to be Conrad rather than Marlow who is making use of conventional racist and imperialist modes of representation.

III

The most forceful attack on Conrad as a racist has been made by Chinua Achebe.27 Achebe's force, however, is often at the expense of subtlety: what he attacks is a grossly simplified version of *Heart of Darkness*. To begin with, he elides the gap between Marlow and Conrad: he ignores both the text's dramatisation of a consciousness (Marlow's) and Conrad's strategic use of the distance between himself and his narrators.28 Conrad is not 'pretending to record scenes', he is not presenting an account of Africa: he is presenting Marlow's experience of Africa and Marlow's attempt to understand and represent that experience. Marlow is a
fictional character whose consciousness operates according to contemporary codes and categories. Marlow's perceptions are often racist, because those codes and conventions were racist, but the narrative method (which Achebe dismisses) represents a more radical stance since it problematises Marlow's narrative, his perceptions and representations.

Achebe also misrepresents the way in which antitheses operates in *Heart of Darkness*. He describes the narrative as setting up the Congo as the antithesis of the Thames, but then adds:

> It is not the differentness that worries Conrad but the lurking hint of kinship ... the Thames too 'has been one of the dark places of the earth'. It conquered its darkness, of course, and is now in daylight and at peace.

(p. 252)

As Achebe's first statement partly acknowledges, *Heart of Darkness* does not construct its narrative by means of static oppositions: Conrad destabilises the antithesis of imperialist discourse by tracing connections where there should only be oppositions. It is not just that the Thames 'has been one of the dark places of the earth', but, by the end of Marlow's narration, the anonymous primary narrator has learned from it to revalue the Thames:

> The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky—seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness.

(p. 162)

This hardly suggests that the Thames has 'conquered its darkness'. In addition, Achebe ignores the way in which Marlow's remark about 'the dark places of the earth' initiates a challenge to the rhetoric of imperialism. Bentley again provides a point of reference. For him, as for Marlow, the European presence in Africa prompts thoughts of the Roman colonisation of Britain:

> It is more than probable that our forefathers were a wild lot. The Romans found the Britons a tough people to tackle.

But Bentley then draws a very different moral:

> The very grit, go, manliness, energy, and general noblesse, which, when properly tempered and directed, has resulted in so great a nation, was the cause of their wildness and violence.

Bentley uses the analogy with the Roman colonisation of Britain to justify European interference in Africa. Since the English are manifestly 'so great a nation' (in terms of 'grit, go, manliness, energy'), they are obviously well-placed to 'temper and direct' the Africans. Marlow, by contrast, alludes to the Roman colonisation of Britain in order to subvert his audience's ethnocentricity:

> 'Sandbanks, marshes, forests, savages,—precious little to eat fit for a civilized man …'

(p. 49)

Marlow's words destabilise the antithesis of savage/civilized from the outset, and the continuation of his speech shows how the idea of 'savagery' is a product of the colonisers' fear in the face of the 'incomprehensible':
‘He has to live in the midst of the incomprehensible, which is also detestable. And it has a fascination, too, that goes to work upon him. The fascination of the abomination …’

(p. 50)

The opposition between Kurtz's African mistress and ‘the Intended’ is also not as straightforward as Achebe suggests. He reads her as ‘a savage counterpart to the refined European woman’. The passage he quotes suggests that an opposition is constructed in terms of the ‘savage’ (from ‘the night of the first ages’) and the European woman with her ‘mature capacity for fidelity’—that is, an ideological opposition underwritten by evolutionary theory. But Achebe distorts the passage by leaving out one sentence: ‘I noticed she was not very young—I mean not girlish’ (p. 157). The word ‘mature’ compares what she is (‘not very young’) with what Marlow might have expected her to be (‘girlish’): it is not, primarily, part of a contrast between the European and the African woman. Achebe also assumes that Marlow's view of ‘the Intended’ is not problematical: it is worth noting that Marlow's first impression of her (‘She seemed ready to listen without mental reservation, without suspicion, without a thought for herself’, p. 155) is not supported by the outcome of the interview. Achebe also ignores the way in which the African woman is associated with life, vitality, passion (p. 136), while the European woman is associated with lifelessness and death:

‘The tall marble fireplace had a cold and monumental whiteness. A grand piano stood massively in a corner; with dark gleams on the flat surfaces like a sombre and polished sarcophagus … The room seemed to have grown darker, as if all the sad light of the cloudy evening had taken refuge on her forehead. This fair hair, this pale visage, this pure brow, seemed surrounded by an ashy halo from which the dark eyes looked out at me.’

(pp. 156-7)

The opposition between these two women is further complicated by the presence in the text of a third woman: the ‘woman, draped and blindfolded, carrying a lighted torch’ (p. 79) in Kurtz's painting. Marlow does not specify whether this woman is white or black, but she is configurated with the other two and she reflects unambiguously upon the ‘civilizing mission’ of the Europeans.

IV

The nub of Achebe's criticism of Conrad is Conrad's representation of Africa and Africans:

Can nobody see the preposterous and perverse arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind? But that is not even the point. The real question is the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this agelong attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world. And the question is whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art.33

Achebe is right: African culture and history have been denied adequate representation in European writing, and Heart of Darkness does nothing to remedy this. Bentley again provides an instructive comparison. He devotes his first two chapters to a history of the Congo from 1484 to 1877, and his narrative generally gives much more sense of social relations and social organisation within and between different peoples in the Congo basin, but his history of the Congo is written from the perspective of European contact with the Congo and his narrative generally is firmly fixed within a racist, imperialist Christian framework.34Heart of Darkness, however, does not offer a representation of Africa: it offers a representation of representations of Africa. Edward Said has described ‘Orientalism’ as more ‘a sign of European-Atlantic power over the Orient’ than ‘a veridic discourse about the Orient’ and that distinction is also important in this context.35 Conrad does not
present himself as an expert on Africa and Africans: he creates a narrator and a narrative situation; he does not use the pseudo-authoritative first-person report of so many magazine articles of the period.\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Heart of Darkness} fixes on the power-relation between Europe and Africa and holds up for analysis the European discourses produced in that context. Said argues that

\begin{quote}
The imaginative examination of things Oriental was based more or less exclusively upon a sovereign Western consciousness … according to a detailed logic governed not simply by empirical reality but by a battery of desires, repressions, investments, and projections.\textsuperscript{37}
\end{quote}

And it is precisely those ‘desires, repressions, investments, and projections’ that \textit{Heart of Darkness} exposes in the discourses of imperialism. Africa is not the arbitrarily-selected backdrop for a story about ‘the break-up of one petty European mind’: Kurtz's ‘break-up’ is the result of his place in the power-laden engagement of Europe and Africa; Kurtz is a victim of one of the discourses of imperialism; and Kurtz's history shows how damaging that discourse is to both Africans and Europeans.

Achebe also ignores the implied reader of \textit{Heart of Darkness}. As Benita Parry reminds us:

\begin{quote}
Conrad in his ‘colonial fictions’ did not presume to speak for the colonial peoples nor did he address them … His original constituents were the subscribers to \textit{Blackwood's} and \textit{New Review}, an audience still secure in the conviction that they were members of an invincible imperial power and a superior race.\textsuperscript{38}
\end{quote}

In the case of \textit{Heart of Darkness}, Conrad knew in advance that his readers would be those of \textit{Blackwood's Magazine}, and he also knew what that implied.\textsuperscript{39} Talal Asad notes:

\begin{quote}
When anthropologists return to their countries, they must write up ‘their people’, and they must do so in the conventions of representation already circumscribed … by their discipline, institutional life, and wider society.\textsuperscript{40}
\end{quote}

Conrad shows his understanding of the parameters within which he was writing by mirroring them in Marlow's relations with his audience. Marlow's audience, like the readership of \textit{Blackwood's Magazine}, is made up of males of the colonial service class. Marlow is forced to confront the problem of making his experience intelligible to an audience which readily manifests the limits of its understanding and tolerance: “‘Try to be civil, Marlow,’ growled a voice’ (p. 94). Marlow adopts various rhetorical strategies in relation to this particular audience, and Conrad similarly shapes his narrative strategies in \textit{Heart of Darkness} to a specific, known implied reader. But far from purveying ‘comforting myths’ (as Achebe alleges), the narrative strategies of both Conrad and Marlow work to subvert many of the ‘comforting myths’ accepted by the implied reader. However, as Achebe registers, one myth \textit{Heart of Darkness} fails to challenge is that of racial superiority.

Parry rightly states that Achebe's ‘protest at Conrad's insulting representations of Africa should be listened to by critics for the “truth”’ it asserts: Achebe's protest is ‘a voice that cannot be silenced’.\textsuperscript{41} However, as Parry implies, Achebe's ‘truth’ needs to be situated in relation to other ‘truths’. It might be argued, for example, that \textit{Heart of Darkness} needs to be placed in its historical context: Achebe treats \textit{Heart of Darkness} without reference to the context in which it was written and without consideration of the kinds of awareness to be expected from an English novelist of the 1890s. Achebe seems more concerned with \textit{Heart of Darkness} as a text existing within modern institutional parameters: as ‘the most commonly prescribed novel in twentieth-century literature courses in English Departments of American universities’.\textsuperscript{42} He provides anecdotal evidence of depoliticised readings of the novel within these institutional parameters, but he does not indicate how widespread this depoliticised reading is or was (as he notes, ‘travellers’ tales’ are not trustworthy evidence); nor does he seek to explore the relationship between the depoliticised reading and the
institutionalisation of the text; nor does he seek to relate depoliticised institutional readings of *Heart of Darkness* (if such readings are the norm) to the imperialism of the ‘wider society’. Furthermore, if we consider the present institutional status of *Heart of Darkness*, the text is now supplemented (literally, in the case of the Norton edition) by Achebe's exposure of its racist attitudes. In short, if *Heart of Darkness* is seen as a text of the 1890s, then Achebe has not attended sufficiently to that context; on the other hand, if *Heart of Darkness* is the text as institutionalised by modern teaching and publishing, then Achebe has not sufficiently explored the implications of institutionalisation—including his own paradoxical position as supplement to what he describes as ‘an offensive and deplorable book’.43

Finally, Achebe's implicit demand for an adequate 'picture of the peoples of the Congo', the yardstick by which *Heart of Darkness* is measured, is similarly problematical. Said's exploration of orientalism soon raises the question of ‘how one can study other peoples’, and it is precisely this question that modern dialogic or reflexive anthropology engages with. As Said observed:

> No production of knowledge in the human sciences can ever ignore or disclaim its author's involvement as a human subject in his own circumstances.

Or, as James Clifford puts it, the ethnographic experience involves ‘a state of being in culture while looking at culture’.45 The narrative method of *Heart of Darkness* can be seen as an exemplary response to this part of the problem: Marlow's ‘image of Africa’ is scrupulously contextualised by the frame narrative. (In this light, Marlow's racism is less surprising, given his involvement in the imperialist enterprise.) Indeed, for Clifford, Conrad provides a model, not just in this one work, but in the entire body of his work, or rather in the act of writing that body of work:

> It is not surprising to find throughout his work a sense of the simultaneous artifice and necessity of cultural, linguistic conventions. His life of writing, of constantly becoming an English writer, offers a paradigm for ethnographic subjectivity; it enacts a structure of feeling continuously involved in translation among languages, a consciousness deeply aware of the arbitrariness of conventions, a new secular relativism.

Conversely, Achebe's rejection of *Heart of Darkness* might be compared to Gabriel Garcia Marquez's comment on representations of colonised peoples generally:

> The interpretation of our reality through patterns not our own serves only to make us ever more unknown, ever less free, ever more solitary.

For Achebe and other black readers *Heart of Darkness* is clearly offensive and imprisoning (although Ngugi, for example, seems to have found Conrad an enabling influence), but for white European readers coming to terms with an imperialist past (or European/American ethnographers engaged with the problematics of the adequate representation of other cultures) *Heart of Darkness* still has much to offer—though not as an ‘image of Africa’.48

**Notes**

3. Clifford, p. 100n.
During his time in the Congo, when he was (presumably) mainly speaking French, Conrad was writing letters in French and Polish and keeping a diary in English (with occasional African and French words).


As every English public-schoolboy would have known, Marlow is alluding to the words addressed by Roman gladiators to the Emperor before they engaged in combat. Since access to Latin and Greek was effectively restricted to public-schoolboys, the use of Latin functions as a sign of gender and class. On the role of public schools in relation to imperialism, see Alan Sandison, *The Wheel of Empire* (Macmillan, 1967), pp. 13-16.

Their first exchange is not very helpful: ‘I swore shamefully … “You English?” he asked, all smiles. “Are you?” I shouted from the wheel.’ (p. 122). Clearly Marlow swears in English (hence the Russian's question), but is the rest of the dialogue to be imagined as taking place in French or English? The Russian's exclamation ‘My faith, your pilot-house wants a clean-up!’ (p. 123) suggests either French or English with French interference.

It is perhaps significant that, in ‘The Crime of Partition’ (*Notes on Life and Letters*, J. M. Dent and Sons, 1924), Conrad describes France and Poland as the ‘two centres of liberal ideas on the continent of Europe’ (p. 117), whereas Russia is described as ‘an Asiatic Power’ (p. 115).

‘Heart of Darkness’, p. 98. If we continue to interrogate the text according to the logic of realism, these words would presumably have been in French.

The picture is further complicated by the suspicion of eloquence and the awareness of what cannot be spoken that are also present in the text. See Jeremy Hawthorn, ‘Heart of Darkness: language and truth’ in *Joseph Conrad: Language and Fictional Self-Consciousness* (Edward Arnold, 1979), pp. 7-36.

A distinction should be made between the Africans on the banks of the river and the African crewmen. According to Sherry, the crew of the *Roi des Belges* were probably Bangalas: see Conrad's *Western World* (Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 59; also *Heart of Darkness*, pp. 102-3. It is their Bangala speech which is represented as ‘short, grunting phrases’ (p. 103). This still seems closer to the animal than the human, but we might note that Marlow also refers to the comments of a member of his audience as ‘grunting’ (p. 97). At other times, these African crewmen are represented as engaging in verbal communication with the Europeans, but it is difficult to say in what language we are to imagine these communications taking place. It seems unlikely that they would have used English to a French-speaking crew; and Conrad does not represent them as speaking Pidgin (‘chop’ would be more accurate Pidgin than ‘eat’ p. 103). According to W. H. Bentley, *Pioneering on the Congo*, 2 vols. (Religious Tract Society, 1900), ‘Portuguese was the trade language on the Congo’ (I, p. 88), but it is also possible that French *patois* might have been used. The representation of their language in the text is perhaps better seen in the context of Loretto Todd's observation: ‘literary insertions of pidgins and creoles were, in the past, based less on actual observation than on a form of literary convention’ (*Pidgins and Creoles*, Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1974, p. 77).

This reading is supported by the entry in Conrad's ‘Congo Diary’ recording a similar incident: ‘Expect lots of bother with carriers tomorrow. Had them all called and made a speech which they did not understand’ (Z. Najder ed., *Joseph Conrad: Congo Diary and other uncollected pieces*, [Doubleday & Company, 1978], p. 14).

The Africans at the Inner Station are presumably to be imagined as speaking a particular dialectal form of Bantu with which the Russian was unfamiliar. This is not an instance of that racist reductionism according to which Europeans are represented as having languages, while non-European languages are reduced to the status of ‘dialects’. (I am indebted to Robert Fraser, here and elsewhere, for information about West Africa.)

Bentley, I. 315. Bentley records his work as a missionary in the Congo from 1879 to 1900. Conrad mentions Bentley in his ‘Congo Diary’ (p. 12).
15. Indeed, he emphasises the Europeans' incomprehension: ‘At night sometimes the roll of drums behind
the curtain of trees would run up the river and remain sustained faintly … Whether it meant war,
peace, or prayer we could not tell’ (p. 95). The stage image draws attention to the Europeans' sense of
alienation from African realities: they experience themselves for this moment as spectators, passive
and powerless, waiting for a performance to begin.
16. Marlow might be nearer the truth than he realised. Bentley notes that Ntotela, ‘King of Congo’,
ordered drums to be beaten at San Salvador on Saturday night and Sunday morning to announce the
Christian Church Service (I, 136).
17. Compare ‘I was loafing about, hindering you fellows in your work and invading your homes, just as
though I had got a heavenly mission to civilize you’ (pp. 51-2) and ‘Well, if a lot of mysterious
niggers armed with all kinds of fearful weapons suddenly took to travelling on the road between Deal
and Gravesend, catching the yokels right and left to carry heavy loads for them …’ (p. 70).
18. Compare Chinua Achebe's use of the same image in Things Fall Apart (Heinemann, 1958; reprint
1988): ‘The crowd had surrounded and swallowed up the drummers, whose frantic rhythm was no
longer a mere disembodied sound but the very heart-beat of the people’ (p. 36). Achebe uses the
image to signify a sense of collective identity, which he thereby celebrates; for Marlow, it expresses a
kinship which is feared.
20. Bentley, I., 386.
21. Achebe singles out this passage for comment in his essay ‘An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's
Heart of Darkness’, The Massachusetts Review, 18 (1977), 782-94. A revised version of this essay is
pp. 251-62. Since this is more readily accessible, all references will be to this text. (The essay is also
included in Chinua Achebe, Hopes and Impediments, Heinemann, 1988.) The blackness which
Marlow stresses is not, however, a matter of skin colour: he is describing a figure silhouetted against a
fire in a forest at night.
22. Karl Marx, ‘Future Results of British Rule in India’ quoted by Benita Parry, Conrad and Imperialism
23. Sherry, Conrad's Western World, pp. 54-5. For Najder's opposed view, see Z. Najder, Joseph Conrad:
24. Bentley, II. 97. Bentley also records an incident during a journey on the Kwangu, when four men in a
canoe tried to levy a toll on the steamship: ‘They demanded blackmail, and lay across our bows. The
two whistles of the Peace shrieked their loudest … There was an instant collapse in the canoe; guns
were dropped and paddles were seized and plied to their utmost’ (II, 139). Again, however, the
distinction perhaps has to be made between people who lived on the banks of the Congo and those
who lived on the banks of its tributaries.
25. Brian V. Street, The Savage in Literature: Representations of 'primitive' society in English Fiction,
26. See, for example, H. G. Wells's short story ‘The Lord of the Dynamos’.
‘Viewpoint’, T.L.S. 4010 (1 February 1980) and Hunt Hawkins, ‘The Issue of Racism in Heart of
Darkness’, Conradiana, XIV 3 (1982), 163-71. More recently, Craig Raine's review of Achebe's
which chose to concentrate on Achebe's criticism of Conrad, provoked a lively correspondence.
September 1989, 4) convincingly engaged with the issue of 'cannibalism'.
28. Achebe observes that ‘Conrad appears to go to considerable pains to set up layers of insulation
between himself and the moral universe of history’ (p. 256). But if Conrad was ‘a thoroughgoing
racist’ (p. 257), it is not clear why he would feel the need for such insulation. The readers of
Blackwood's Magazine would not have demanded such insulation from racist and imperialist ideas.
Achebe's subsequent criticism that Conrad 'neglects to hint however subtly or tentatively at an
alternative frame of reference by which we may judge the actions and opinions of his characters’ (p. 256) misreads the mode of Conrad's fiction: to borrow Andrew Gibson's terms, Achebe seeks to convert an 'immanent' text into a 'transcendent' one. (See Andrew Gibson, ‘Sterne, Beckett, and the Novel’).


31. Bentley, I., 443.
32. Achebe, p. 255.
34. Bentley might be compared with Achebe's District Commissioner (in Things Fall Apart) with his book on The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger. The paragraph he intends to devote to the character who has been the central figure in Achebe's book stands as an eloquent symbol of the European's depth of understanding of African society and culture.


39. In November 1911, Conrad wrote to his agent, J. B. Pinker: ‘There isn't a single club and messroom and man-of-war in the British Seas and Dominions which hasn't its copy of Maga.’

40. Asad, p. 159.
41. Parry, 138n.
42. Achebe, p. 259.
43. Achebe, p. 259.
44. Said, p. 11.
45. Clifford, p. 93.
46. Clifford, p. 96.

Criticism: Rita Bode (essay date 1994)


[In the following essay, Bode asserts that “a close focus on the females in Heart of Darkness suggests that the extent and nature of their power are formidable.”]

Conrad's women in Heart of Darkness have bewildered critical commentators as much, perhaps, as his Congo experience bedevils Marlow. Though Conrad's text seems to proffer an invitation to read the work as a kind of male ritual, a moral and sexual initiation into “manhood,” the wide range of critical approaches has not neglected the work's female figures. Recent feminist studies have focused on the women characters to explore
Conrad's methods and ideology. Valerie M. Sedlak, for instance, looks at Marlow's “search for interpretation,” which elucidates the novella's patterns of “fictive discourse,” and Johanna M. Smith assesses Conrad's complex approach to imperialist ideology through the female figures. Other studies have drawn conclusions about the women themselves. Frequently, critics have sensed danger among the women for the novella's male protagonists. Some commentators, like Addison C. Bross and Bruce R. Stark, locate this danger in the female characters' “link with evil and darkness,” while others, such as Jan Verleun and Mahmoud K. Kharboutli, offer different perspectives on the great influence that the women of Heart of Darkness exert. Verleun recognizes the “enormous moral pressures” that the Intended “will bring to bear on [Marlow's] determination to spare her,” and Kharboutli sees their “extraordinary powers of influencing life.” Indeed, a close focus on the females in Heart of Darkness suggests that the extent and nature of their power are formidable. Time and again, Conrad's women seem to exercise control over the male characters. The theme of brotherhood, particularly as it plays itself out in the doubling of Marlow and Kurtz, has long been accepted as a fruitful approach to Conrad's work. But the women also form significant reflections of each other. The connections among them are many. They form a kind of sisterhood in which each female seems to support and complete the intents of the others. The men, however unwittingly, succumb to their will. The separate female space, which, according to Marlow, the women inhabit, becomes by the novella's end the dominant one, drawing within its parameters the male characters as well. I wish to suggest in this essay that present in Heart of Darkness is a powerful female network, which frequently takes charge and assumes control of the novella's events, of the Marlow who experiences the Congo, as well as the Marlow who tells the tale.

The argument, however, for such a female network exerting any power seems problematic. The brotherhood of Marlow and Kurtz, rooted in Marlow's conscious identification of himself with Kurtz, seems a very different matter from a “sisterhood” in which the women, on the narrative level, are unaware of each other's existence. The women in Heart of Darkness, indeed, appear to be functions of Marlow's (and Kurtz's) imagination, and as such, their status as autonomous individuals is shaky. Their powers appear questionable. And yet, the many connections among them are forceful enough to make the novella's women grow beyond, indeed, become too large for the imaginative constructs that try to contain them. The subtle, but powerful web of connections among the women belies Marlow's narrative to suggest a female presence and authority lying outside his interpretations. While some of the connections are made directly by Marlow himself, and others emerge through Kurtz's relationships, still others are highly suggestive metaphorical links, reflecting various degrees of Conrad's conscious artistry. The combination of these three modes of conveying the links among the women implies that, to some extent, Conrad overtly intends that there be a strong female presence in the work, while covertly he is perhaps grappling with this female presence as Marlow himself is. Marlow struggles to maintain his own limited image of womankind. He frequently protests too much, suggesting a basic uneasiness that the women might possibly have an existence beyond his interpretation of them. He consistently refuses to acknowledge or explore the implications of the links that he himself at times brings to our attention. Marlow's omission suggests that he fears these women. The narrative discrepancy between his easy dismissal of them and his unacknowledged fear, between his concept of women and the impression created by the novella's women suggests an independent context for them; but it is the intense textual connections that truly empower the women, for these create a kind of sub-text in Heart of Darkness—perhaps even a story within a story (one over which Marlow has no control)—that ripples suggestively throughout the narrative. My concern in this essay, then, is with this sub-text.

Marlow's assessment of the female condition is well-known. He tells us early on: “It's queer how out of touch with truth women are! They live in a world of their own and there had never been anything like it and never can be. It is too beautiful altogether, and if they were to set it up it would go to pieces before the first sunset. Some confounded fact, we men have been living contentedly with ever since the day of creation, would start up and knock the whole thing over.” Marlow postulates the existence of a separate female space, limited in its vision, contained in its possibilities. For him, women exist in a world apart from “truth” and “fact.” Yet if the women, as Marlow later states, are “out of it” (49), then, so, too, is Marlow, himself, for in his journey up the Congo, he also enters a world in which truth and reality become difficult, if not impossible, to discern.
Even as he moves toward the river, Marlow already feels himself kept away “‘from the truth of things within the toil of a mournful and senseless delusion’” (17). He also has to make a concerted effort to keep hold “‘on the redeeming facts of life’” (26). The physical world itself in the Congo, the fog, the darkness, the impenetrable jungle, severely limits discernment. “‘What was in there?’” Marlow wonders (29). There is, furthermore, no returning clarity with the return from the Congo. In his narration on the Nellie, the dream sensation is still strongly with him: “‘It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream—making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is the very essence of dreams …’” (30). Confronted by the jungle, Marlow, too, seems “‘out of touch with truth.’” In other words, he seems to enter a world which closely resembles his view of female experience. This association becomes particularly significant when we consider that the jungle itself is referred to consistently in female terms. Its embrace, its presence, its very soul are feminine. The wilderness “had caressed him … taken him, loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh” (49) runs Marlow's sensuous description of Kurtz. As Marlow makes explicitly clear, Kurtz's African mistress reflects the mighty female force of the jungle: “‘And in the hush that had fallen suddenly upon the whole sorrowful land, the immense wilderness, the colossal body of the fecund and mysterious life seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul’” (60). Marlow's journey into the female jungle is more than a sexual allegory of male penetration; it is an immersion into a separate other world corresponding disturbingly to the female world which, on a conscious level, he dismisses. It is the nightmare underside of his “‘beautiful’” world of women, a nightmare, in part, at least, because he is forcefully drawn into what he had so confidently placed apart.

The association of Marlow's Congo experience with a female world is strengthened on another level by Conrad's frequent suggestion that female forces lie behind the white male presence in the Congo. The pilgrims' avarice and rapacity are inevitably connected to the women back home, who, like the Intended, wait patiently for their men to make the fortunes in which they can share. Marlow's casual explanation that the Intended's “‘engagement with Kurtz had been disapproved by her people. He wasn't rich enough or something’” (74) implies a significant reason for Kurtz's venture into the Congo. Kurtz's litany—“‘My Intended, my ivory, my station, my river’” (49)—is damning in its direct association of the distant female instigator with the Congo's dark effects.

In Marlow's case, powerful women seem to control his destiny at every turn. They seduce and propel him into the heart of darkness; they receive and encompass him once he is there. The “‘immense snake uncoiled’” that fascinates him about the Congo River recalls that first, fatal temptation in which, traditionally, woman figures so centrally. “‘The snake had charmed me,’” Marlow admits (12). As the Intended stands behind Kurtz's imperialistic ventures into the heart of darkness, so it is Marlow's “‘excellent aunt’” who gets him to the Congo where, moreover, her vision of Marlow and the state of affairs generally dominates. Significantly it is through her vision that we first associate Marlow with Kurtz. Marlow's summary of his aunt's view of him could double as a description of Kurtz: “‘I had been represented … as an exceptional and gifted creature—a piece of good fortune for the Company—a man you don't get hold of every day’”(15). Similarly, Kurtz “‘is a very remarkable person’” (22), “‘an exceptional man’” (25), someone who “‘will go far, very far … He will be a somebody in the Administration before long’” (22) and he, too, is “‘of the greatest importance to the Company’” (25). Marlow's detailing of his aunt's view of him, “‘I was also one of the Workers, with a capital—you know. Something like an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle’” (15), sounds again in the brickmaker's description of Kurtz as “‘a prodigy … an emissary of pity, and science, and progress.’” and as the brickmaker continues, he articulates directly the link between Marlow and Kurtz suggested by the aunt:

““And so he comes here, a special being, as you ought to know.” “Why ought I to know?” I interrupted really surprised. He paid no attention. “Yes. To-day he is chief of the best station, next year he will be Assistant-Manager, two years more and … but I dare say you know what
he will be in two years' time. You are of the new gang—the gang of virtue. The same people who sent him specially also recommended you. Oh, don't say no. I've my own eyes to trust.” Light dawned upon me. My dear aunt's influential acquaintances were producing an unexpected effect upon that young man.

(28)

While Marlow’s aunt affects irrevocably the course of his life, other women watch over the direction that she has established for him. The “‘two women … knitting black wool’”(13) in the Company office in Brussels seem to carry on what Marlow’s aunt set in motion. Through their association with the classical Fates, they suggest a power over life itself.7 Like the dark (and bloody) figure of Dickens's Madame LaFarge, the two Company women seem to be determining, through their knitting, who shall die and who shall live. Their handiwork suggests that theirs is a specifically female power reinforcing the idea that as women, they control the life force itself. Commentators frequently point out that these mythical creatures should number three instead of two,8 but, in a sense, they are the central figures in a succession of Fates, framed on the one side by Marlow's aunt and on the other, by the African mistress. The two knitting women, moreover, hover disturbingly over the story because of their strong effect on Marlow. Conrad deliberately charges them with sinister implications. They seem all-knowing, as well as indifferent, an uneasy combination. They wear black; they are mysterious and inscrutable; the fat one looks like a witch complete with wart and cat, the usual familiar of witches. Marlow senses that these women have an undefined power over him. He recalls:

“In the outer room the two women knitted black wool feverishly. … The old one sat on her chair … She glanced at me above the glasses. The swift and indifferent placidity of that look troubled me. Two youths with foolish and cheery countenances were being piloted over and she threw at them the same quick glance of unconcerned wisdom. She seemed to know all about them and about me too. An eerie feeling came over me. She seemed uncanny and fateful. Often far away there I thought of these two, guarding the door of Darkness, knitting black wool as for a warm pall, one introducing, introducing continuously to the unknown, the other scrutinising the cheery and foolish faces with unconcerned old eyes. 'Ave! Old knitter of black wool. Morituri te salutant.' Not many of those she looked at ever saw her again—not half—by a long way.”

(14)

And later, when Marlow is about to do battle for Kurtz's soul, when he confounds “‘the beat of the drum with the beating of [his] heart,’” it is “‘the knitting old woman with the cat’” who suddenly obtrudes into his consciousness (64).

The two knitters in black suggest, furthermore, that Marlow evinces the sailor's attitude toward women, influenced by the folklore of the sea. In a sailor's story, the vision of a witch, whose presence haunts the sailor-protagonist, is particularly suggestive since witches have power over the natural elements on which sailors are so dependent; witches are to be feared, for instance, since they can call up storms at sea. It is significant that, with his diminished sense of reality, Marlow describes himself as “‘bewitched,’” sensing, in his physical experience, some force of enchantment: “‘You lost your way on that river as you would in a desert and butted all day long against shoals trying to find the channel till you thought yourself bewitched and cut off for ever from everything you had known once—somewhere—far away—in another existence perhaps’” (35). Women, generally, are sources of great superstition among sailors.9 As Horace Beck tells us in Folklore and the Sea, “Cards, dice and women can only lead to trouble at sea.”10 Beck's list is a telling one in its association of women with two other elements over which man does not exercise full control. “Cards, dice and women” have a certain autonomy that gives them the power of the fates to affect men's lives. In their unpredictability, they cannot be trusted, and hence, are feared. From his too facile dismissal of all women to
another realm of perception through to his final encounter with the Intended, Marlow's troubled reactions frequently suggest the sailor's fundamental fear of female powers.11

The African mistress seems to justify such fears. She is ""savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent … ominous and stately in her deliberate progress’’ (60) along the shore. Marlow's descriptions suggest that she not only reflects the mysterious impenetrable jungle with all its secret rites and forces, but also exercises control over it. She possesses the ability to change the face of the landscape itself: "‘Suddenly she opened her bared arms and threw them up rigid above her head as though in an uncontrollable desire to touch the sky, and at the same time the swift shadows darted out on the earth, swept around on the river, gathering the steamer in a shadowy embrace. A formidable silence hung over the scene’’” (60-61). Kurtz's longing to remain a part of the mysterious jungle life seems inextricably linked to his longing for her. Kurtz penetrates to her as much as to the shoreline when, about to be carried back to civilization, he gazes out "‘with fiery, longing eyes, with a mingled expression of wistfulness and hate’’” from the pilot-house where he has been laid. She is the darkness that embraces and caresses him. The Intended helps to send Kurtz into the heart of darkness, and the African mistress seems to define the darkness for him. Her presentation suggests that she lies behind Kurtz's activities moving him, despite her glittering brilliance in appearance, towards his own peculiar darkness. The Russian harlequin fears her influence over Kurtz. She is the leader of her people, standing fearless when others run in fear, initiating their cries and shouts. When she leads the "‘roaring chorus of articulated, rapid, breathless utterance,’” Marlow asks Kurtz, "‘Do you understand this?’ … ‘Do I not?’” he said slowly, gasping, as if the words had been torn out of him by a supernatural power” (66).12 We are left wondering if it is she who has endowed Kurtz with the status of a god.13

The African mistress's outstretched arms cannot stay the movement of Marlow's steamboat back down the Congo River, but they do not need to, for, if she has affected Kurtz, she has also penetrated Marlow's sensibility permanently. In her position to Kurtz, she serves a parallel function to the aunt's relation to Marlow, since she, too, seems to instigate proceedings that profoundly affect the life of another, but she has a complementary role to the two knitting fates who haunt Marlow. She suggests, indeed, that she is the missing Fate, the one who snips the thread of life. Even more inscrutable, impenetrable, and mysterious than the two knitters, she comes permanently between Marlow and the world in which he once lived. She seems to cut his ties with that other world on which Marlow relied—the world of truth, reality, facts. She secures his entry into the feminized jungle from which he cannot escape, for she and the jungle stay with him. She seems to be a collaborator with the knitting women, fulfilling their ominous warnings that there is no return, for when Marlow does come back, he arrives, Gulliver-like, in a different Brussels from the one which he left:

“I found myself back in the sepulchral city resenting the sight of people hurrying through the streets to filch a little money from each other, to devour their infamous cookery, to gulp their unwholesome beer, to dream their insignificant and silly dreams. They trespassed upon my thoughts. They were intruders whose knowledge of life was to me an irritating pretence because I felt so sure that they could not possibly know the things I knew. Their bearing, which was simply the bearing of commonplace individuals going about their business in the assurance of perfect safety, was offensive to me like the outrageous flauntings of folly in the face of a danger it is unable to comprehend. I had no particular desire to enlighten them, but I had some difficulty in restraining myself from laughing in their faces so full of stupid importance.”

(70)

The darkness of his jungle experience has accompanied Marlow home nevermore to leave him. He inhabits permanently now a "‘world of [his] own’” (16), which is a cruel inversion of the world apart in which he places women.
When Marlow tells his story, he speaks from this darkened world. "And this also," said Marlow suddenly, 'has been one of the dark places of the earth" (9). Part of the importance of Conrad's narrative frame might very well be to provide Marlow with a chance to regain his equilibrium. Surrounded by his all-male comrades who still inhabit the world of work and facts, joined to them by the "bond of the sea" (7), Marlow still cannot escape from the dream world which has become his reality. The telling of his tale provides no liberating act of expiation. Instead, the telling re-creates anew the darkened vision of the mysterious jungle. The darkness with which Marlow contends is not the "horror" (68) of Kurtz, nor is it any of the individual women in themselves, but rather it is their cumulative effect, the collective feminine force to which the male protagonists succumb and lose themselves. Marlow's comrades do not pull him back into their fold in any particular way. He sits apart because he is apart re-creating for them the experience with which he lives. And we can wonder, indeed, if at the story's end, it is not the zeal of the convert that carries the day, for Marlow's brother narrator seems to glimpse his darkened world. It is he who comments in the novella's final words: "The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky—seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness" (76).

The final scene with the Intended suggests most strongly that the jungle's effects linger for Marlow. Commentators have frequently focused on the many details that recall the jungle here, from the obvious—Marlow's "vision" of Kurtz as he stands at the Intended's door, "a shadow darker than the shadow of the night" (72)—to the more subtle—the piano with its dark wood and ivory keys linking the Intended's civilized drawing-room to the immoral activities of the Congo. It is not, however, Marlow's inner darkness that pervades the scene with the Intended, nor is it the Intended herself, with her death-like surroundings and shadow-like presence, who is the sole source of the darkness. The darkness that recalls the jungle here seems to stem rather from the Intended's placement in the continuum of the novella's female figures stretching from Brussels to the Congo and back. Confronted by the Intended, Marlow makes some explicit associations:

"She put out her arms, as if after a retreating figure, stretching them black and with clasped pale hands across the fading and narrow sheen of the window. Never see him! I saw him clearly enough then. I shall see this eloquent phantom as long as I live and I shall see her too, a tragic and familiar Shade resembling in this gesture another one, tragic also and bedecked with powerless charms, stretching bare brown arms over the glitter of the infernal stream, the stream of darkness."

(75)

The African mistress and the Intended complement each other. They stand together and keep Kurtz's presence before Marlow as well. If the African mistress cut off Marlow's exit to his former reality, the Intended confirms his irrevocable presence and existence in a different dimension. The links between these women point to a sisterhood in which each works to further and complete the actions begun by the other. The complementary nature of their connections suggests a kind of subversive pattern which aims at the submission of Marlow to its own determined will. Perhaps the brotherhood of Kurtz and Marlow lies, in part at least, in their submission to this sisterhood.

In the encounter with the Intended, Marlow is vanquished. The Intended's belief in Kurtz, like his Aunt's view of him, is another example for Marlow of the way in which women are "'out of it'" (49), but significantly, just as the aunt's perspective seems to dominate in the Congo, so the Intended's vision here overcomes all resistance. Critics frequently note the suggestions of death in Marlow's meeting with the Intended. The Intended's street is "'as still and decorous as a well-kept alley in a cemetery'"; inside are visual echoes of some grand place of entombment with "'three luminous and bedraped columns,'" with "'the tall marble fireplace'" which has "'a cold and monumental whiteness,'" and with "'the dark gleams'" of the grand piano, "'like a sombre and polished sarcophagus.'" Conrad's detail of the entrance, the "'high and ponderous door'" of the Intended's building, suggests that Marlow feels overwhelmed. He then stands before a second
foreboding door, the dark “‘mahogany door on the first floor’” where the Intended lives (72). The emphasis on doors here as he makes his way to the Intended and the descriptions and associations of these doors recall that fateful “‘door of Darkness’” (14) guarded over by the two knitting women. Marlow has arrived where he was supposed to go.

Like the African mistress, the Intended seems to have the power to bring on the darkness. After her entrance, Marlow notices that “‘the room seemed to have grown darker as if all the sad light of the cloudy evening had taken refuge on her forehead.’” The description is effectively ambiguous. It seems all positive. The Intended's glance is “‘guileless, profound, confident, and trustful,’” but it issues from “‘dark eyes.’” She has a “‘pure brow’” (73), but she is “‘all in black’” (72), and her “‘pale head’” (72) and “‘pale visage’” (73) remind us perhaps too much of Kurtz's ivory pate with the “‘colourless lips’” (66); her halo is, after all, “‘ashy’” (73).

Marlow presents his “‘lie’” to the Intended as an attempt to shield her from the truth, but this explanation is self-serving. He states about Kurtz's final words: “‘The dusk was repeating them in a persistent whisper all around us, in a whisper that seemed to swell menacingly all around us like the first whisper of a rising wind’” (75). Uttering the “‘persistent whisper’” would confirm the presence of “‘the horror’” in the Intended's civilized drawing room. Marlow is trying to protect himself as well. The Intended's effect on him, moreover, is profound. She takes over, assumes charge. As Stark points out, the Intended leads the conversation along getting Marlow to say what she wants to hear (548-49). The interaction of the two, however, suggests a deeper activity—the submission of his will to hers. Marlow seems to lose the ability to initiate his own thoughts, to create his own words. He becomes a mere mimic, making her words, his:

“‘But you have heard him. You know!’ she cried.

‘Yes, I know,’ I said …

‘No!’ she cried. … ‘Something must remain. His words at least have not died.’

‘His words will remain,’ I said.

‘And his example,’ she whispered to herself. ‘Men looked up to him—his goodness shone in every act. His example. …’ ‘True,’ I said, 'his example too. Yes, his example. I forgot that.’”

(74-75)

Details of disintegration reinforce a sense of Marlow's submission. He loses himself. He falls apart physically and emotionally. “‘I felt like a chill grip on my chest,’” he recalls. He speaks “shakily,” is silenced by his own “fright,” pulls himself together momentarily to utter his “lie,” and then, he recounts, “‘my heart stood still, stopped dead short’” (75). What occurs in this final scene to Marlow is a kind of death of the heart from which he never recovers. It is no coincidence that Marlow almost dies after his Congo experience—“‘No, they did not bury me, though there is a period of time which I remember mistily, with a shuddering wonder, like a passage through some inconceivable world that had no hope in it and no desire’” (70). Conrad's focus on inner traits like “‘hope’” and “‘desire’” suggests a spiritual and emotional death, if not a physical one. In a sense, Marlow is spiritually re-born into the darkened world associated with the female figures, in which profoundly different kinds of “‘truth’” and “‘fact’” prevail from the ones that have formed his reality. His fate seems almost a deliberate punishment for his belittling views of the female space. He is thrust into this world with a vengeance. There is no fragility here. The dark underside of women's “‘beautiful’” world will not “‘go to pieces before the first sunset’” (16). His meeting with the Intended seals Marlow's experience of the world as a dark one and makes him forevermore a seeker of the more balanced truth that he has lost.
The framework narrator's early comments on Marlow seem to find their root and cause here in the encounter with the Intended, for Marlow, as we're told, is not only “a seaman, but ... a wanderer, too” (9). He is someone who is searching, “a seeker, not a finder yet,” as Melville said about Hawthorne. Marlow's stories show that the “direct simplicity” of the sailor's yarn is no longer possible for him. The tangible, concrete meanings, the “kernel” inside the “cracked shell”(9) give way to the meaning that is outside, “outside in the unseen,” as Conrad wrote originally (9n), “enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that, sometimes, are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine” (9). Before his aunt had sent him off to the Congo, Marlow's view of women had been one of “direct simplicity.” He had gauged them, placed them, dismissed them. Marlow tries to cling to this view after his Congo experience. It would have been “too dark altogether” (76), he contends, to tell the Intended the truth about Kurtz. But earlier his words reveal his admission that the darkness has already triumphed. As he repeats the Intended's words, he speaks, “with something like despair in my heart, but bowing my head before the faith that was in her, before that great and saving illusion that shone with an unearthly glow in the darkness, in the triumphant darkness from which I could not have defended her—from which I could not even defend myself” (74). The meaning of his tale is “outside” in the darkness that surrounds him. And Marlow's inability to see the Intended as part of this darkness suggests that he has not yet found the meaning of his story.

Much critical commentary on Marlow's meeting with the Intended focuses on his “lie.” Several critics have argued that Marlow's equation of the Intended's name with Kurtz's last words, “the horror! the horror!” (68), is not a lie at all, since she represents the immorality of civilization behind the Congo experience. She is “the horror.” Marlow, himself, however, believes that he has lied. His lie is disturbing, moreover, because it seems to confirm a tendency to lie. Through silences and omissions, Marlow misleads on more than one occasion. Marlow believes that “there is a taint of death, a flavour of mortality in lies ... It makes me miserable and sick like biting something rotten would do” (29), but close on the heels of this declaration, he admits about his conversation with the young brickmaker that “I went near enough to [a lie] by letting the young fool there believe anything he liked to imagine as to my influence in Europe. I became in an instant as much of a pretence as the rest of the bewitched pilgrims” (29). Near the story's beginning, he does nothing to contradict his aunt's wrong-headed beliefs about him. Later, he eavesdrops on conversations, which is also a form of deceit. Perhaps the Intended does lead Marlow into lying. But significantly, something within Marlow himself readily responds to those inducements. The lie to the Intended, then, confirms an aspect of Marlow that he tries to present as unique, and, at the same time, it strongly suggests the power of the female forces to penetrate to his susceptibilities.

Marlow's belief that he has lied has further serious implications. Marlow tells us that he needs physical work to keep his “‘hold on the redeeming facts of life’” (26). In work, he finds his identity. “‘No, I don't like work ...’” Marlow begins: “‘but I like what is in the work—the chance to find yourself. Your own reality—for yourself—not for others—what no other man can ever know. They can only know the mere show, and never can tell what it really means’” (31). To maintain his sense of self and reality, Marlow needs tasks in which there is a clear and direct relationship between cause and effect, between his set of actions and the ensuing results. His Congo trip effectively robs him of this kind of experience. There is no clarity or directness in his encounters with Kurtz, no easy understanding of the African mistress. He functions well while repairing his steamboat and piloting it successfully up and down the Congo River, but the encounter with the Intended unbalances him. He no longer knows what to expect: “‘It seemed to me that the house would collapse before I could escape, that the heavens would fall upon my head. But nothing happened. The heavens do not fall for such a trifle’” (76). His lie to the Intended becomes a kind of self-negation. Buckling before her power, he says what he does not wish to say with no clear vision of consequences; in the process, he loses his hold on the kind of direct action from which he derives his identity. Our final vision of Marlow still has him resembling an “idol” (7), as he sits “in the pose of a meditating Buddha,” but he is “apart,” has grown “silent,” and most tellingly, he is “indistinct” (76).
As Marlow wonders about the heavens falling at the end of *Heart of Darkness*, he asks, “‘Would they have fallen, I wonder, if I had rendered Kurtz that justice which was his due? Hadn't he said he wanted only justice?’” (76). Marlow's echoes of justice here at the story's end have a haunting and suggestive effect, for the word recalls its iconographical expression earlier. As Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, among others, have pointed out, Kurtz's oil sketch, which Marlow sees at the Central Station, presents a strong evocation of Justice.\(^1\) That we should be reminded of this sketch in the novella's final moments has significance, for this woman of Kurtz's creation underlines the ties and links that point to the female network present in Conrad's piece, and suggests the position of power that the women hold. This female figure draws to it all the other women in the work, for she reflects some significant aspect of each of them. Initially, aside from its iconography, the female figure in oils is, like Marlow's aunt, another woman propelling Marlow into the heart of darkness. As Marlow tells his listeners, the sketch “‘arrested me’” (28); it exhilarates his fascination with Kurtz. Marlow goes on to describe the painting as “‘sombre’” (27) and “‘sinister’” (28), which recall his response to the two knitters of black wool. The female figure in oils seems as enigmatic and inscrutable as the Fates had seemed to him earlier.

Kurtz's combination of iconographic details seems to be his own. The “‘draped’” (27) and “‘stately’” (28) aspect of the figure suggests a certain majesty frequently found in mythological figures. She evokes the sense of some kind of deity certainly. She invites allegorical interpretations, yet deliberately impedes them as well.\(^2\) The suggestion that the figure evokes Justice seems well-founded since Justice is traditionally represented as a draped and blindfolded woman, but there are no scales of justice here. The blind-fold should indicate impartiality, but here, juxtaposed to the torch, it suggests rather the pointed absence of light. Part of the figure's sinister quality arises from this emphasis on justice being simply blind. Gilbert and Gubar suggest further that the figure's blindness implies powerlessness; but the figure still possesses the light, and as she carries it before her, her pose still commands a presence; she still seems to be leading; she still seems powerful, and her blindness seems to make that power threatening and dangerous. She anticipates, moreover, the appearance of Kurtz's African mistress. The African mistress, too, is “‘draped.’” She, too, commands a majestic presence, leads others and curiously enough, she, too, can be seen as a visual evocation of Justice. The African mistress “carried her head high, her hair was done in the shape of a helmet, she had brass leggings to the knees, brass wire gauntlets to the elbow” (60). Her stately majesty, together with her helmeted head and warlike attire, suggests Athena herself, who, in her capacity as the deity of war and peace, maintains the authority of justice.

What creates the particular qualities of Kurtz's picture, furthermore, is its chiaroscuro, a technique that is central to the presentation, as I have already implied, of both the African mistress and the Intended. It is not, however, simply their aesthetic descriptions in terms of light and dark that link these female figures, but the way in which the light and dark function ambiguously. In its combination of light and dark, Kurtz's sketch is especially telling, for, as Marlow states, it is not the “‘background … sombre—almost black’” that is sinister, but “‘the effect of the torchlight on the face’” (27-8). Her inability, in her blind-folded state, to see the light of the torch that she carries, points to the ambiguous nature of light and dark. She is an “emissary of light” (15) who exists in darkness. She represents the visual equivalent of Kurtz's report for the “‘International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs’” as well as its postscript, “‘Exterminate all the brutes!’” (51), for both suggest a blurred distinction between light and goodness, on the one hand, and darkness and evil, on the other. The presentation of these women suggests a strong association with a light that turns into darkness; they represent a realm in which light and darkness become interchangeable, in which light and darkness are shifting, ambiguous entities.

Light and shade also define the “‘portrait’” of the Intended which Marlow mentions just prior to his meeting with her. Though Marlow accepts the truth of the photograph, his comment “‘that the sunlight can be made to lie too’” (71) reminds us directly about the ambiguous nature of light and dark in this work. Kurtz's sketch and the Intended's portrait have strong links through their association with Kurtz, and they are also the only two pictures in the work. In the sketch and the portrait, we are faced with unanswered questions that bespeak their
connections. Could the photograph of the Intended have served as the basis for Kurtz's sketch? Was the Intended the model for Kurtz's figure of justice? Did Kurtz suspect the source of the heart of darkness before he ever entered the dark continent?

Kurtz supposedly created his sketch before the heart of darkness had seduced him. The Manager tells Marlow, “Mr. Kurtz had painted this—in this very station more than a year ago—while waiting for means to go to his trading-post” (28). But the sketch does not exist in isolation. Like Marlow giving way to the Intended's probing of his susceptibilities, Kurtz's female creation seems to lead him to acknowledge what he already suspects and what, perhaps, through his other women, he experiences. The blind-folded woman carrying the torch seems present in Kurtz's final utterance and death, and through their links to her, Kurtz's other women also seem to hover about his death-bed. In dying, Kurtz's own actions echo the image of his woman in oils. Like his creation, Kurtz is confronted by light, yet he cannot see. Marlow recounts:

“One evening coming in with a candle I was startled to hear him say a little tremulously, ‘I am lying here in the dark waiting for death.’ The light was within a foot of his eyes. I forced myself to murmur, ‘Oh, nonsense!’ and stood over him as if transfixed. …

He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision—he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath:

“The horror! The horror!”

(68)

Perhaps the “image,” the “vision,” is his own as he depicted it in his sketch of the light slipping into darkness. Perhaps the horrifying truth that is affirmed for Kurtz in his final moments is that the light lies; there is no absolute light; light can represent darkness.

What, then, was the justice that Kurtz had wanted? “Hadn't he said he wanted only justice?” Marlow asks (76). If Kurtz's desire for justice was the demand for some kind of acknowledgement that light and dark, truth and deception, purity and immorality are not so far apart, then Marlow fails in more ways than one to render Kurtz his justice. But if justice is mentioned at the end to remind us finally and completely of the powerful, driving presence of women in Conrad's darkened world, then Marlow's submission to the Intended does, perhaps, render Kurtz that justice which was his due. Whatever the meaning of Kurtz's sketch, he sees it as embodied in a female figure. Female figures capture his imagination. And finally, females embody the ambiguity that seems to control meaning.

Notes


6. See DeKoven for a suggestive detailing of the jungle as feminine (931 and following).

7. Smith also draws attention to their links with the classical Charon and Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost* (187).


9. To meet a woman on his way to joining his boat before a voyage is an ill-fated sign for a sailor (See Christina Hole, “Superstitions and Beliefs of the Sea,” *Folklore* 78 [1967]): 184-89), and women on board cargo and merchant vessels are considered evil omens (see Phillippa Waring, *A Dictionary of Omens and Superstitions* [London: Souvenir Press, 1978]). Witness the ominous repetitive reminders in Conrad's “The Secret Sharer” that the Captain's wife is on board the troubled *Sephora*.


11. Other traditional gender assignations made by sailors seem to tie in with this fear. The sea, itself, the greatest threat to sailors, is traditionally feminine, governed by lunar goddesses. It is, perhaps, no coincidence, then, that sailors' ships are always female (consider the *Nellie* as well as Marlow's beloved steamboat); not only is a sailor's ship his most intimate companion, but it is also a female over whom he can exercise control; it is under his authority, and he can take very practical steps to keep it there.

12. The manuscript and the serial versions of *Heart of Darkness* affirm the ties between the African mistress and Kurtz even more strongly and directly, for instead of “‘Do I not,','” they read, “‘I will return'” (Kimbrough, 66n), words which suggest that Kurtz is not replying to Marlow's questions, but speaking directly to the woman on shore.

13. See DeKoven for a very different reading of the African mistress. She sees her as a “walking objective correlative of imperialist plunder” (120).


15. Compare Nadelhaft, who interprets Marlow's treatment of the Intended as “sardonic and manipulative … from the first moments of their meeting” (48).


18. Watt discusses a “series of occasions where Marlow has lied, or at least deceived, on behalf of Kurtz” (142-42).


20. Could Conrad, for instance, have been trying some kind of ironic variation on *Liberty Guiding the People*? The contrast of stark lights and darks certainly reflects the work of Delacroix and other artists among the nineteenth-century French Romantics, who were well-known by Conrad's time.


22. Compare Sexton for an interesting discussion of how the sketch is present in several scenes, including this one. Sexton argues that the “threads of Marlow's narrative parallel the sketch in physical detail and symbolic meaning” (389).

**Criticism: Kimberly J. Devlin (essay date winter 1994)**


[In the following essay, Devlin analyzes the textual symptoms found in *Heart of Darkness and asserts that the novella was written with a colonial bias.*]

In their initial theorization by Freud, symptoms engage the body's performative registers on several levels: they can traverse, for instance, behavioral patterns (as in compulsive gestures or tics), sensate functions (as in dyspnoea), communicative abilities (as in aphonias), and mental processes (as in supervalent thoughts). They are characterized alternately as excesses (as in phobias or obsessions) and absences (as in amnesic gaps), and they are marked by their formal variety, their ingenious refusal to confine themselves to any particular expressive mode of the embodied subject. Symptomology illustrates the ways in which the body's numerous performative registers are inseparable from the linguistic, are enmeshed in the discursive. The symptomatized body emerges as a site of hyper-signification.

Psychoanalysis can be said to narrativize the signifying embodied subject, that is, to construct from its specific symptoms a larger narrative. Several of Freud's case histories suggest that the overdetermined origins of this narrative remain entangled in history and fantasy. Novelistic narratives, often with analogously entangled sources, can also be somatized, conceived of as textual corpora, as discursively materialized bodies that likewise exhibit particular symptoms. Two recent commentaries on *Heart of Darkness,* for instance, have implied that its narrative corpus displays what psychoanalysis might label symptomatic repressions, amnesic gaps. Chinua Achebe has argued that Conrad's text effectively forgets Africa, reducing it to “setting and backdrop … to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind” (257). Frances B. Singh has pointed out that Marlow's story contains a related albeit more explicitly embodied textual elision: in its insistence that the “actual rites, the customs of the same people whom the Belgians were exploiting, are exercises in evil and that knowledge of them should be suppressed,” Marlow's narrative unwittingly doubles a material document it partially contains within itself—Kurtz's Report to the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs (272).

Achebe and Singh both hold Conrad more or less responsible for these repressions, the former characterizing him as “a thoroughgoing racist” (257), the latter maintaining that if Conrad shares most of Marlow's prejudices, which does seem to be the case, “then *Heart of Darkness* was written, consciously or
unconsciously, from a colonialistic point of view” (277-278). My own discussion of *Heart of Darkness* will ultimately supplement this line of commentary on the novel's colonialistic biases, but it will also deliberately bracket Conrad: not because I do not think he is technically responsible for his own discursive body and whatever ideological weight it carries (and this weight is indeed considerable, given how widely *Heart of Darkness* in particular is taught); but because I do believe, like Singh, who concedes the possibility of unconscious textual agency, that writers have only limited control over intended textual meanings and even less over their reception.  

In illustration of this limited control, we can look at a particular figure within the textual corpus of *Heart of Darkness* itself—the colonialist Kurtz. As I will explain in greater detail later, the narrative inscribes the minimal mastery he has over his own symptomatic discursive self-projections. It also makes clear that good intentions guarantee nothing, that the intended meaning of his African mission never materializes, going errantly astray, as it were. In Marlow's representation of Kurtz, symptoms speak more readily than conscious intents.

Kurtz is repeatedly and centrally figured as a textual being, as someone whose essence is inseparable from discourse, discourse that becomes a material carapace. In a series of other minor characterological images, the narrative breaks down the distinction between texts and physical embodiments, by linking individual presences to various forms of representation: the Company's chief accountant has the appearance of “a hairdresser's dummy” (21); the Manager's spy is a “papier-mâché Mephistopheles” (29), a description that hybridizes a visual simulacrum with a literary and dramatic text; the Russian adventurer's colorful patchworked attire contains visual residues of the multi-colored map in the Company's offices; and even Marlow himself briefly becomes a medical text, a phrenological specimen, when the Belgian alienist asks to measure his head. My methodology here likewise blurs the distinction between text and embodiment, albeit with a difference, insofar as Conrad's text becomes a corpus, a corpus marked by symptoms that “speak.” In their novelistic reifications, as in Freudian case histories, symptoms can take multiple and variable forms: they are traceable, for instance, in characterological behavior and motive, in telling rhetorical turns, in enigmatic narrative events, in representational patterns, in narrational gestures and trajectories, in imagistic figurations, in discursive tensions. Textual symptoms such as these will be used in this essay to trace a pervasive but particularized drive in *Heart of Darkness* and, ultimately, a defensive disavowal.

In order to map the symptomatized drive, which is optically organized, I will be relying on a characteristically dense and diffuse theoretical narrative provided by Jacques Lacan: its terminology and contentions about visuality will be outlined very briefly here. First of all, the differential “split between the eye and the gaze” (a subtitle of one of Lacan's lectures) refers to a differential in perspectival power: “What we have to circumscribe … is the pre-existence of a gaze—I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides” (72). This differential creates what he calls the scopic drive, an insistent need of the limited eye to see more than is immediately accessible to it (“The split between gaze and vision will enable us … to add the scopic drive to the list of drives” [78]). Secondly, Lacan emphasizes the gaze's regulatory regime over the visually limited subject (“From the moment that this gaze appears, the subject tries to adapt himself to it” [83]) and also what he calls its scotomizing potential: “the gaze seems to possess such a privilege that it goes so far as to have me scotomized, I who look, the eye of him who sees me as object” (84). The posited power of the gaze is ultimately conceived of as annihilating to the I/eye of the subject, reducing it to nothingness, to insignificance, to invisibility—to the status of a dark blotch or *scotoma* in the visual field. Finally, as “a privileged object,” and hence one form of what Lacan designates algebraically as “the objet a” (83), the gaze is linked to the phallus, and the eye implicitly aligns itself with the castrated subject, marked by its visual “lack.” Needless to say, like the phallus, the gaze is illusory—a constructed psychic possession or phantasmal projection: as a result, no one can actually “have” it. But even though the perspectivally limited subject can never attain this site of visual wholeness and omniscience, he can futilely aspire towards it or fantasize that he does indeed occupy it.
The aspiring towards the position of the gaze is manifest in the scopic drive of colonialism, a drive embodied most centrally in the General Manager and Kurtz, peripherally in the figure of the Belgian doctor: the symptoms of the drive are textually overdetermined. Early in Marlow's narrative, the alienist that examines the Company's prospective employees revealingly concedes to him, "It would be … interesting for science to watch the mental changes of individuals on the spot" (15). In this telling locution, the doctor elides his own curious I/eye and synecdochically replaces it with "science," as the limited subject wishfully confuses himself with the larger field of inquiry; and although he may intend the phrase "for science" to mean "for the benefit of science," his selected compact wording revealingly turns the discipline (which stands in for the subject) into the viewing gaze. The voyeuristic structure of this interest emerges in the combination of visual detachment and visual intrusion: the doctor inspects his objects from a "scientific" distance and yet simultaneously desires to see beyond inhibiting externals, as is made patent in his fascinated admission that "the changes take place inside" (15). He explicitly encodes the byproducts of this fantasized medical insight as another capital gain of colonialism (and a superior one at that), so that watching at once produces a commodity and sustains institutional power: "I have a little theory which you Messieurs who go out there must help to prove. This is my share in the advantages my country shall reap from the possession of such a magnificent dependency. The mere wealth I leave to others" (15).

One of the beneficiaries of this "mere wealth" is, of course, the Manager, a second figure in whom intense visual scrutinization of others and imperialist exploitation are symptomatically merged. One of the earliest details that Marlow recalls about the Manager is an aggressive eye—one is tempted to say, a castrating eye. Significantly, however, Marlow notes that he attempts to conceal the virulence of his look: "he certainly could make his glance fall on one as trenchant and heavy as an ax. But even at these times the rest of his person seemed to disclaim the intent" (24). This covert visual aggression neatly foreshadows his employment of a spy to read the Company's confidential correspondences, his displacement of his bureaucratic voyeurism onto an external agency. It is worth considering the Manager's implicit aspirations to the position of the gaze in the context of one of Malek Alloula's claims about colonialism:

colonialism is … the perfect expression of the violence of the gaze, and not only in the metaphorical sense of the term. Colonialism imposes upon the colonized society the ever-presence and omnipotence of a gaze to which everything must be transparent. The exercise of power, especially when the latter is arbitrary, cannot permit the maintenance of shadowy zones; it considers them equivalent to resistance.

(131, n. 27)

One potential act of resistance that occurs at the station run by the Manager is the burning of the grass shed containing trading supplies. This incident creates a textual shadowy zone in Heart of Darkness, as it remains unclear if the fire is indeed a gesture of native protest or a mere accident. Indifferent to genuine causality, the colonialist command at the Central Station creates an illusion of scopic mastery of the incident—renders it "transparent," so to speak—by assigning responsibility and due spectaclized punishment. The individual who has undertaken this assigning is arguably a second textual shadowy zone, although one can speculate that it is the Manager, that the beating is a function of his colonialist gaze, once again punitive, once again covert. But there is also the possibility that the fire is a ploy of one of the agents, acting on behalf of the Manager himself: the Manager is unperturbed by the incident and is overheard telling a confidant that he plans to "take advantage of this unfortunate accident" (26)—presumably the destroyed trading supplies are another excuse for delaying the rescue of Kurtz. If this last possibility is the unexplained truth behind the incident, then the Manager not only aspires to the position of the gaze but also actively attempts to confuse the optical fields of others. He may well have created the equivalent of a trompe l'oeil: a representation of the real that is misrecognized as an actuality—for instance, the curtain in this genre of oil painting perceived as tangible fabric, or the fire at the Central Station perceived as subversive gesture or clumsy mishap. Only upon closer inspection is the illusion seen to be a factitious fact—the curtain-as-painted or the fire-as-staged. The potential
illusion here can be conceptualized as a symptom, as a reified trace of the Manager's desire for mastery in the visual realm.

The textual inscrutability of this incident—its ultimate unreadability, to borrow a locution from Peter Brooks—is consistent with the air of mystery the Manager self-consciously cultivates (“He sealed the utterance with that smile of his as though it had been a door opening into a darkness he had in his keeping. You fancied you had seen things—but the seal was on” [25]). Aspiring to the position of the gaze, as it expresses itself in this particular figure, involves not only a desire for powerful surveillance but also a need to conceal what precisely is seen and known. This need fits well with Lacan's characterization of the gaze as “unapprehensible” (83), visually and epistemologically elusive. In the overheard conversation with his uncle, however, the Manager betray's that his eye is not the gaze, that there is indeed a “shadowy zone” that plagues his ken: this zone is not the colonized, but rather the fellow colonialist Kurtz. The Manager is annoyed, most obviously, by Kurtz's influence with the Council in Europe and by “the pestiferous absurdity of his talk” (34); but the overheard fragments of his speech also hint at an epistemological frustration that is manifested concretely in a sort of visual refusal. The Manager's knowledge of Kurtz is reduced to “no news,” mere “strange rumours” because Kurtz refuses to reappear at headquarters, to emerge from his remote enclave—a decision which leaves the Manager and his uncle mystified, “at a loss for an adequate motive” (34). The Manager counters Kurtz's visual refusal—the figure and cause of these inscrutabilities—with a punitive one of his own: a refusal to make an expeditious appearance at the Inner Station when he hears Kurtz is ill.

Michael Levenson has argued that Kurtz is “the reductio of imperialism. He stands at the point where rational acquisition becomes irrational hoarding, where economic routine has become primitive ritual, where a commodity becomes a fetish, and where indirect violence becomes overt barbarism” (399). I would add to this roster that Kurtz also stands at the point where the covert aspiration to the position of the gaze becomes a patent misrecognition of the self as an actual godhead, with its implicit perceptual omniscience: “He began with the argument that we whites, from the point of development we had arrived at, ‘must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings—we approach them with the might of a deity,’ and so on, and so on” (50). A particular rhetorical turn in Kurtz's recalled report—“we … ‘must necessarily appear to them’”—vacillates precariously between a blithe assumption that the white subject automatically looks a certain way to the perceiving African other and an uneasy imperative that the white subject must vigilantly work to create the illusory deific image. The rigors of controlled self-spectacle, seen also in the figure of the Manager, slip through in the symptomatic ambiguity of Kurtz's discourse. Kurtz desires not only to be seen in a particular masterful way but also to attain masterful vision in itself. He reinforces his appropriative plunderings of the ivory, for instance, in a characteristically grandiloquent verbal claim acted out in a bizarre fixated visual possessiveness: “We filled the steamboat with it and had to pile a lot on the deck. Thus he could see and enjoy as long as he could see because the appreciation of this favor had remained with him to the last. You should have heard him say, ‘My ivory’” (49, my emphasis). In Kurtz's relationship to this colonialist metonymy of Africa, looking is symptomatically associated with owning. Marlow, of course, will expose Kurtz's delusion here, explaining that Kurtz is in truth the owned rather that the owner, the possessed rather the possessor, the controlled object rather than the controlling agent—a point reinforced visually when the steamer departs from the Inner Station: Kurtz “stared through the open shutter” at the African tribe and wilderness; “He kept looking out past me with fiery, longing eyes” (66), Marlow recalls, adumbrating a visual powerlessness in the face of a mesmerizing force. Kurtz's defeat is registered on the level of the visual in his pained inability to look back at the jungle figured as a stoic and impervious gaze. His thwarted visual mastery ultimately undermines his desperate verbal claims: “monotonous bends that were exactly alike, slipped past the steamer with their multitude of secular trees looking patiently after this grimy fragment of another world. … ‘Close the shutter,’ said Kurtz suddenly one day; ‘I can't bear to look at this.’ I did so. There was a silence. ‘Oh, but I will wring your heart yet!’ he cried at the invisible wilderness” (67).

Prior to this revealing admission of visual defeat, Kurtz constructs himself as a visionary, as a gifted creature who sees more than the average human being: he accepts and elaborates the Company's definitions of him as
“something like an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle” (15)—the idealizations that Marlow refuses to misrecognize as the self. Kurtz's identification with apostleship emerges most clearly in Marlow's conversation with the Russian adventurer, the self-proclaimed disciple, who hence receives vicariously the master's visual powers: as the Russian rapturously recalls, “‘He made me see things—things’” (55). Marlow's narrative hints, in other words, that aspiring to the position of the gaze may be Kurtz's centering symptom, may be the invisible drive which organizes his being. I use symptom here in the “radical” sense articulated by Slavoj Zizek, explaining Lacan's final theorization of symptom as *sinthome*:

> What we must bear in mind here is the radical ontological status of symptom: symptom, conceived as *sinthome*, is literally our only substance, the only positive support of our being, the only point that gives consistency to the subject. In other words, symptom is the way we—the subjects—“avoid madness,” the way we “choose something (the symptom-formation) instead of nothing (radical psychotic autism, the destruction of the symbolic universe)” through binding our enjoyment to a certain signifying, symbolic formation which assures a minimum of consistency to our being-in-the-world.

(*Object*, 75)

If Kurtz's visual voracity is the support of his subjectivity, then its frustration logically marks the beginning of his end. This frustration is a type of counter-symptom, recorded in his inability to face the wilderness he has explored and penetrated to unprecedented extremes, his scopic mastery of the region shoring up other forms of power. Marlow's tale adumbrates, however, a possible trade-off in the visual realm: Kurtz's counter-symptomatic concession of scopic failure (“‘Close the shutter’”) may be what allows his moment of anagnorisis. Given the widely varying emotions and drives recorded on Kurtz's face—“I saw on that ivory face the expression of sombre pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror—of an intense and hopeless despair” (68)—his anagnorisis may well include a recognition of the actual non-consistency of his being-in-the-world. The narrative implies that Kurtz's involuntary abandonment of his symptom—his brief relinquishment of his exploratory eye directed *externally* toward elusive geographical and epistemological realms—facilitates the ontological insight of his dying *inward* vision.

The desire to be the subject of the powerful colonialist gaze, symptomatized in the reciprocal figures of Kurtz and the Manager, is ironic: for numerous textual details expose them as subjected to the colonialist gaze, both men emerging as its self-conscious object. The Manager, for example, cannot merely decide in private that he will not expeditiously rescue the ailing Kurtz, instead he must construct in public spectacle his material inability to do so—hence the sinking of the steamer, the accidental nature of which Marlow registers due skepticism about (“Certainly the affair was too stupid—when I think of it—to be altogether natural” [24]). In his two accounts of this incident, Cedric Watts has written that the Manager “persuaded ‘some volunteer skipper’ to steer the vessel on to stones” (*Conrad's “Heart of Darkness”* 84) and that the pair of men “take the vessel into the river and run it aground so that it is extensively damaged” (*Deceptive Text* 120). Watts's argument about the Manager's plot against Kurtz contains important textual insight, but these descriptions of the sinking of the steamer may belie the spectacular subtlety of the Manager's actions: they both implicate the Manager in patent and clumsy sabotage of a crucial vessel. Marlow's narrative, I believe, suggests a carefully constructed illusion: an urgent situation acted upon, a skipper recruited, followed by (supposedly) unexpected disaster three hours into the journey—given the treacherous nature of the river described by Marlow, it strikes me as improbable that someone would have to be “persuaded” to hit stones. The tale hints at another symptomatic *trompe l'oeil*: a visual staging of a catastrophe, complete with numerous participants and witnesses, that might readily pass as real. Underlining their structural resemblance to each other, Marlow links the sinking of the steamer to the burning of the shed, through the recalled identical response of the unnamed agent with black moustaches: after both events, the agent bestows on them an accolade suggestive of a perfect performance (for example, “Everybody had behaved splendidly! splendidly!” [24] and “Everybody was ‘behaving splendidly, splendidly’” [26]).
In the sinking of the steamer, in particular, the Manager betrays a keen awareness of the physically absent yet psychically present gaze of the Council in Europe—a gaze which would presumably hold him responsible for its star agent's death, if it knew that the death could have been prevented. The Council in Europe is a mere textual trace in *Heart of Darkness*—directly mentioned only twice in the final version of Marlow's tale (see 22 and 33)—yet a determining presence in the novel's residual plot. Watts is justified in characterizing the novel as “a murder story” (*Conrad's “Heart of Darkness”* 83), and one that is true to its genre, I would add, insofar as the murderer takes elaborate measures to conceal his crime from a disciplinary scopic regime. Thus the Manager's curious and perhaps compulsive lie about “the affair” to the uncle who is as morally bankrupt as he is (“‘The extraordinary series of delays is not my fault. I did my possible’” [34]) suggests, possibly, his paranoid distrust of all other perspectives (even those of his patent confidants and allies); or else it records his self-exonerating belief in the truth of his own illusions (the gaze has been internalized and must be appeased). Marlow's narrative implies, I think, that the Manager is successful in tricking the colonialist gaze: although his failed attempt at seizing Kurtz's documents may be a lingering source of uneasiness, he sounds certain that the “‘readable report’” he plans to relay to this gaze will be taken as truth (“‘I anticipated this. Shows a complete want of judgment. It is my duty to point it out in the proper quarter’” [61]). But if the Manager tricks the gaze, due to its distance and subsequent subjection to textual mediations, he does not succeed in duping the more immediate eye. Marlow senses vigilantly controlled self-spectacle collapsing, when the Manager nervously snaps a stick of sealing wax and speculates about how long “the affair” should take (25-26), and less tentatively detects other egregious imperfections in his performances as well (“‘He is very low, very low,’ [the Manager] said. He considered it necessary to sigh, but neglected to be consistently sorrowful” [61]).

Kurtz's reciprocal subjection to the colonialist gaze is symptomatized in his obsession with his reputation in the company: “he repeatedly entreated me to take good care of ‘my pamphlet’ (as he called it) as it was sure to have in the future a good influence upon his career” (51). It can be traced as well in his desire for public spectacleized recognition, in his fantasy of having “kings meet him at railway stations on his return from some ghastly Nowhere” (67). In the case of Kurtz, it is also worth noting that—according to Lacan—one of the symptoms of the human's entrapment in the gaze's regulatory regime takes the shape of a construct that is “like a mask”:

… the being breaks up, in an extraordinary way, between its being and its semblance, between itself and that paper tiger it shows to the other. In the case of display, usually on the part of the male animal, or in the case of grimacing swelling by which the animal enters the play of combat in the form of intimidation, the being gives of himself, or receives from the other, something that is like a mask, a double, an envelope, a thrown-off skin, thrown off in order to cover the frame of a shield. …

Only the subject—the human subject, the subject of desire that is the essence of man—is not, unlike the animal, entirely caught up in this imaginary capture. He maps himself into it. How?

In so far as he isolates the function of the screen and plays with it. Man, in effect, knows how to play with the mask beyond which there is the gaze. The screen is here the locus of mediation.

(107)

In *Heart of Darkness*, the main equivalent of this construct—compared to a mask, an envelope, and a screen—is Kurtz's rhetoric, suggestively figured by Marlow as an enveloping sartorial obfuscation (Kurtz's voice “survived his strength to hide in the magnificent folds of eloquence the barren darkness of his heart” [67]; he is “a shadow insatiable of splendid appearances … draped nobly in the folds of a gorgeous eloquence” [72]). The potentially dual origin of the construct, as described by Lacan (“the being gives of himself, or receives from the other”), finds its parallel in the divided source of Kurtz's discourse: he fabricates it, of course, but the fabrication is clearly inflected by contemporary journalism and public speeches—what
Marlow refers to "the rot let loose in print and talk just about that time" (15-16). Kurtz's manipulation of his rhetorical mask is not unsuccessful. Despite their disdain for its claims, both the Manager and his spy believe that Kurtz's idealistic eloquence authenticates him as a member of "the new gang … of virtue" (28), and even the skeptical Marlow is initially only "curious" about "this man who had come out equipped with moral ideas of some sort" (33). But the central dupe of the mask is Kurtz himself, who "could get himself to believe anything—anything" (71), including the veracity of the verbal carapace he works so arduously to reconstruct, after its recurrent collapses. Doubling once again the Manager who may have defensively managed to convince himself that "We have done all we could for [Kurtz]—haven't we" (61), Kurtz places credence—at least until his moment of anagnorisis—in the truth of his own self-constructed illusions.

Discussing the theoretical passage cited above, Kaja Silverman has pointed out that it provides "one of those rare junctures within the Lacanian oeuvre where it becomes possible to impute to the subject some kind of agency, albeit one hedged with all kinds of qualifications and limitations, not the least of which is the impossibility of that subject ever achieving self-presence or 'authenticity'" (75). *Heart of Darkness* indeed emphasizes the limitations on the agency employed in the subject's mapping of itself into the Lacanian "locus of mediation": if Kurtz's discursive self-constructions constitute a form of "play[ing] with the mask beyond which there is the gaze," the subject's control over this "play" is represented as absolutely minimal. The highfalutin sentiments convincingly articulated by Kurtz to the Manager and his spy, and subsequently mimicked by them (see 28 and 34), devolve—compulsively and unconsciously—in the report on the *Suppression of Savage Customs* (obviously in the forgotten parapraxis of its postscriptum, more subtly in its "ominous" opening hints of megalomania [50]). On board the steamer after his rescue, the subjects reserved for Kurtz's "occasional utterances of elevated sentiments" are patently egotistical: "My Intended, my station, my career, my ideas" (67). Here the rhetorical screen not only announces Kurtz's enthralment to the other's gaze by its very presence, it also enumerates the signifiers of significance it believes will impress this site of sight. Another fragment of Kurtz's discourse recalled by Marlow is an outright statement of avarice, only flimsily anchored in a supposed desire for justice (72). Perhaps the most egregious contradiction in Kurtz's linguistic carapace emerges in the narrative recounted by the Russian adventurer: the "splendid monologues on … love, justice, conduct of life" (58), which the Russian has been treated to, have been punctuated at some point by a death threat—and its philosophical rationale echoes a statement heard earlier in Marlow's tale. Kurtz's claim that "there was nothing on earth to prevent him from killing whom he jolly well pleased" (56) suggests that discursively he has come to resemble the Manager's uncle, in its resonance of the latter's belief that "Anything—anything can be done in this country" (34). The narrative traces, in short, no clear or controlled pattern in Kurtz's rhetorical self-presentation: the rhetoric of idealism resurfaces in the wilderness just as surely as the rhetoric of rapacity reappears on board the Western steamer—and in the presence of a man whom Kurtz implicitly welcomes as an ally in "the new gang … of virtue" ("He rustled one of the letters, and looking straight into my face said, 'I am glad.' Somebody had been writing to him about me. These special recommendations were turning up again" [59-60]). In several instances, of course, the two divergent rhetorics are curiously intermingled. In these conflicted and variable discursive figurations of Kurtz, the mask that constitutes the public human subject emerges as a construct that is only imperfectly manipulated.

The symptomatic inconsistences in Kurtz's speech and behavior are dependent, in their turn, on symptomatic repressions, amnesias that sustain a non-recognizedness of a non-coherent self. It is helpful to compare this characterization of Kurtz with the sketchily defined European Council, which functions in the final version of the narrative, I argue, as a structuring absence, as a remote and invisible gaze that is nevertheless determining. *Heart of Darkness* introduces a version of this influential absence that is addressed and indeed looked to—in performative actions or direct communicués (such as reports, letters, or account statements)—in Marlow's historical preamble to his tale: he hypothesizes a Roman commander, posted to a desolate northern military camp, who is occasionally "cheered by keeping his eye on a chance of promotion to the fleet in Ravenna, by and by, if he had good friends in Rome and survived the awful climate" (10, my emphasis). In the manuscript draft of the novel, the contemporary incarnation of this governing body that determines postings and
promotions is clearly delineated. I believe, in other words, that the European Council is fleshed out in the longer initial version of the contrast Marlow posits between ancient Roman conquerors and contemporaneous European colonists:

They were no colonists, their administration was merely a squeeze, and nothing more, I suspect. They were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force—nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weaknesses of others. They grabbed for what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. That's all. The best of them is they didn't get up pretty fictions about it. Was there, I wonder, an association on a philanthropic basis to develop Britain, with some third rate king for a president and solemn old senators discoursing about it approvingly and philosophers with uncombed beards praising it, and men in market places crying it up. Not much! And that's what I like! No! No! It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind—as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness.

(10 [with footnote reincorporated into the text], my emphasis)

In this initial draft, Marlow is critical of conquerors for their greed and brutality, but even more contemptuous of colonists who are guilty of the same motive and means yet manage to believe in “pretty fictions,” to place credence in a blinding “sentimental pretense” of philanthropy (10). The European Council apparently shares Kurtz's philosophy, which parenthesizes colonialism's pecuniary impetus in order to emphasize its putative humanitarian goals: “‘Each station should be like a beacon on the road towards better things, a centre for trade of course but also for humanizing, improving, instructing’” (34). More patently in the manuscript version of the novel than in the final one, Kurtz and the European Council mirror one another in their mutual susceptibility to symptomatic repressions that enable material realities to be discursively marginalized or psychically effaced. If the European Council is the Other of the colonialist venture in Africa, then Kurtz emerges as its perfect imitative image.

The Council haunts the periphery of Marlow's tale in a paradoxically doubled form. On the one hand, it is implicitly constructed along the lines of the dominant model of the Other: as the subject who is supposed to know, as the vigilant absent gaze that monitors the Company's actions through a precarious textual network. But on the other hand, the Council appears as the Other in its directly oppositional form: as the subject who is supposed not to know.5 as the subject who must be kept ignorant of the real horrors of the colonialist enterprise in Africa. Heart of Darkness implies—particularly through the motif of “‘the new gang … of virtue’”—that the European Council regulating the colonialist Company is erected upon an ideological myth, its foundation being a belief in its own benevolent ends. The reader can hence speculate about why the Manager is so resolute about sending “‘a readable report’” to “‘the proper quarter’”: such a document will construct an intelligible and clean version of what has transpired at the Inner Station. “‘The method is unsound’” (61) provides a metonymic hint of its tenor. Once he is assured that “the ‘affair’ had come off as well as could be wished,” the Manager exhibits minimal interest in learning the full truth of Kurtz's situation, which the narrative implies he is never privy to: Marlow recalls that “he took us both in with a comprehensive and satisfied glance” (67)—a symptomatic gesture expressive of temporary visual relief. All the Manager needs, after all, is an official text, whose ultimate destination is in all likelihood the Council: this report is possibly the story's final projected trompe l'oeil (albeit in verbal rather than visual form). Even the tale's freelance colonialist registers a sense of the importance of European scopic ignorance: after disclosing Kurtz's exploits to Marlow, the Russian adventurer exacts from him a promise of “complete discretion” (62), in an effort to ensure the “emissary of light[']s” reputation in Europe. On the issue of the European Council's structuring powers and epistemological vulnerabilities, a discursive fragment of the Manager's uncle is also highly suggestive: “‘Anything—anything can be done in this country. That's what I say; nobody, here, you understand here, can endanger your position. And why? You stand the climate—you outlast them all. The danger is in Europe, but there before I left I took care to …’” (34, Conrad's ellipsis). The Manager's uncle
demarcates a rigid separation of realms, a “here” and a “there”—and a “there” which must be manipulated, as his closing reassurance implies. The space between “here” and “there” corresponds, in a sense, to the symptomatic gap of repression: it represents the chasm where knowledge is transformed and blocked, in order to leave ideological myth intact; it limns the epistemological rupture that allows colonialist discourse in Europe to sustain itself uncritically.

In recording the disjunctive “here” and “there,” Marlow's tale locates an external gap that functions as a precondition for colonialist exploitation, a gap productive of a scotoma within European vision; it explores simultaneously decisive internal determinants of colonialist extremities in individual characters. Constructed on one level as an exposé of specific functionaries, Marlow's narrative arguably exhibits a scopic drive of its own, particularly in its desire to discover causalities, to assign impetuses (explicitly or implicitly) to other drives represented within its textual corpus: the tale figuratively needs to see, for instance, what compels the visual and material rapacity conjoined in the figures of the Manager and Kurtz. In the case of the Manager, the desire for visual power that supports his acquisitiveness is represented as being directly proportional to his ethical deficiency and his professional mediocrity (“He originated nothing, he could keep the routine going—that's all” [25]). Thus the gaze of the European Council—with the regulatory powers it maintains despite its scopic vulnerabilities—insistently holds the potential to expose him or to scotomize him (by replacing him with the purportedly worthier Kurtz) and, in such a demotion, render him bureaucratically negligible. The Manager's admission of resentment when he hears that Kurtz is spoken of at the coastal station—“‘Ah! So they talk of [Kurtz] down there’” (25)—briefly betrays the insecurities that are the tenuous foundation of his facade of imperturbability. The causalities of rapacity here are constructed as lack—of scruples, of productive ability, of secure sense of self. This construction is extended in the figure of Kurtz, although in registers that are both more psychologically loaded and ideologically problematic.

Kurtz's most explicit lack is the textually posited virtue of “restraint,” and the passage that describes this moral absence is, dare I say, curious. According to Marlow, the heads on the stakes

only showed that Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts, that there was something wanting in him—some small matter which when the pressing need arose could not be found under his magnificent eloquence. Whether he knew of this deficiency himself I can't say. I think the knowledge came to him at last—only at the very last.

(57, my emphasis)

The narrative assumes here a voyeuristic function, as it peeks under Kurtz's “magnificent eloquence”—elsewhere figured as “folds” of clothing (67 and 72)—and obsessively espies lack, deficiency, “some small matter” that is missing (terms that in the patriarchal imaginary are equated with “femininity”). This particular lack, figured as one causality of Kurtz's various excesses, has clear residues of the phantasmic wound of castration. In their comments on Heart of Darkness, various critics record the text's peculiar and unstable en-gendering of Kurtz. Garrett Stewart, for instance, refers to the transformed Kurtz—revealingly designated as “it”—as “what was left of the man, his neutered 'shade' or 'wraith'” (361, my emphasis). J. Hillis Miller has written, “[p]ersonification, finally, is a name for the consistent presentation of the darkness as some kind of living creature with a heart, ultimately as a woman who unmans all those male questors who try to dominate her” (221, my emphasis). And Albert J. Guerard, hinting at a significance he hesitates to name, notes that in at least one textual image, Kurtz's gender is reversed: “The analogy of unspeakable Kurtz and enchanted princess may well be an intended irony. But there may be some significance in the fact that this once, the double is imagined as an entranced female figure” (245, n. 2). If Kurtz has experienced a neutering, an unmanning, or a feminization in the wilderness, and if it is the knowledge of this particular “deficiency” which “came to him at last only at the very last,” then the gynophobic resonances of “‘The horror! The horror!’” are unmistakable. On the level of visual figuration in Heart of Darkness, “going native” is also “going feminine.”
In his discussion of the possible historical models for Kurtz, Patrick Brantlinger cites a statement of the exploration writer Sir Harry H. Johnston that reveals some accounts of Europeans “going native” have another distinct ideological bias as well:

“I have been increasingly struck,” wrote Johnston in 1897, “with the rapidity with which such members of the white race as are not of the best class, can throw over the restraints of civilization and develop into savages of unbridled lust and abominable cruelty.” That was another way in which “savages” and the working class sometimes appeared similar. But Kurtz is of “the best class,” not a “lower” one: going native could happen to anyone.

Brantlinger's exemption of *Heart of Darkness* from the class bias betrayed by Johnston ignores textual details: Kurtz is only *supposedly* of “the best class” in terms of his moral idealism (ultimately hollow, of course), and he is explicitly *not* of “the best class” in terms of socioeconomic hierarchies. Toward the end of the narrative, in what almost amounts to a textual afterthought, Marlow explains the probable initiatory compulsion behind Kurtz's colonialist venture—his impecunity and consequent subjection to class snobbery: “I had heard that her engagement with Kurtz had been disapproved by her people. He wasn't rich enough or something. And indeed I don't know whether he had not been a pauper all his life. He had given me some reason to infer that it was his impatience of comparative poverty that drove him out there” (74). On the one hand, this is a humanizing strand in the representation of Kurtz, and it could also explain Marlow's somewhat incongruous opening reference to him as “the poor chap” (11), if we hear the economic residue of the phrase. But on the other hand, this mention late in the narrative of Kurtz's socioeconomic lack creates a textual link—an after-the-fact causality—between itself and other lacks described earlier: specifically, his more centralized lack of “restraint in the gratification of his various lusts” (57). In its explicit and implicit construction of the various impetuses behind rapacity, *Heart of Darkness* subtly perpetuates the ideological assumption of Sir Harry Johnston about the supposed vulnerabilities of “‘such members of the white race as are not of the best class.’”

If the text hints that Kurtz's socioeconomic deficiencies are connected to other moral ones, which it figures as symbolic castration, it also makes clear whom it phantasmically holds responsible for his “altered” state: the wilderness recurrently troped as the maternal. Claire Kahane accurately notes, I believe, that the narrative subtextually “adheres to the masculinist tradition and blames the female figure for the fall of man” (145). It is worth examining the terms in which this fall is elaborated: “The wilderness had patted him on the head, and behold, it was like a ball—an ivory ball; it had caressed him and—lo!—he had withered; it had taken him, loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation. He was its spoiled and pampered favourite” (49). Kurtz emerges here as the indulged child, the seduced and sexually contaminated object of desire, the commodity fetish, the eaten corpse, the non-phallic, emasculated or “withered” man, and the helpless convert to a demonic cult: the lack of agency of the transformed agent is emphatically overdetermined. In this phobic rendering of what the African wilderness can putatively do to the European subject, the wilderness takes the phantasmic guise of what psychoanalysis would call the phallic mother. The repeated attribution of the gaze—the visual correlative of the phallus—to this particular feminine wilderness (see 29, 36, 56, 60, and 67) supports this psychic textual construction, and suggests also that, at the level of the imaginary, the gaze is not necessarily conceptualized as “masculine” or “patriarchal.”

Immediately after Marlow accounts for Kurtz's transformation through a causative presence (the dangerous maternalized wilderness), he posits in addition a causative absence: a disappearance in Africa of other human beings. In a moment of presumed incomprehension on the part of his audience on board the *Nellie*, Marlow expounds informally a theory of intersubjectivity, by emphasizing the regulatory function of others in the structure of human behavior:
You can't understand? How could you—with solid pavement under your feet, surrounded by kind neighbours ready to cheer you or fall on you, stepping delicately between the butcher and the policeman, in the holy terror of scandal and gallows and lunatic asylums—how can you imagine what particular region of the first ages a man's untrammelled feet may take him into by the way of solitude—utter solitude without a policeman—by the way of silence—utter silence, where no warning voice of a kind neighbour can be heard whispering of public opinion.

Marlow implies here that the presence of others is so ingrained in the consciousness of his audience that it has been effectively effaced as an object of thought: the juxtaposition in the phrase, “you—with solid pavement under your feet, surrounded by kind neighbours,” suggests that other humans are taken for granted as a grounding force, contemplated as inactively as the law of gravity. But even though others are an effaced given, they are not genuinely forgotten, as Marlow's reference to “stepping delicately” makes clear. It is interesting to note in Marlow's informal theorization how readily real others (neighbors, the butcher, the policeman) turn into the symbolic Other—reified here as “scandal and gallows and lunatic asylums.” In the slippage of Marlow's figurations, actual presences—human I/eyes and voices—become larger institutional “terrors”: the first takes the form of punitive discourse (“scandal”); the second, punitive death (“gallows”)—with, perhaps, implicit spectaclized execution under the glare of an anonymous public; the third, punitive ascription of madness (“lunatic asylums”—with, perhaps, implicit panoptical observation. The latter two institutional threats contain not only a disciplinary gaze but also a scotomizing one. Execution, of course, literally reduces the subject to nothingness, while relegation to the madhouse figuratively marks the subject as such, consigning it to invisibility, blotting it out of social sight.

The point of Marlow's theory is that Kurtz in Africa is no longer surrounded by real I/eyes and—in this absence—has transcended the terror of the gaze: the novel as a whole underscores this point emphatically. Conrad's infamous “adjectival insistence” in Heart of Darkness (Leavis 177) is perhaps rivaled by a particular discursive insistence on Kurtz's unique transformative state of solitude. The Manager's uncle asks, “‘Is he alone there?’”; the Manager answers in the affirmative and then reiterates Kurtz's note that reads “‘I had rather be alone than have the kind of man you can dispose of with me’” (33). In the overheard fragments of conversation between uncle and nephew, Marlow hears again the words “‘quite alone now’” (34). The manuscript draft of the text has the Manager asking additionally, “‘Can I help him being alone?’” (34, see footnote). In his theory of intersubjectivity, Marlow himself, of course, refers to Kurtz's “solitude—utter solitude without a policeman” (49) and later reports that Kurtz had “wandered alone far in the depths of the forest” (55). Marlow describes Kurtz as taking “counsel with this great solitude” (57), and lest we miss the point, reminds us two more times that “He was alone” (65) and “Being alone in the wilderness, [Kurtz's soul] had looked within itself … and had gone mad” (65). If the claims of Kurtz's aloneness become textual symptoms in their sheer and compulsive repetitiveness, they are symptoms that are, in a sense, contagious, spreading—not surprisingly—to the critical discourses on the novel itself. F. R. Leavis points out, “we are given a charged sense of monstrous hothouse efflorescences fostered in Kurtz by solitude and the wilderness” (179). Lee M. Whitehead connects this solitude to the visual register: “The ‘kernel’ of the story is certainly Kurtz and what happens to him alone in a primeval darkness beyond the eyes of others” (121). Marianne Torgovnick uses Kurtz's aloneness to explain his linguistic lapses, arguing that “isolation unhinged for Kurtz the stability of language, making, for example, the phrase ‘the suppression of savage customs’ slide into ‘exterminate the brutes’” (150). And Ian Watt simply states, “Kurtz has not been able to deal with isolation in the wilderness” (240).

I elaborately map these assertions of Kurtz's aloneness, reinforced by various commentaries on the novel, in order to establish a discursive tension in Marlow's narrative: for in his recalled conversation with the Russian adventurer, Marlow gives us a picture of Kurtz in Africa that is quite different, that runs counter to the images
of “utter solitude.” When Marlow learns that Kurtz has raided the territory for its ivory, he exclaims to the Russian, “‘Not alone, surely!’” and the latter does indeed assure him that he had the aid of a huge local tribe of fighting men, whom he lives among (“‘He was living for the most part in those villages on the lake … he would … disappear for weeks—forget himself amongst these people—forget himself—you know.’ … it was only lately that Mr. Kurtz had come down to the river, bringing along all the fighting men of the lake tribe. He had been absent for several months, getting himself adored, I suppose” [56-57]). It is tempting to resolve the discursive tension between Kurtz's “utter solitude” and his strong interactivity with this large group of Africans through a recourse to time: to assume that Kurtz was genuinely alone for some unspecified period before joining the tribe. But an early usage of “alone,” which I have deliberately thus far elided, plainly hints at what the word means in Marlow's narrative: Kurtz, we are told, starts a return to headquarters, only to change his mind, heading back to the Inner Station “alone in a small dugout with four paddlers” (34). “Alone” in this context—and, by inference, elsewhere—is implicitly defined as “bereft of the company of white European males.”

Marlow's informal theory of intersubjectivity, by stressing Kurtz's transformative state of isolation, discounts Africans as real others, as the others that have the power over the subject to structure its behavior. This discounting is peculiar, given the elaborate evidence of Kurtz's colonial mimicry-in-reverse, whereby the colonialist imitates the natives, rather than the other way around. Avrom Fleishman makes the valid point that Kurtz's identification with native life is “incomplete,” insofar as he is interested in draining the territory rather than developing it (107). While agreeing with this contention, I would maintain that his identification on other levels is extensive: he speaks the language of the indigenous population; he has native consort; he joins their warfare, albeit adding European weaponry; he perhaps dons their minimalist mode of dress, as his partial nakedness at his rescue may imply (in a contrast to the Russian, still concerned with being sartorially “‘decent’” [61]); and, of course, he participates in their rituals. The position he takes within the last of these cultural practices—the position of the godhead to be recognized and worshipped—has a certain seamless logic to it, given his ongoing concern with reputation. The perspective he seeks recognition from has merely shifted its locus, moving from the invisible gaze of the European Council to the more immediate and perceivable I/eyes of an African tribe. In its visual symptomology, moreover, the text betrays that Kurtz is not only master of a particular territory of Africa but also its slave. This paradox is recorded in the heads on stakes, initially misrecognized as fenceposts. With one unexplained exception, they are all turned towards Kurtz's abode, creating, on the one hand, a symbolic field of conquered and enthralled subjects. On the other hand, however, this field simultaneously reveals its metaphysically enthralled core: its visual center and focus, Kurtz himself, in need of numerous others to support and sustain his sense of self.9

The discursive tension in Heart of Darkness that I have been tracing—Kurtz's enthrallment to the African tribal culture, in textual dissonance with his putative isolation from all others—can be symptomatized as a disavowal, in its alternate concessions and denials of knowledge. The narrative corpus says, in effect, “I recognize that Kurtz is immersed in an African populace, but still … he was indeed alone”; “I recognize that Kurtz imitated, on numerous levels, the practices of a particular indigenous population, but still … there were no real others to structure his behavior.” Because the regulatory practices of African others are misrecognized as non-regulatory (as opposed to regulating differently), they are disavowed as a determining force. The African tribal members as genuine other I/eyes for Kurtz can be constructed as the novel's own partial scotoma—its blindspot that is occasionally albeit only imperfectly corrected. The recurrent reemergence of the scotoma—in the attempted denial of the possibility that Kurtz could be ontologically determined by a non-European other—is a crucial support of the novel's hegemonic fantasy of European cultural hegemony.

Notes

1. For an example of this point, see Conrad's obviously surprised and admittedly self-justificatory response to the critical reception of The Secret Agent, in his “Author's Note” of 1920 that now prefaces the novel.
2. Quotations from *Heart of Darkness* in double quotation marks with internal single ones are Marlow's repetitions of his own or others' recollected words; those in double quotation marks are Marlow's comments to the men on board the *Nellie*.

3. Later in the narrative, unaware that his words are being overheard, the Manager will state explicitly his belief—hardly unique, but nonetheless incriminating—in the efficacy of educative sadistic sights (one of his numerous links to Kurtz): “‘We will not be free from unfair competition till one of these fellows is hanged for an example’” (34).

4. Brooks's chapter on Conrad in *Reading for the Plot* is called “An Unreadable Report: Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.”

5. My discussion of the European Council as both the subject who is supposed to know and the subject who is supposed not to know is indebted to Zizek's similar conceptualization of socialist regimes in *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, 40-41.

6. Claire Kahane has argued the following about Kurtz's last words: “The ‘horror’ echoes its homonym ‘whore,’ its embedded, embodied repressed term, suggesting that what is revealed through the voice is a fear of and rage at woman, whose innocence masks her sexual being, and who provokes the oral desire which elsewhere in his fiction Conrad repeatedly represents in the biting, voracious, dangerous mouths of mute woman” (145). While not disputing this reading, I am suggesting that Kurtz's “‘horror’” registers as well quite different fears—a fear of being feminized, classically confused with a fear of being castrated, of being “wanting in … some small matter.”

7. Apparently this ideological assumption is perpetuated, in only slightly different terms, in other discourses as well. John McClure uncritically points out that “just as Conrad presents Kurtz as driven to the Congo by an experience of social and economic inferiority … Mannoni discovered that his subjects had come to Madagascar in an effort to compensate for feelings of inferiority, induced by the very structure of European society, by means of the easy superiority they acquired as Europeans among a weaker subject people” (137). McClure is referring to Mannoni's *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization*.

8. Ian Watt suggests that the possible source of this theory is Thomas Huxley's Romanes lecture of 1893 on “Evolution and Ethics,” and quotes the specific passage it echoes (see Watt 162).

9. For a more elaborate reading of the extremity of Kurtz's need of others—and, most specifically, a female other—see Staten, 730-739. He provides a convincing argument about Kurtz's “insatiable desire to occupy the being of the other” (737), through a brilliant reinterpretation of a symptomatic resolution, namely, “‘I will wring your heart yet!’”

**Works Cited**


**Criticism: Cedric Watts (essay date 1996)**

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is a rich, vivid, layered, paradoxical, and problematic novella or long tale; a mixture of oblique autobiography, traveller's yarn, adventure story, psychological odyssey, political satire, symbolic prose-poem, black comedy, spiritual melodrama, and sceptical meditation. It has proved to be ‘ahead of its times’: an exceptionally proleptic text. First published in 1899 as a serial in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, it became extensively influential during subsequent decades, and reached a zenith of critical acclaim in the period 1950-75. During the final quarter of the twentieth century, however, while its influence became even more pervasive, the tale was vigorously assailed on political grounds by various feminist critics and by some left-wing and Third World commentators. In this essay, I discuss the novella's changing fortunes in ‘the whirligig of time’ (Feste's phrase from *Twelfth Night*) and argue that even now it retains some capacity to criticize its critics.

In some obvious respects, *Heart of Darkness* belongs to the late nineteenth century. This is a tale of travel, of adventurous exploration, of an ‘outpost of progress’. It draws on the kind of material made popular by Rider Haggard, Rudyard Kipling, R. L. Stevenson, and numerous lesser writers: appropriate fiction for the heyday of imperialism. It is a story of a journey into ‘darkest Africa’, a region given publicity not only by the explorations of H. M. Stanley but also by the Berlin Conference of 1885, which had recognized the existence of the ‘Congo Free State’ as the personal possession of King Leopold II of Belgium. It was an era of intense international rivalry for colonial possessions. There was widespread interest in the political, moral, and psychological challenges afforded to Europeans by African colonization. The tale dealt with atavism and decadence, at a time when these topics had been given currency by Zola and the ‘Naturalists’, by Cesare Lombroso (the criminologist) and Max Nordau (author of *Degeneration*), and by the controversies over the Aesthetic Movement. Nordau, for instance, claimed that civilization was being corrupted by the influence of people who were morally degenerate; and his account of the ‘highly-gifted degenerate’, the charismatic yet depraved genius, may have influenced Conrad’s depiction of Kurtz. A larger matter still was that the popularization of Darwin's theory of evolution had raised widespread anxieties about human nature, its origins, and its future. Finally, the popularization of Lord Kelvin's Second Law of Thermodynamics, the law of entropy, had suggested that eventually, as the sun cooled in the heavens, life would become utterly extinct on this planet, which would be doomed to ultimate darkness. In his tale, Conrad addressed or alluded to all these issues. Characteristically, he had combined popular elements with highly sophisticated analysis. The popular elements included topical allusions, an adventurous narrative, and a range of exotic material. The treatment was challengingly versatile and oblique.

In *Heart of Darkness*, a story is told by a British gentleman to other British gentlemen. The convention of ‘the tale within the tale’ was familiar and, at that time, particularly appropriate. Among writers of the era whose works Conrad appreciated, it was used by Turgenev, Maupassant, James, Kipling, Crane, Cunningham Graham, and Wells. This convention was not only a reflection of the social customs of an age of gentlemen’s clubs and semi-formal social gatherings at which travellers would meet to compare notes and exchange yarns about foreign experiences. It also emphasized the interplay of personal and social experience, perhaps dramatizing relativism of perception, limitations of knowledge, or conflicts between private and public codes. From its very title onwards (*Heart of Darkness* invokes contradictory notions), the tale is full of paradoxes. And the 1890s were a decade in which paradoxes, whether small or large, abounded in literature. They occurred not merely in the quotable epigrams of Oscar Wilde but in the large-scale paradoxes in the works of,
for instance, Samuel Butler, Edward Carpenter, George Bernard Shaw, Thomas Hardy, and Wilde again (in his essay ‘The Soul of Man under Socialism’, for example). Here ideological contradiction gained rhetorical compression. Previously, Baudelaire had declared that nature provided ‘forests of symbols’, and, in an era when symbolism in prose and verse commanded fresh interest, Conrad was able to voice his paradoxes not only through explicit statement but also through ambiguous images and many-faceted symbols. The narrative of *Heart of Darkness* offers, for example, the following paradoxes:

Civilization can be barbaric. It is both a hypocritical veneer and a valuable achievement to be vigilantly guarded.

Society saves us from corruption, yet society is corrupt.

Imperialism may be redeemed by ‘an idea at the back of it’, but imperialism, irredeemably, is ‘robbery with violence’.

Brotherhood transcends racial differences, but ‘we live, as we dream—alone’.

The truth should be communicated, but women should be denied it. Communication of the essential is impossible.

Morality is a sham. Without it, human beings become sham humans.

Awareness is better than unawareness. We may become aware that it is better to be unaware, and we may even learn that ignorance is bliss.

A person who sells his soul does at least have a soul to sell, and may gain a significance denied to the mediocre.

Repeatedly, images prove paradoxical. The customary associations of white and black, of light and dark, are variously exploited and subverted. The city is ‘sepulchral’; London is associated with ‘brooding gloom’; and the very title of the tale refers not only to the heart of ‘darkest Africa’ but also to Kurtz’s corruption, to benighted London, and to innumerable kinds of darkness and obscurity, physical, moral, and ontological.

Few prominent features of *Heart of Darkness* could not be traced back through the nineteenth century into the distant past. Its satiric treatment of imperialism had precedents in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), in Voltaire's *Candide* (1759), and in Byron's *Don Juan* (1819-24). The charismatic Kurtz, brilliant yet depraved, corrupted yet fascinating, descends from the ‘hero-villains’ of Gothic fiction, the most notable of these being Emily Brontë's Heathcliff (who, like Ann Radcliffe's Montoni, is in turn a literary descendant of Milton's Satan, regarded by the Romantics as a sublime rebel). Furthermore, the tale's imagery suggests, Kurtz is a modern Faust, who has sold his soul for power and gratification; so perhaps Charlie Marlow owes a debt to Christopher Marlowe. Even that oblique narrative convention that was so popular in the 1890s can be related to the poetic convention of the dramatic monologue, exploited by Browning and Tennyson, and to the sophisticated employment of multiple narrators in Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. And the method could be traced via Coleridge's ‘Rime of the Ancyent Marinere’ back to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and ultimately to the inset narratives of the Homeric epics. Marlow's nightmarish journey is explicitly likened to Dante's imaginary journey in *The Inferno*; and the allusions to ancient Rome help to recall *The Aeneid*, particularly Book VI, in which Aeneas, the legendary imperialist, travels through the underworld.

Of course, the novella also has a diversity of sources in Conrad's personal experience. His scepticism about ‘the imperial mission’ can be related to the facts that he was born into a Poland which (having been partitioned by Austria, Prussia, and Russia) had vanished from the map of Europe, and that his parents were
redoubtable patriots who were exiled by the Russian authorities as punishment for their conspiratorial patriotism. Partly as a result of his parents' political struggle against Russian oppression, both of them died when Conrad was still a boy. Hence his keen sense of the price in human terms exacted by political idealism, and, indeed, by idealism of various kinds. Hence, too, his marked sense of isolation. The contrast between the romanticism of his father, Apollo Korzeniowski, and the astutely sceptical advice of his uncle and guardian, Tadeusz Bobrowski, helped to develop his sense of paradox and ethical conflict. Then Conrad's many years at sea nurtured a respect for the ethical implications of seamanship—for an ethic of work and duty. This is an ethic that Marlow finds sustaining and of which the tale's marine boiler-maker is a modest examplar, and it is made incongruously tangible in that manual of seamanship, by 'Tower, Towson—some such name', found in the heart of the jungle.

*Heart of Darkness* was prompted mainly by Conrad's own journey into the Congo in 1890. During this journey, he noted evidence of atrocities, exploitation, inefficiency, and hypocrisy, and it fully convinced him of the disparity between imperialism's rhetoric and the harsh reality of 'the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience' (*LE*, p. 17). That experience provided a basis for the knowledgeable indignation of *Heart of Darkness*. Certainly, however, the combination of that indignation and a visionary-symbolic intention results in satiric exaggeration: the inefficiency and incompetence displayed in the tale are so widespread as to make it seem unlikely that the imperialists in Africa could ever establish viable railways, road systems, or towns. Similarly, as Norman Sherry has shown, the real-life counterpart to Kurtz, Georges Antoine Klein, was a counterpart only in the fact that he was an ailing trader in the Congo who had to be transported back downstream on Conrad's vessel and who died on the voyage. There is no evidence at all that he shared Kurtz's brilliance and depravity.

Other, more intimate, personal factors also provided materials for the tale. Conrad was a lively raconteur who used to swap yarns with G. F. W. Hope, W. B. Keen, and C. H. Mears on Hope's yawl, the *Nellie*, anchored in the Thames. Hence, the setting and manner of the tale's opening. Hope was a company director, like the host in the tale; Keen an accountant; Mears a solicitor. Conrad went to Brussels to gain employment with the Belgian company that organized trade in the Congo; Marlow travels to the 'sepulchral city', identifiably Brussels, for his interview. Conrad, like Marlow, gained the interview through the influence exerted by an aunt (though in Conrad's case the person he addressed as 'Aunt'—Marguerite Poradowska—was the wife of a distant cousin). Madame Poradowska was in mourning when Conrad called on her after his journey to the Congo, for her husband had recently died; and, since Conrad was emotionally attracted to her, she evidently provided a model for the bereaved Intended, for whom Marlow feels incipient love. If Marlow has various features in common with Conrad, the depiction of Kurtz was probably inflected by the author's sense of similarity between Kurtz's plight and that of the dedicated creative writer. In a passage of the autobiographical work *A Personal Record* that offers reflections on his own aims as an author, Conrad says:

> In that interior world where his thought and his emotions go seeking for the experience of imagined adventures, there are no policemen, no law, no pressure of circumstance or dread of opinion to keep him within bounds. Who then is going to say Nay to his temptations if not his conscience?

(p. xviii)

If, therefore, the tale can be so clearly related to Conrad's own prior experience, to various concerns of the 1890s, and to a diversity of long literary traditions, what makes it proleptic? How did it come to be 'ahead of its times'? The answer lies in the combination of intrinsic and extrinsic factors. The intrinsic factors include: its satiric verve and sceptical boldness; its suggestive density and ambiguity—the layered narrations, ironic meanings, symbolic suggestions; its radical paradoxicality; and its designed opacities. The extrinsic factors include the following. The burgeoning of what became known as cultural Modernism, and the consequent readiness of numerous critics to appreciate and commend the features they recognized as Modernist.
related development of critical procedures that were particularly responsive to ambiguity, irony, and symbolic multiplicity within a work. The increase of scepticism concerning religion, history, civilization, and human nature; though complicated by some religious nostalgia, by surviving modes of faith, and by some humanistic hopes. The general development of antipathy to imperialism: an antipathy that, for many readers, the text seemed to echo (though in course of time other readers disputed this). Heart of Darkness was abundantly suggestive and remarkable quotable. Repeatedly it seemed, prophetically, to sum up areas of experience that gained new prominence in the light of historical events in the twentieth century. If offered a concise iconography of modern corruption and disorder. The tale became an anthology of epitomes.

The First World War showed how men could be engulfed, diminished, and destroyed by man-made organizations and technology. Conrad seemed to have anticipated this in his depiction of the ways in which men in Africa served, and died for, a remorseless organization. He portrays men dwarfed by the system that dominates them and by an alien environment. Hitlerism and the Holocaust seemed to have been anticipated in the depiction of Kurtz's charismatic depravities: Kurtz, potentially ‘a splendid leader of an extreme party’, celebrated for his intoxicating eloquence, is the persuasive genius whose grandiose ambitions are reduced to the exclamation ‘Exterminate all the brutes!’1 During the century, there was increasing recognition of a vast disparity between the (often religious or idealistic) propaganda of imperialism and its harshly exploitative realities. This too served to vindicate much of the tale, which declared: ‘The conquest of the earth … mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves’ (HD, [Heart of Darkness] p. 140). That Heart of Darkness even seemed to have offered a critical commentary on the Vietnam War was recognized by Francis Ford Coppola's spectacular film, Apocalypse Now (1979), which simultaneously generated the film Hearts of Darkness, a record of the making of Apocalypse Now that was a testament to Kurtzian corruption and decadence in real life. Later, Nicolas Roeg directed another version for the cinema. It seemed that the sombre, sceptical aspects of the tale had been amply vindicated by the follies and brutalities of twentieth-century history.

In 1902, Edward Garnett, Conrad's friend and sometime literary mentor, wrote: ‘Heart of Darkness in the subtlety of its criticism of life is the high-water mark of the author's talent’ (Sherry, ed., Conrad: The Critical Heritage, p. 133). By 1974, C. B. Cox could confidently declare: ‘This masterpiece has become one of those amazing modern fictions, such as Thomas Mann's Death in Venice or Kafka's The Trial, which throw light on the whole nature of twentieth-century art, its problems and achievements’ (Introduction, p. vii). Repeatedly, the tale seemed to have heralded twentieth-century cultural preoccupations. Sigmund Freud's emphasis on the divided self, on the striving, lustful, anarchic id seeking gratification despite the countervailing pressure of the ego or super-ego, had been anticipated in the depiction of Kurtz's ferocious fulfillments in the Congo. C. G. Jung, in turn, seemed almost to be recalling Kurtz and the tale's imagery of light and darkness when he emphasized that the ‘visionary mode of artistic creation’ is

a strange something that derives its existence from the hinterland of man's mind—that suggests the abyss of time separating us from pre-human ages, or evokes a super-human world of contrasting light and darkness. It is a primordial experience which surpasses man's understanding, and to which he is therefore in danger of succumbing.

(Modern Man in Search of a Soul, p. 180)

The interest of Freud and Jung (and later of Northrop Frye, Joseph Campbell, and Claude Lévi-Strauss) in the importance of myth was shared by numerous Modernist writers, and here again Conrad seemed to have anticipated them. In 1923, T. S. Eliot praised James Joyce for developing in Ulysses the ‘mythic method’, whereby references to ancient myths could coordinate works which addressed ‘the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history’ (’Ulysses, order and myth’, p. 483). But that readiness to stage ironic contrasts between the mythic past and the materialistic present, a readiness so marked in Eliot's The Waste Land itself, was already a feature of Heart of Darkness, which, while describing present-day
confusion, invoked memories of the Faust myth, *The Divine Comedy*, and *The Aeneid*. Indeed, Eliot acknowledged a debt to Conrad: the original epigraph of *The Waste Land* was a passage from *Heart of Darkness* that concludes with Kurtz's words, ‘The horror! The horror!’, and the descriptions of the Thames in ‘The Fire Sermon’ draw details from the opening of Conrad's tale. More importantly, *Heart of Darkness* had suggested the appalling paradox that whereas the majority of men who lead secular lives are heading for a death which is extinction, Kurtz has at least the significance granted by the intensity of his evil. If he has sold his soul, at least he had a soul to sell. And this paradox, too, Eliot developed in *The Waste Land* and in his critical essays: ‘[D]amnation itself is an immediate form of salvation—of salvation from the ennui of modern life, because it at last gives some significance to living … The worst that can be said of most of our malefactors … is that they are not men enough to be damned’ (*Selected Essays*, pp. 427, 429). Graham Greene exploited the same paradox in *Brighton Rock* (1938), and Greene often acknowledged his debt to Conrad. In the film *The Third Man* (1949), written by Greene and directed by Carol Reed, the villain, Harry Lime, has a Kurtzian charisma, and one of his henchmen is called ‘Baron Kurtz’. Lime was played by Orson Welles, who had himself attempted to make a film of *Heart of Darkness*. In 1899, in its vividly graphic techniques, particularly the rapid montage, the overlapping images, and the symbolic use of colour and chiaroscuro, *Heart of Darkness* had been adventurously cinematic at a time when film—rudimentary then—was not.

Familiar characteristics of Modernist texts are the sense of absurdity or meaninglessness, of human isolation, and of the problematic nature of communication. Eliot, Kafka, Woolf, and Beckett are among the writers who grappled with these matters, all of which had been sharply depicted in *Heart of Darkness*. The sense of the defilement of the natural environment by man's technology, another powerful feature of the narrative, was later to be addressed by Eliot, Lawrence, Greene, and numerous subsequent writers. Kurtz's words ‘The horror! The horror!’ were eventually repeated by Colonel Kurtz, played by a mumbling Marlon Brando, in *Apocalypse Now*; but before repeating them, he quoted a few lines from Eliot's poem, ‘The Hollow Men’. This made a neat cultural irony, since ‘The Hollow Men’ takes as its epigraph ‘Mistah Kurtz—he dead’ and develops the Conradian theme of the absurdity of secular existence.

The tale's cultural echoes extend through time and across continents. Kurtz is a literary father of Thompson, the demoralized imperial idealist in the acclaimed novel of Kenya in the 1950s, *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) by Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Kurtz's report for ‘The Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs’ has its counterpart in Thompson's essay, ‘Prospero in Africa’. Kurtz concludes: ‘Exterminate all the brutes!’; Thompson reflects: ‘Eliminate the vermin’ (pp. 48-50, 117). A radically different novel, Robert Stone's *Dog Soldiers* (1975), a prize-winning thriller depicting drug-driven corruption and brutality in the United States, took as its apt epigraph the following lines from Conrad's tale:

‘I've seen the devil of violence, and the devil of greed, and the devil of hot desire; but, by all the stars! these were strong, lusty, red-eyed devils, that swayed and drove men—men, I tell you. But as I stood on this hillside, I foresaw that in the blinding sunshine of that land I would become acquainted with a flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly.’

(p. 155)

II

By the 1970s, *Heart of Darkness* had accumulated extensive critical acclaim and been widely disseminated as a ‘set text’ in colleges and universities. It was now ‘canonical’. Even if it had flaws (perhaps ‘adjectival insistence’), its strengths far exceeded its weaknesses. Its cultural influence was clearly pervasive. This novella served as a reference-point, an anthology of scenes and passages that in various ways epitomized twentieth-century problems and particularly twentieth-century modes of exploitation, corruption, and decadence. Yet, as Feste says in *Twelfth Night*, ‘the whirligig of time brings in his revenges’, and in the 1970s
radical critical attacks on *Heart of Darkness* developed. For Terry Eagleton, a Marxist, Conrad's art was an art of ideological contradiction resulting in stalemate:

Conrad neither believes in the cultural superiority of the colonialist nations, nor rejects colonialism outright. The ‘message’ of *Heart of Darkness* is that Western civilisation is at base as barbarous as African society—a viewpoint which disturbs imperialist assumptions to the precise degree that it reinforces them.

(*Criticism and Ideology*, p. 135)

But already a far more damaging political attack had been made. In a 1975 lecture, the distinguished Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe, declared that Conrad was ‘a bloody racist’ (*An image of Africa*, p. 788). Achebe asserted that *Heart of Darkness* depicts Africa as ‘a place of negations … in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest’ (p. 783). The Africans are dehumanized and degraded, seen as grotesques or as a howling mob. They are denied speech, or are granted speech only to condemn themselves out of their own mouths. We see ‘Africa as setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor. Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril’ (p. 788). The result, he says, is ‘an offensive and totally deplorable book’ that promotes racial intolerance and is therefore to be condemned.

Achebe's lecture had a powerful impact, and its text was repeatedly reprinted and widely discussed. *Heart of Darkness*, which had seemed to be bold and astute in its attacks on imperialism, was now revealed as a work that, in the opinion of a leading African writer, was actually proimperialist in its endorsement of racial prejudice. The next onslaught came from feminist critics and had a similar basis. While Achebe had seen the Africans as marginalized and demeaningly stereotyped, various feminist critics felt that the tale similarly belittled women. Nina Pelikan Straus, Bette London, Johanna M. Smith, and Elaine Showalter were among those who claimed that *Heart of Darkness* was not only imperialist but also ‘sexist’. Straus declared that male critics had repeatedly become accomplices of Marlow, who ‘brings truth to men by virtue of his bringing falsehood to women’ (*The exclusion of the Intended*, p. 130). Kurtz’s Intended, denied a name, is also denied access to truth so as to maintain the dominative brotherhood of males:

The woman reader … is in the position to insist that Marlow's cowardice consists of his inability to face the dangerous self that is the form of his own masculinist vulnerability: his own complicity in the racist, sexist, imperialist, and finally libidinally satisfying world he has shared with Kurtz.

(p. 135)

Smith, similarly, alleged that the tale ‘reveals the collusion of imperialism and patriarchy: Marlow's narrative aims to “colonize” and “pacify” both savage darkness and women’ (*Too beautiful altogether*, p. 180).

In short, a text that had once appeared to be ‘ahead of its times’, a nineteenth-century tale that anticipated twentieth-century cultural developments and epitomized twentieth-century concerns, now seemed to be dated—outstripped by recent advances. A text that had so often been praised for its political radicalism now looked politically reactionary. The problems raised by the controversy over the merits of *Heart of Darkness* were now problems not merely about the reading of details but also about the very basis of evaluation of literary texts, about the relationship between literary appreciation and moral/political judgement.

III
If we re-read *Heart of Darkness* in the light of Achebe's comments, various disturbing features soon gain prominence. For example, although the Europeans manifest various kinds of corruption and turpitude, the Faustian theme associates supernatural evil with the African wilderness. The dying Kurtz crawls ashore towards some ritual ceremony, and Marlow tries to head him off:

‘I tried to break the spell—the heavy, mute spell of the wilderness—that seemed to draw him to its pitiless breast by the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts, by the memory of gratified and monstrous passions. This alone, I was convinced, had driven him out to the edge of the forest, to the bush, towards the gleam of fires, the throb of drums, the drone of weird incantations; this alone had beguiled his unlawful soul beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations’.

(p. 234)

And within the wilderness:

‘A black figure stood up, strode on long black legs, waving long black arms, across the glow. It had horns—antelope horns, I think—on its head. Some sorcerer, some witch-man, no doubt: it looked fiend-like enough’.

(p. 233)

In religious matters, Marlow seems usually a sceptic. Certainly there is an atheistic implication in his remark that life is ‘that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose’. Yet, where Kurtz's depravity is concerned, Marlow seems willing to endorse a belief in supernatural evil—and that evil is specifically associated with the people of the African jungle. A sceptical reader today might conclude that we are being offered not only a mystification of corruption, but also a racist mystification. One problem here, however, is that the observations quoted are Marlow's, and they thus lack the authority that would be granted by an ‘omniscient narrator’. Achebe says that Conrad ‘neglects to hint however subtly or tentatively at an alternative frame of reference … Marlow seems to me to enjoy Conrad's complete confidence’ (p. 787). Against this, however, one might object that Conrad has deliberately opted for doubly oblique narration. Marlow's tale, which is interrupted by dissenting comments by his hearers, is being reported to us by an anonymous character. Marlow himself has explicitly drawn attention to the difficulty of seeing truly and reporting correctly, and he is known for his ‘inconclusive’ narratives. His tone when describing Kurtz's last hours is more insistently rhetorical and less observantly acute than at other times. The general effect of the oblique procedures may be to make us think: ‘Marlow can probably be trusted most of the time, but we need to keep up our guard. He isn't fully reliable’. Indeed, Conrad took greater pains than did most users of the oblique narrative convention to preserve the possibility of critical distance between the reader and the fictional narrator.

Nevertheless, Achebe forcefully exposed the text's temporality. A number of features, including Marlow's casual use of the term ‘nigger’, clearly reveal the tale's Victorian provenance. Its defenders now ran the risk of using a suspect logic. When Marlow said things of which they approved, they might give Conrad credit; when he said things that embarrassed them, they might cite the oblique convention, blame Marlow, and exonerate Conrad. Clearly, such logic could be neatly reversed by their opponents.

Achebe's telling attack was fierce and sweeping, and deliberately polemical; and he later moderated its ferocity. Other Third World writers, including Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Wilson Harris, Frances B. Singh, and C. P. Sarvan, argued that while Conrad was certainly ambivalent on racial matters, *Heart of Darkness* was progressive in its satiric accounts of the colonialists. Singh noted that though ‘Heart of Darkness’ was vulnerable in several respects, including the association of Africans with supernatural evil, the story should
remain in ‘the canon of works indicting colonialism’. Sarvan concluded: ‘Conrad was not entirely immune to the infection of the beliefs and attitudes of his age, but he was ahead of most in trying to break free’. To be fair to Heart of Darkness, as to any literary text, we need to take account of its date. As Sarvan indicates, relative to the standards prevailing in the 1890s, the heyday of Victorian imperialism, Heart of Darkness was indeed progressive in its criticism of imperialist activities in Africa, and, implicitly, of imperialist activities generally. Conrad was writing at a time when most British people, including many socialists, would have regarded imperialism as an admirable enterprise. He was also helping the cause of Africans in the Congo by drawing attention to their ill-treatment. In practice, the tale contributed to the international protest campaign that strove to curb Belgian excesses there. E. D. Morel, leader of the Congo Reform Association, stated that Heart of Darkness was ‘the most powerful thing ever written on the subject’. Conrad sent encouraging letters to his acquaintance (and Morel’s collaborator in the campaign), Roger Casement, who in 1904 published a parliamentary report documenting atrocities committed by Belgian administrators.17 Achebe says that Heart of Darkness marginalizes the Africans, but Marlow gives them prominence when he describes, with telling vividness, the plight of the chain-gang and of the exploited workers dying in the grove. What the other Europeans choose to ignore, Marlow observes with sardonic indignation. Relegation, which is criticized, is a theme of the narrative.

That the tale appeared in 1899 offers some defence against feminists' attacks, too, though it is defence and not vindication. Marlow's patronizing views of women, which might well have been quite widely shared by men of that time, are problematized by the text in ways that yield ironies that feminist critics could exploit. Marlow, who says that women are ‘out of touch with truth … in a world of their own’ (p. 148), depends on his aunt for a job, and therefore her world is also his. Furthermore, Marlow's lie to the Intended—the cause of so much critical debate—is presented in a debate-provoking way. Marlow registers confusion (‘It seemed … that the heavens would fall’; ‘The heavens do not fall for such a trifle’), and he had previously said ‘I hate, detest, and can't bear a lie’, so his own words expose a double standard by which women are (a) culpably ignorant of truth, and (b) in need of falsehood supplied by males. In any case, characteristically ‘virile’ activities of men—colonial warfare and the conquest of the ‘wilderness’—have been depicted by Marlow as virtually deranged in their destructive futility.

A larger question is raised by these political criticisms of Heart of Darkness. A standard procedure, illustrated by Achebe and Straus, is to judge the tale according to whether its inferred political outlook tallies with that of the critic: to the extent that the critic's views are reflected, the tale is commended; to the extent that they are not, the tale is condemned. This procedure is familiar but odd. It assumes the general validity of the critic's outlook; but different people have different outlooks. Moreover, the critic's outlook may not remain constant, but may be modified by experience, including encounters with literary works. In this respect, Heart of Darkness seems to ambush its adversaries. Marlow has been changed by his experience of Africa, and is still being changed. One of the subtletest features of the text is the dramatization of his uncertainties, of his tentativeness, of his groping for affirmations that his own narrative subsequently questions. Through Marlow, this liminal and protean novella renders the process of teaching and learning, and of negotiating alternative viewpoints. To take an obvious example: he offers conflicting interpretations of Kurtz’s cry, ‘The horror! The horror!’: Perhaps they refer to Kurtz’s corruption, perhaps to the horror of a senseless universe. But there may be another meaning: no final resolution is offered. Marlow addresses a group of friends on a vessel. They may not share his views; and, indeed, they voice dissent—‘Try to be civil’; ‘Absurd’. A commentator who declares Conrad ‘racist’ or ‘sexist’ may be imposing on Conrad readily available stereotypes, but, at its best, the tale questions the process of imposing stereotypes. Such phrases as ‘weaning those ignorant millions’, ‘enemies, criminals, workers … rebels’, ‘unsound method’ or ‘leader of an extreme party’ are invested with sardonic irony. In addition, a political commentator on the text may seem imperialistic in seeking to incorporate literary terrain within the territory of his or her own personal value-system. If we abolished all those past texts that, to our fallible understandings, failed to endorse present values or prejudices, few works would survive. A literary work may have a diversity of political implications and consequences, but it is not a political manifesto. It is an imaginative work that offers a voluntary and hypothetical experience. Its linguistic texture
may be progressive when its readily paraphrasable content may not. All its implications remain within the invisible quotation marks of the fictional. In other works, the same author could, of course, deploy quite different materials with contrasting implications. In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow says that women are out of touch with truth; but in *Chance*, he says that women see ‘the whole truth’, whereas men live in a ‘fool’s paradise’ (p. 144). Meanwhile, in 1910, Conrad signed a formal letter to the Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, advocating votes for women (*Letters*, IV, p. 327).18 Awareness of Conrad's complexity may entail recognition of a currently widespread critical habit: the reductive falsification of the past in an attempt to vindicate the political gestures of the present. *Heart of Darkness* reminds us that this habit resembles an earlier one: the adoption of a demeaning attitude to colonized people in the attempt to vindicate the exploitative actions of the colonizer. The ‘pilgrims’ in the tale have fathered some of the pundits of today.

We read fiction for pleasures of diverse kinds; and Conrad earned his living as an entertainer, not as a writer of religious or political tracts. The pleasures generated by *Heart of Darkness* have many sources. They lie in part in its evocative vividness, its modes of suspense, its originality, and its power to provoke thought. Paraphrase is a necessary critical tool, but paraphrase is never an equivalent of the original, whose vitality lies in its combination of particular and general, of rational and emotional. A political scansion of the work is not the only mode of scansion, nor is it necessarily the most illuminating. Literary criticism has an identity distinct from political advocacy, just as creative writing is distinct from political non-fiction. As the text moves through time, the changing historical and cultural circumstances will variously increase and reduce its cogency. Texts may thus apparently die for a period and then regain their vitality. Shakespeare's *King Lear* vanished from the stage for about 150 years, and audiences seeing *King Lear* in the eighteenth century saw Nahum Tate's play, not Shakespeare's. May Sinclair's fine novel, *Life and Death of Harriett Frean* (1922), was neglected for decades until Virago Press republished it. The reputation of *Heart of Darkness* is now a matter of controversy, and its standing may decline; but its complexity guarantees that it will prove fruitful to many readers for a long time yet.

As we have seen, the very ambiguity of that title, *Heart of Darkness* (originally *The Heart of Darkness*), heralded that complexity. The titular phrase then evoked the interior of ‘darkest Africa’; but it also portended the corruption of Kurtz, and the tale begins with visual reminders of ways in which London, centre of the empire ‘on which the sun never sets’, can itself be a heart of darkness—palled in ‘brooding gloom’. So, from the outset, the narrative probes, questions, and subverts familiar contrasts between the far and the near, between the ‘savage’ and the ‘civilized’, between the tropical and the urban. Repeatedly, the tale's descriptions gain vividness by Conrad's use of delayed decoding, a technique whereby effect precedes cause.19 He presents first the impact of an event, and only after a delay does he offer its explanation. This is exemplified by the descriptions of, for example, the chaos at the Outer Station, eventually explained as railway-building, or of the exploited Africans in the chain-gang, who ‘were called criminals’. The technique lends graphic vividness and psychological realism to the process of perception, but it also emphasizes an ironic disparity, or possible disparity, between the events that occur and their conventional interpretation. Delayed decoding is used in numerous ways: in the treatment of small details, of large events, and even of plot sequences within the tale. Sometimes the irony lies in the fact that the interpretation is tardy, or inadequate, or constitutes a reductive falsification. And here lies a warning for commentators on *Heart of Darkness*. One of the features that made it outstanding among texts of the 1890s was its recognition of the disparities between the realities of experience and the inadequacies of conventional interpretations of it. The tale repeatedly implies an irreducible excess that eludes summary. It may thus warn commentators that they, confined to the limited discourse of rational non-fictional prose, are likely to be outdistanced by the multiple resources of the fictional text. The anonymous narrator speaks with romantic eloquence of all the great men who have sailed forth on the Thames, but Marlow interjects ‘And this also … has been one of the dark places of the earth’, and proceeds to remind him that Britain would once have seemed as savage a wilderness to Roman colonizers as Africa now seems to Europeans. This is a rebuke to empire-builders and to believers in the durability of civilization; it invokes a humiliating chronological perspective; and it may jolt the reader into circumspection.
Reflections on this passage might induce caution in any commentator who initially fails to relate *Heart of Darkness* fairly to the time of its writing, or who assumes the superiority of a present-day viewpoint that is itself a product of the times: ‘We live in the flicker’. As *Heart of Darkness* repeatedly implies, a value judgement cannot, in logic, be deduced from a statement of fact. The narrative is partly about the struggle to maintain a humane morality when that morality no longer seems to bear guaranteed validity. In this respect, *Heart of Darkness* remains cogent and may teach circumspection to its critics. The tale has sombre implications, and so has the story of its reception over the years, but the eloquence, virtuosity, and intensity with which *Heart of Darkness* addressed its era were exemplary, and seem likely to ensure its longevity.

**Notes**


5. See Evans, ‘Conrad's underworld’, and Feder ‘Marlow's descent into hell’.


8. Ch. 1-12 of Sherry's *Conrad's Western World* deal with the fictional transformation of factual materials concerning Africa. Klein is discussed on pp. 72-8.

9. Conrad said that there was ‘a mere shadow of love interest just in the last pages’ (*Letters*, II, pp. 145-6).


11. This link was recognized in George Steiner's novel, *The Portage to San Cristobal of A. H.* (1981), in which the Kurtzian role is taken by an aged but still eloquent Adolf Hitler, discovered in the depths of the jungle.


13. The version in *Stone* (p. vii) has minor misquotations.

14. ‘So we have an adjectival and worse than supererogatory insistence on “unspeakable rites”, “unspeakable secrets”, “monstrous passions”, “inconceivable mystery”, and so on ... Conrad ... is intent on making a virtue out of not knowing what he means’, Leavis, *The Great Tradition*, pp. 198-9.

15. For example, the revised version in Kimbrough, ed., *Joseph Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'*, pp. 251-62, deletes a passage linking Conrad to ‘men in Nazi Germany who lent their talent to the service of virulent racism’, and concedes that ‘Heart of Darkness’ has ‘memorably good passages and moments’. The phrase ‘a bloody racist’ became ‘a thoroughgoing racist’. Carabine, ed., *Joseph Conrad: Critical Assessments*, II, also prints the revised version although erroneously identifying it as the 1977 text.

18. See also Davies, ‘Conrad, Chance, and women readers’.

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Man can embody truth but he cannot know it.” Nowhere is William Butler Yeats's adage more clearly illustrated than in the narrative of Charlie Marlow in Heart of Darkness. Throughout the text, Marlow insists upon the distinction between truth and lies; between men and women; between civilization and savagery; and, most of all, between Self and Other. Of these, the most important distinction is between Self and Other, for it is this opposition that sustains the colonial enterprise. The lure and the fear of the Other initiate the pursuit and “discovery” of colonialism; the conviction of the inferiority of the Other justifies the undertaking. Yet despite Marlow's insistence, all binary oppositions collapse in the course of his narrative: colonists prove to be conquerors, the gang of virtue is indistinguishable from the gang of greed, the illusions of women merely echo the illusions of men, and there is no clear distinction between lies and truth. Most importantly, the fundamental difference between Self and Other disappears and, with it, the unbridgeable gulf between men and women and between savage and civilized that sustains the power structure of western civilization. But this awareness offered by the text eludes Marlow for, enmeshed in his own culture, he would find this awareness “too dark—too dark altogether.”

In psychological terms, the Other is but the undiscovered territory in the self. In the colonial enterprise, this territory of the unconscious is displaced onto another people who both allure and terrify. The colonizer, fearing to succumb to the Other, attempts to contain it—through subordination, suppression, or conversion. These strategies of containment are designed to preserve the opposition and inequality between Self and Other that justifies the imperialist enterprise. The central trope of imperialism is what Abdul R. JanMohamed terms “the manichean allegory” that converts racial difference “into moral and even metaphysical difference” (80). This allegory characterizes the relationship between dominant and subordinate culture as one of ineradicable opposition (82). Although the opposing terms of the allegory change—good and evil, civilization and savagery, intelligence and emotion, rationality and sensuality—they are always predicated upon the assumption of the superiority of the outside evaluator and the inferiority of the native being observed.

Colonialist literature, as byproduct of the imperialist enterprise, necessarily reinscribes the manichean allegory either to confirm or to interrogate it in an effort to move beyond its limits. As a result, colonialist texts take two forms, which reflect, respectively, these two different responses: the “imaginary” and the “symbolic” (JanMohamed 84). These designations derive from Jacques Lacan's descriptions of sequential stages of human development. The “imaginary,” according to Lacan, dates from the mirror stage of infant life, in which the child of six to eighteen months jubilantly identifies itself with its mirror image, the wholeness and integrity of which belie the internal flux and fragmentation the child experiences (Lacan 4). Because of the unbridgeable distance of the specular image with which the child identifies, the child situates within it rivalry, opposition, and aggressivity (Gallop 59). The relation between the self and its image, which Lacan terms “the imaginary,” is one in which mirroring forestalls intersubjectivity or the interaction between two separate selves, each with its own distinct perspective.

In the “imaginary” colonialist text, JanMohamed observes, “the native functions as an image of the imperialist self in such a manner that it reveals the latter's self-alienation” (84). This self-alienation consists in the failure to recognize as inherent within the self despised attributes the imperialist projects onto the Other. Thus, the “imaginary” colonialist text adheres to a fixed opposition between the self and the native, insisting upon the homogeneous identity of the indigenous population and taking refuge in the “superior,” more “enlightened,”
and more “civilized” perspective of the dominant culture. Interpreted through the narrative perspective of Marlow, *Heart of Darkness* exemplifies the “imaginary” colonialist text.

The second type of colonialist fiction, the “symbolic,” parallels the stage at which the young child, once having become convinced of its wholeness and integrity, is able to recognize and identify with an imago or subject-image as a counterpart; and is then able to enter into a dialectic that links the self or I “with socially elaborated situations” (Lacan 5). At this stage, the child is able to enter into social exchange, dialogue, and relationship (Gallop 59-61). An equivalent stage in culture would make possible a dialectic encounter between Self and Other in which the dominant culture is able to bracket its own values and thus radically to question its basis for cultural inference and interpretation. Such a dialectic or exchange would aim at resolving cultural oppositions through syncretic solutions (JanMohamed 85). Such, I would argue, is the larger narrative perspective of *Heart of Darkness*, which exposes the limitations and self-contradiction of Marlow's views to open up a complex dialogue on issues of history, culture, race, and gender. Thus the entirety of *Heart of Darkness* attempts to deal with the Other in symbolic terms, although Marlow is able to deal with the Other only in the realm of the Imaginary.

*Heart of Darkness* points to awarenesses beyond Marlow both by revealing his limitations and by systematically undercutting the polarities and distinctions that Marlow takes pains to establish. From the first, Marlow's narrative invites the reader to reach an understanding beyond him when he states that his experience was “not very clear. And yet it seemed to throw a kind of light” (70). Among his many limitations in dealing with cultural differences, Marlow displays his xenophobia when he reluctantly accepts his relatives' choice of living on the Continent, explaining, “It's cheap and not so nasty as it looks, they say” (71). Further, he exhibits contradictory ideas about entering another culture, revealing his determination to get to Africa “by hook or by crook” but, once there, feeling like “an imposter” (77) when he observes that the natives (unlike him) “wanted no excuse for being there” (78). He insists that he detests and avoids lies, yet acknowledges three separate lies in the course of the narrative—to the station manager, to Kurtz, and to the Intended. He maintains that the conquest of the earth is redeemed by “an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to” (69-70). Not only is this assertion undercut by the language of idolatry, but it prefigures evidence, as the narrative unfolds, that Kurtz' belief in the idea of “humanizing, improving, instructing” (101) leads to the most ruthless exploitation and most appalling idolatry of all, as Kurtz turns himself, the emissary of the idea, into an object of worship. Further, Marlow dismisses as foolish his aunt's notion of “weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways” (76), but describes as “a beautiful piece of writing” Kurtz' kindred assertion, “By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good [among the natives] practically unbounded” (123). Throughout the text, Marlow works hard to separate savage customs from civilized behavior, yet an observer might be pressed to distinguish Marlow's noisy jig with the boiler-maker (when he finally gets rivets to repair his boat) (98) from the “whirl of black limbs” (105) on shore that he condescends to regard as “not inhuman” (105). Similarly, Marlow's distinction between the comprehensible language of civilized discourse and the incomprehensible noise of savages—“the roll of drums” (105), “abrupt burst of yells” (141), “savage clamour” (113), “savage discords” (110), “tumultuous and mournful uproar” (110)—breaks down. All voices, European and native, degenerate in Marlow's memory into “one immense jabber, silly, atrocious, sordid, savage, or simply mean, without any kind of sense” (120-21).

Because most of Marlow's attempts at separations prove unstable and many of his distinctions blur, they serve to reveal his intense need to sustain the manichean allegory so necessary to his sense of Self in contradistinction to the Other. Underlying Marlow's efforts to maintain binary oppositions is the colonizer's intense anxiety about being taken over by the Other. Marlow's strategy of containment emerges most forcefully throughout the text in his parallel descriptions of women and of natives.1

Throughout his account, Marlow both denigrates and overestimates the power of women. Through synecdoche, Marlow reduces the women he sees in the waiting room of the Belgian shipping company to “one
fat and the other slim” (73), one young and one old, “knitting black wool as for a warm pall” (74). At the same time, they are oddly “uncanny and fateful” (74); and Marlow after his encounter with Kurtz observes, “the knitting old woman with the cat obtruded herself upon my memory as a most improper person to be sitting at the other end of such an affair” (142). Analogously, the secretary, who seems to know all about Marlow's fate, he reduces to “a white-haired secretarial head, but wearing a compassionate expression” (74).

Similarly, Marlow downplays his aunt's power, while inadvertently revealing his reliance upon her. After disavowing his dependency on women—“Then—would you believe it? … I, Charlie Marlow, set the women to work—to get a job. Heavens!”—he acknowledges that he relied upon his aunt to get him the job as captain of the Congo steamer. His aunt, who clearly wields more social power than Marlow, he describes patronizingly as “a dear enthusiastic soul” (76), although her influential recommendations of him haunt him along his Congo journey and serve to ally him with the similarly “gifted” Kurtz. As he describes her, he confines his aunt to a drawing room “that most soothingly looked just as you would expect a lady's drawing room to look” (76), a description that contrasts markedly with his later description of the disquieting drawing room in which he encounters Kurtz' Intended. Marlow's adverb “soothingly” suggests his discomfort at the idea of encountering a woman who is not contained in a drawing room, a discomfort he will experience at its most extreme in his meeting with the “savage” woman in the jungle. Once he returns from the Congo, no lady's drawing room will again be a “soothing” place because he will have found out—although he never consciously admits it—that neither women nor domestic space offer sanctuary from the knowledge of the pervasiveness of evil.

Marlow's self-deluding ability to polarize his experiences—in particular, to separate the “soothing” female world of illusions from the larger male world of shocking realities—collapses in his interview with the Intended. Despite Marlow's efforts to keep these worlds separate, after his jungle encounter with Kurtz, they fuse in the nightmare atmosphere of the Intended's drawing room, inhabited by Kurtz' ghost, whose words echo and eerily combine with hers to form the ghastly chorus Marlow hears. This chorus suggests a terrifying intertwining of purpose between Kurtz and his Intended—a collusion between the “soul as translucently pure as a cliff of crystal” (149) and the “soul that knew no restraint, no faith, and no fear” (144). For this reason, when Marlow asserts, “I saw them together—I heard them together” (154) in the drawing room, he experiences “a sensation of panic in my heart as though I had blundered into a place of cruel and absurd mysteries not fit for a human being to behold” (154). (The phrase “cruel and absurd mysteries” eerily echoes the “unspeakable rites” attributed to Kurtz in Africa). In this scene, Marlow's language and observations suggest, although his panic and confusion indicate he does not consciously understand, that domestic bliss and female innocence in Belgium are predicated upon the exploitation of natives and the pilfering of ivory in the Congo; that marriages between ambitious young men of insufficient means with young women of substance are facilitated by the colonial enterprise, in which enterprising young men make good in the name of doing good. (“I had heard that her engagement with Kurtz had been disapproved by her people. He wasn't rich enough or something … He had given me some reason to infer that it was his impatience of comparative poverty that drove him out there” [155]).

Many apparently innocent features of the drawing room recall sinister aspects of the colonial enterprise presented earlier in the story. Thus, the grand piano “like a sombre and polished sarcophagus” (153) recalls the image of Brussels, the city outside her door, site of the colonial Company's offices, as “a whitened sepulchre” (73); the piano, symbol of feminine refinement, has keys of ivory, the ivory Kurtz pilfered from Africa; the apparently noble image of the Intended's white forehead “illumined by the unextinguishable light of belief and love” (154) against the dark background of the room recalls Kurtz's ominous painting of her “draped and blindfolded, carrying a torch” in which “the effect of the torch-light on the face was sinister” (92). In the drawing room scene, she is in effect blindfolded by her enduring and willful illusions about Kurtz and she carries the torch of his ideas, which cast a sinister light back upon her. Fittingly, the image of her hair as an “ashy halo” associates her apparently angelic goodness with death. Consequently Marlow, in acknowledging that the Intended's claim, “I knew him best” (107), may be accurate, aptly notes that “with
every word spoken the room was growing darker” (107)—that is, more unfathomable, more remote from
truth, more connected with evil, more suggestive of death. In this scene all details combine to point out that
domestic innocence colludes with global evil in death-dealing conspiracy. Yet, in the Intended's drawing
room, as in other stations along his pilgrimage, Marlow shrinks from the enormity of the knowledge he is
offered.

Similarly, in his descriptions of the African natives, as in his glib generalizations about women, Marlow
likewise attempts to deny the power of the Other he fears by resorting to stereotypes. Just as his descriptions
of women are reductive, so too are his accounts of the natives, whom he acknowledges only in generic
descriptions. “Dark human shapes could be made out in the distance … two bronze figures, leaning on tall
spears, stood in the sunlight under fantastic head-dresses of spotted skins, warlike and still in statuesque
repose” (136). Even when described individually, they are stereotyped: “The man seemed young—almost a
boy—but you know with them it's hard to tell” (82). Marlow's stereotypical descriptions of both women and
natives serve a strategy of containment that enables him to deny both their importance for him and his affinity
with them.

Nowhere, however, is Marlow's containment of the Other through discourse so sustained as in his treatment of
the “savage” woman, the figure in which race and gender emblematically intersect. This is not to say that
racial and sexual difference are to be equated. Since the value attributed to each is culturally determined,
interpretations of racial and sexual superiority vary from one culture to another; and within any particular
culture these constructions may conflict rather than intersect. Yet when Heart of Darkness presents an African
tribal culture that reverses both the racial and sexual hierarchy of the West, these reversals constitute a
powerful double threat to Western social constructions that Marlow views as natural and inevitable.

Marlow's compelling but ambivalent description of the “savage” woman enables the reader to see the contrast
between her authority and unique attributes and Marlow's repeated attempts, throughout the text, to deny the
power and individuality of African natives. Marlow responds to her dangerous allure—dangerous because he
sees her as partly responsible for Kurtz's “going native”—by insisting on her ineradicable twofold otherness,
the savage and female as distinguished from the civilized and male. By designating her the living embodiment
of these dualities, Marlow shoves up the binary oppositions upon which his understanding of Western
civilization rests.

The “savage” woman, as Marlow describes her, is a distillation of alluring but frightening otherness. His view
of her highlights her beauty, leadership, and ferocity. She is “wild,” “gorgeous” (136), and proud. Wearing a
helmet, armor, and magic charms, she is fearless in the face of the pilgrims' bullets, and is obeyed by her
tribesmen. She is “like the wilderness itself, with an air of brooding over an inscrutable purpose” (137), a
description sufficiently ominous but all the more so for echoing the previous description of the wilderness as
“an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention” (103). Although she is without words, the
“savage” woman is not without purpose—and this, her “struggling, half-shaped resolve” (137), is all the more
menacing for being unknowable. Her threatening otherness is most fully articulated by Marlow's parodic
double, the Russian “man of patches” (88) who finds her so frightening that he proclaims: “If she had offered
to come aboard [the steamer] I really think I would have tried to shoot her” (88). The contrast between the
harlequin's nervousness and the “savage” woman's composure, between his ragged attire and her “gorgeous”
adornment highlights her formidable power.

In her overt sexuality and aggressive claims upon Kurtz's person, Marlow finds her both enticing and
menacing. Voracious and diabolical, she appears to belong to a matriarchal and polyandrous female warrior
culture. Equated with the wilderness—she is its “tenebrous and passionate soul” (137)—she is a kind of
succubus that has made Kurtz her concubine and thereby drained him of his vitality:
The wilderness had patted him on the head … it had caressed him, and—lo!—he had withered; it had taken him, loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation. He was its spoiled and pampered favourite.

(121)

The “savage” woman is one with the wilderness that has claimed Kurtz for its harem. This image of Kurtz as the “spoiled and pampered favourite” in a male harem directly threatens the patriarchal and ostensibly monogamous structure of the society from which he has emigrated.

So threatening is the “savage” woman in her sexual otherness that Marlow adopts a strategy of subduing her power through grief: “she stopped as if her heart had failed her” (137). Finally the text supplants her with—in effect, turns her into—the Intended, in perpetual mourning and domestic confinement, whose outstretched arms mirror the “savage” woman's gesture but lack her power to command a tribe or to enshroud a pilgrim ship in shadow: “Suddenly she [the “savage” woman] opened her bared arms and threw them up rigid above her head … and at the same time the swift shadows darted out on the earth, swept around on the river, gathering the steamer into a shadowy embrace” (88). Thus Marlow’s narration quells the anxiety the “savage” woman evokes: It demonstrates that her “barbarous” charms are in fact “powerless” (156). Her inconsolable grief, in paralyzing her, restores the male—in the person of her paramour, Kurtz—to primacy.

The colonialist anxiety of being taken over by the Other surfaces even more frighteningly in the cannibalism that Marlow imputes to the native workers aboard his boat who, at any moment, may devour Marlow and the pilgrims. In Heart of Darkness, cannibalism serves as the metaphor for the absolute violation of boundaries between one human being and another, the physical equivalent of the cultural absorption or ingestion by the Other that the colonizer fears.

On another level, the cannibalism Marlow imputes to the natives may be merely a guilty projection of the rapacity of the white colonizers who, as Jonathan Swift noted about earlier British colonial exploiters in “A Modest Proposal,” have already devoured the native population in less literal ways. Since the European intruders have invaded territorial boundaries, have violated property rights, and have in fact confiscated the natives' most personal property—their bodies—for their own uses, the Europeans are but one step from literally devouring the inhabitants. In fact, Marlow describes the insatiable Kurtz as threatening to do so: “I saw him open his mouth wide—it gave him a weirdly voracious aspect, as though he had wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the men before him” (135). Even Marlow's approval of the apparent restraint of the natives aboard ship, whom he takes to be hungry cannibals, may simply suggest the guilt he feels at the Europeans' lack of restraint toward the indigenous population.

Marlow's attribution of cannibalism to the natives—an accusation never borne out by their behavior—is a violence Marlow inflicts on the culture. This violence is characteristic of all linguistic descriptions of the members of one culture by members of another culture who exercise power over them and exploit them. Throughout, Heart of Darkness suggests that physical violence originates in the violence of language—the language that is used to justify intrusion, usurpation, and conversion. As Jacques Derrida observes, human violence originates in the violence of the letter, which takes many forms: in Heart of Darkness, the map of Africa, divided and colored according to the greedy claims of European nations; the inscription upon the land of roads and railroads; the delivery of mail from home to European intruders; the keeping of accounts to tally the loot; the written recommendations of outsiders to legitimize the coercion of natives; the Bible that justifies the pilgrims in converting and (if resisted) in killing the natives; and the law that labels some natives “enemies” and others “criminals” and thereby legitimates clapping them in irons and forcing them into chain gangs. Thus Marlow correctly describes Kurtz primarily as a “voice” whose “unextinguishable gift of noble and lofty expression” (146) authorizes and smoothes the way for indulging his consummate greed.
suggests the inevitable course of Kurtz's report to the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs that begins by arguing that the godlike status of white men in the Congo enables them to “exert a power for good practically unbounded” and ends by urging “Exterminate all the brutes!” (123). As Marlow ironically yet revealingly suggests, this last admonition “may be regarded as the exposition of a method.”

The text's recognition of the violence inherent in language also helps to explain the narrative event most puzzling to critics, Marlow's apparent lie to Kurtz's Intended. In reply to her request for “His last word—to live with,” Marlow responds, “The last word he pronounced was—your name.” By this assertion, Marlow inadvertently tells her the truth. For Kurtz, the Intended is not a distinct person. Just as she has no name of her own, she has no intrinsic reality for Kurtz. She is the expression of his intentions, of the life he intends for her, one that reflects his culture-based ideas about marriage, sexuality, and the subordination of women. She is, in effect, colonized by Kurtz's intentions, which confine her in the drawing room and limit her discourse to an echo of his.

Similarly, the African natives exist in the text as expressions of Kurtz's—and Marlow's—intentions. They exist for Kurtz's uses and are confined to Marlow's conceptions of them. To have intentions toward a people is to appropriate for oneself the right to subdue, to convert, and to use—all in the name of benevolence. Thus “the horror” is indeed the name of the Intended: it designates the violence that results from the intentions of the powerful who impose their will upon the powerless.

Further, the designation “the Intended” signals an awareness that permeates the text of the unreliability and slipperiness of language. “The Intended” is the shifting signifier, sign of the unbridgeable gulf between aim and achievement, the gap in meaning that cannot be sutured. Without heeding the text's warning about the unreliable and equivocal nature of language, the reader may trust too much to Marlow's words, just as Kurtz's adherents have trusted too much to his eloquence; and potential colonist-conquerors may fool themselves as well as others into believing in their noble intentions. Repeatedly, in recording the booming voice but essential hollowness of Kurtz, the text underlines the tricky nature of language itself that conceals as it apparently reveals, that denotes presence while signifying absence, that signals meaning while lacking it.

By the time Marlow tells the truth he considers a lie when he suggests that “the horror” is the name of Kurtz' Intended (that is to say, the name for what he had intended), the text has effectually blurred the distinction between truth and lies, much as it has blurred the distinctions between colonists and conquerors, between savagery and civilization, between men's realities and women's illusions.

If, as has often been claimed, Marlow represents a white, patriarchal, Eurocentric view of late nineteenth-century history, the text suggests, although it does not develop, a perspective on contemporary global politics that is more complex and more problematic than Marlow's. Unlike Marlow's conflations of all historic periods into one universal time and his insistence that Africa mirrors the beginnings of Western civilization, the text marks a specific moment in the European imperialist enterprise, the moment in which late nineteenth-century England, disconcertingly akin to the more overtly ruthless Belgium, was frantically grabbing territory in outlying regions of the world. Unlike Marlow's erasure of class differences through his creation of an artificially egalitarian community aboard a yacht (in which a plain seaman rubs elbows with a lawyer and a director of companies), the text recognizes that even in the jungle class barriers exist between colonial officials and working men, such as mechanics and boiler-makers.

Further, although Marlow posits an essential and innate ideological difference between men and women, the text recognizes that late-Victorian society assigns very limited roles to women so that, if their social views are unrealistic, it is because they lack education and therefore merely echo male platitudes. In addition, the text briefly notices—in the dress and status of the “savage” woman and in the dialect of her tribe—the particularities of a specific African tribal culture and recognizes that this culture has language and meaning, while observing that these are unreadable to outsiders. Thus Marlow's dying helmsman appears to want to
speak but cannot do so to those who do not and will not understand him (119).

Finally, the narrative stipulates that what it arbitrarily equates with darkness is in fact universal—an ineradicable core of evil in all human beings, whatever their culture of origin. When Marlow observes about modern England, “And this also … has been one of the dark places of the earth” (67), his use of the perfect tense brings his observation into the present. By the time Marlow ceases to speak to his audience on the “cruising yawl,” symbolically the privileged site of the dominant culture, all persons on board must acknowledge that the apparently “tranquil waterway” of modern European history leads “into the heart of an immense darkness” (158), located not only in the outposts of empire but always already within the human breast.

Notes

1. These display “an imperialism of the metaphor rooted in a patriarchal language that conflates racial difference with sexual difference in the field of Western representations” (McGee 130).
2. For persuasive discussions of the difference between sexual and racial alterity and of the need to distinguish clearly between them, see Spivak, Mohanty and Suleri.
3. Noting that all language is violence, speech as well as writing, Jacques Derrida makes the point that “the essential confrontation that opens communication between peoples and cultures, even when that communication is not practiced under the banner of colonial or missionary oppression,” takes the form of war (107). As examples of violent inscription, Derrida cites the road, the path, and other instances of the opening and spacing of nature (107-08).
4. Jacques Derrida warns of the dangers of phonologism, “the exclusion or abasement of writing” (102). Phonologism privileges speech over writing because of an erroneous belief that speech is originary and therefore naturally more innocent than writing (106). Perhaps the greatest danger of phonologism is that the eloquent speaker—such as Kurtz—persuades his audience by appearing to stand in for the presence that words necessarily lack.
5. For previous discussions that suggest that “the Horror” is the name of the Intended, although they interpret the horror she represents in different ways than I do, see Bruffee, Ellis, Kauvar, Stark, and Milne. Of all these interpretations, mine is closest to that of Stark, who maintains that the Intended is herself a “whited sepulcre.” Stark, however, goes further than I do in his dire assessment of the Intended: he asserts that the house of the Intended is the “symbolic center of the Inner Circle of the Infernal System” (543), that is, the inner center of Hell; and that the Intended's glittering eyes signal her infernal character, which manifests itself in part through her seduction and manipulation of Marlow.
6. For fuller discussions of Marlow as embodiment of the ideology of European imperialism, see Said 48; Brantlinger 173-97; and McGee 127-32.

Works Cited


**Criticism: Ode S. Ogede (essay date 1999)**


[In the following essay, Ogede argues that Conrad's representation of African women in *Heart of Darkness* perpetuates standard European myths about Africa.]

“A study of the so-called arbitrariness of the sign, of the ways in which concepts divide reality arbitrarily, and of the relation between a sign, such as blackness, and its referent, such as absence,” Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has written, “can help us to engage in more sophisticated readings of black texts. But it can also help to explain the figuration of blackness in Western texts” (*Black Literature and Literary Theory* 7). The principle set forth by Gates in this excerpt can be usefully applied to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1910)1 because Conrad's conviction that he could decode the identity of Africans through their physical landscape and
appearance indicates that the kind of experience that most interested him was to keep alive the standard European myths about Africa. Although this essay will primarily discuss the image of the African woman delineated in *Heart of Darkness*, it also examines the general idea of Africa that dominated the European imagination at the time Conrad's book was published and shows how Conrad's narrative helps in furthering those ideas. There is no doubt that the way in which the African universe was configured and projected during the time of imperial expansion constituted the main shaping influence in the novella's project of identity construction.

Readers may not immediately recognize the central position women occupy in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, for superficially the colonial world of Kurtz's jungle in the Congo is a man's world: a dangerous, capricious world of daily strife, where, it would appear, men find themselves compelled to wage fierce physical and mental battles for their survival. Although at first women are conspicuous only by their physical absence from the world of *Heart of Darkness*, in truth, the female personality is crucial to the overall design of Conrad's text. It is Marlow's aunt, after all, who got him the job in the Congo in the first place. Moreover, throughout the narrative, women are the underlying motivation for all the heroism displayed by the men. Kurtz's daring, for example, is in honor of his "Intended," his fiancée, for Kurtz is compelled to overreach himself because he must first prove himself worthy of her.

Paradoxically, while femaleness as we encounter it in Marlow's aunt presents the picture of shrewishness, power, influence, and vision, Conrad encodes it in the text as the very opposite: brittleness, weakness, sentimentality, and cowardice. Thus, only on a few occasions are women mentioned directly in Conrad's text, and further, white women in particular are a nonphysical presence in the African world depicted in *Heart of Darkness*. This is because integral to Conrad's vision in this book is the notion that the white female is an object of the whited sepulcher of the city and, hence, of civilization.

Because Conrad viewed Africa as a place too dangerous for the habitation of white women, whom he believed were irrelevant there anyway, his views synchronize perfectly with the beliefs of Kurtz, who fosters the conviction that white women are objects to be protected. Both see the physical world of Africa as one that festers with a bestial force so threatening in the way it pushes to extreme limits the morality, sanity, and physical endurance of white men that for a white woman to survive there would be impossible. That Kurtz, projected as the embodiment of the very best of Europe, ultimately succumbs to barbarity in Africa is Conrad's strongest argument about Africa's capacity to destroy what is good.² Kurtz journeys into the heartland of Africa as "an emissary of light" only to fall prey to the overpowering bestiality prevalent there—transformed or forced, as it were, by prolonged African residence to yield to the atavistic instincts within himself.

In his essay "Victorians and Africans," Patrick Brantlinger describes the typical "explorers' writings" as "non-fictional quest romances in which the hero-authors struggle through enchanted or bedeviled lands toward a goal, ostensibly the discovery of the Nile's sources or the conversion of the cannibals" (195). Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is clearly a record of imperial activities during settlement and thus belongs properly outside the primary provenance of the typical "explorer's writing"; it nonetheless also shares with initial explorers' writings a tendency to depict, in Brantlinger's terms, "heroic authors" who move from adventure to adventure against a dark, infernal backdrop where there are no other characters of equal stature—only "bewitched or demonic savages" (195). As Brantlinger correctly notes further, not only do such authors "sometimes individualize their portraits of Africans," they "usually portray them as amusing or dangerous obstacles or as objects of curiosity"; even the missionaries among them viewed Africans as "weak, pitiable, inferior mortals who need to be shown the light" (195).

Perhaps the most "individualized" portrait of an African drawn in *Heart of Darkness* is that of Kurtz's mistress; but significantly, she is not named or sketched in any great detail. She appears, in fact, like an afterthought: Only toward the end of the narrative, after Marlow has told most of the story of Kurtz's
degradation in the jungle, does he tell us how she had shared that life, indicating that she might have been partly responsible for his initiation into the barbarous life that subsequently claimed him.

When the narrator first catches a glimpse of this African woman, she appears to him not as a human being but as “a wild and gorgeous apparition” (136). Conrad's very choice of phrases in describing her reveal deep anxieties, for he believes that she “walked with measured steps, draped in striped and fringed cloths, treading the earth proudly, with a slight jingle and flash of barbarous ornaments” (136). In her brief appearance, Conrad casts the African woman as an ambiguous creature, a figure that repulses and attracts at the same time, and he refuses to endow her with full human dignity:

She carried her head high; her hair was done in the shape of a helmet; she had brass leggings to the knee, brass wire gauntlets to the elbow, a crimson spot on her tawny cheek, innumerable necklaces of glass beads on her neck; bizarre things, charms, gifts of witch-men, that hung about her, glittered and trembled at every step. She must have had the value of several elephant tusks upon her. She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress.

(136-37)

Given her relationship with Kurtz, the carefully worded description of the African woman is a miniature illustration of the wider ramifications of the relationship of exploitation that existed between Africa (as woman) and her white (male) colonizers in general. Thus, like Africa, though the explorers despise and abuse Kurtz's African mistress, they also find her fascinating. That the appearance of the African woman frightens the narrator and his fellow white explorers shows merely their perception of her as a strange creature in unfamiliar territory; thus, the “hush” that suddenly falls upon “the whole sorrowful land, the immense wilderness,” may express the immensity of their state of agitation; but as indicated by the description of her “tragic and fierce aspect,” her “wild sorrow,” her “dumb pain mingled with the fear of some struggling, half-shaped resolve,” and the “air of brooding over an inscrutable purpose” (137), the explorers also view her as a fearful but in some sense powerfully attractive sexual object.

Because the explorers see the woman before them not as a human being but only as “a low jingle, a glint of yellow metal, a sway of fringed draperies” (137), when she “opened her bared arms and threw them up rigid above her head, as though in an uncontrollable desire to touch the sky” (137), they imagine that she is practicing some form of African religion or devil worship, and they begin to fear for their lives. One of the explorers puts their fears in perspective when he says: “If she had offered to come aboard I really would have tried to shoot her. I have been risking my life every day for the last fortnight to keep her out of the house. She got in one day and kicked up a row about those miserable rags I picked up in the storeroom to mend my clothes with” (137). Conrad's ambiguous portrait of Kurtz's African mistress is clear proof not only of his acute xenophobic cast of mind, his personal hostility toward Africa and things African, but also of the irrational fears of his society. By lending confirmation to the standard European myths about Africans as strange, disordered, evil, superstitious, and dangerous but nevertheless usable creatures, Conrad exposes the pusillanimous attitudes that led Western societies of his time to view Africans and their lands as dangerous yet attractive objects and territories for the possession of which the imperialists had to contest so fiercely.

Writing when Western knowledge of the African was limited and at best a mystery, Conrad had a great opportunity to help his society fill important gaps in its knowledge of others. Had he embarked on a genuine search for the objective reality and acted as someone with an open mind—someone with a questioning, interrogating, and investigating intelligence—Conrad might have written himself into history as an original thinker, as a courageous writer who showed great sensitivity to difference. His choice, instead, to meet the expectations of his audience, its need to relegate Africans to a subhuman category, and to propagate what Chinua Achebe has aptly termed Europe's “comforting myths” about Africa (315), reveals a perspective that
was limited by his inability to probe beyond the fog of public prejudices.

Formalistically, the arrangement whereby Conrad lends unequivocal approval to Marlow's point of view represents the most limiting factor of *Heart of Darkness*, for Marlow is a most unsuccessfully executed unreliable eyewitness narrator. The failure to utilize Marlow as an objective reporter is not merely a stylistic error, it is an ideological blunder that mirrors Conrad's own equivocation. Torn between the aspiration to realism and the allure of romance, Conrad bows to the seductive appeals of the latter and thus fails woefully in his attempt to use an eyewitness narrator to achieve a realistic fictional representation of the African. Why did the author grant so central a position to a narrator whose vision is so impaired that he mistakes impressions for substance, fantasy for reality?

In a highly informative footnote, that should have been worked into the narrative body of his text, Christopher Miller has used autobiographical data to link Conrad's style to his psychological disposition. Miller, who terms Conrad's fictional adumbrations “highly perverse,” makes the revealing remark that “the point at which Africa became the property of boys' adventure stories is a matter of some interest” (173). Miller then cites an illustration from Conrad's short essay “Geography and Some Explorers,” which Miller believes tells much about Conrad's “youthful fascination with geography” (173):

> And it was Africa, the continent out of which the Romans used to say some new thing was always coming, that got cleared of the dull imaginary wonders of the dark ages, which were replaced by exciting spaces of white paper. Regions unknown! My imagination could depict to itself there worthy, adventurous and devoted men, nibbling at the ages, attacking from north and south and east and west, conquering a bit of truth here and there, and sometimes swallowed up by the mystery their hearts were so persistently intent on uncovering.

(173)

Solely on the basis of this dominating presence of impressionism in the Conradian imagination, Albert Guerard's classification of *Heart of Darkness* as a “realistic” account of “things that actually happened on an actual expedition that Conrad made, in 1890, into the heart of Africa” (Introduction 8) is surely a case of extreme oversimplification. The overwhelming faith Conrad places in the intimate relationship between art and emotion puts him far closer to the Romantics than to the Modernists. As Robert Scholes and Robert Kellog rightly note in their influential book *The Nature of Narrative*, the effect the unreliable eyewitness narrator can produce lies in the ability of an adept modern author to use the device as a means for lending “an especially ironical cast to an entire narrative, laying on the reader a special burden of enjoyable ratiocination, as he seeks to understand what the character telling the story can not himself comprehend” (263). It is not merely coincidental that ironical interpretation is not part of Conrad's intention in *Heart of Darkness* (or that if it had been, it has been poorly executed); Conrad was no naive artist but a conscious craftsman who deliberately set out to defend white supremacist ideologies.

It cannot be stated often enough that Conrad's portrait of the African woman is an imaginative projection, an expression of the European cast of mind during the period of imperial expansion. The prevailing belief held the African as a subhuman creature, and Marlow merely articulates this prejudice. Given that ethnocentrism is blind, it is not surprising that when Marlow sets sail from Europe to the heartland of Africa as part of the European “civilizing mission,” logic is not part of his baggage.

Undergirding the imperial project was a deep-seated hypocrisy, and Marlow expresses this negative force when he admits that colonialism represents “just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind” but insists that the nobility of its underlying vision justifies colonial conquest. As he puts it, in boldface: “The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look at it
too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretense but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to” (Heart of Darkness 69-70). During his ruminations on the river Thames, which he uses to embody Europe's presumed civilization, Marlow exposes even more explicitly the irrational celebration of the self that generated his equally irrational hatred of difference: “The water shone pacifically; the sky, without a speck, was a benign immensity of unstained light; the very mist on the Essex marsh was like a gauzy and radiant fabric, hung from the wooded rises inland, and draping the low shores in diaphanous folds” (66). Nor can any logic explain why the Thames produces the tranquil and “meditative” effect Marlow reports: “The tidal current runs to and fro in its unceasing service, crowded with memories of men and ships it had borne to the rest of home or to the battles of the sea. It had known and served all the men of whom the nation is proud, from Sir Francis Drake to Sir John Franklin, knights all, titled and untitled—the great knights-errant of the sea” (66-67). What we have here is an emotional reaction; it is not an idea that can be accounted for through logical reasoning. As a matter of fact, such specific historical moments in English history as “the Golden Hind returning with her round flanks full of treasure, to be visited by the Queen's Highness to the Erebus and Terror, bound on other conquests—and that never returned,” and the idea of the “captains, admirals, the dark 'interlopers' of the Eastern trade, and the commissioned ‘generals’ of East India fleets” (67), which the narrator calls up in evidence of the Thames's historical significance, serve only as sites of imaginative anchors for his ethnocentric feelings.

The following eulogies further attest to the limitless role of feelings in the narrative structure of Heart of Darkness: “Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame, they all had gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire. What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth! The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germ of empires” (67). Marlow sings praises for the Thames because he knows the river intimately; in contrast, he denigrates the landscape of Africa because it is unknowable and evinces a lingering sense of apprehension, fear, even evil.

That Marlow's first idea of Africa is encapsulated in the image of “a mighty big river” resembling “an immense snake uncoiled, with its tail lost in the depths of the land” (71) tells everything about Marlow's irrational hatred for Africa even before he sets eyes on the continent. Thus, an unintended effect of Conrad's story is to cast Marlow as a victim of racial stereotypes, as a man unable to live above his mental conditioning. What surfaces with uncanny force is the way in which the myth of Africa as a dangerous place is so deeply entrenched in the European mind that the authority of science must willfully be called upon to give it credibility. The scene in which Marlow is subjected to a medical examination before being called up for the African mission, for example, pointedly highlights the misuse of science in defending irrational assumptions.

As the medical doctor explains during Marlow's physical examination, Africa harbors a great capacity to muffle the mental makeup of Europeans. This is why, in order to prevent any tragic occurrences, it is the doctor's practice to “always ask leave, in the interests of science, to measure the cranium of those going out there; moreover, the changes take place inside, you know” (75). The doctor's warning to Marlow after his examination, that he must “[a]void irritation more than exposure to the sun. In the tropics one must before everything keep calm” (76), has the intended effect: Even before the journey begins, Marlow is assailed by great fears. He began to feel “as though, instead of going to the centre of a continent, I were about to set off for the centre of the earth” (77). Given his mental conditioning, it comes as no surprise that Marlow's fears rise to a crescendo when he first glimpses the continent. His state of mind—severe, threatening anxiety and discomfort—shows convincingly how the confusing swirl of emotions has far more to do with his imagination than with any real danger Africa poses:

There it is before you—smiling, frowning, inviting, grand, mean, insipid, or savage, and always mute with an air of whispering, ‘Come and find out.’ This one was featureless, as if
still in the making, with an aspect of monotonous griminess. The edge of a colossal jungle, so
dark-green as to be almost black, fringed with white surf, ran straight, like a ruled line; far
away along a blue sea whose glitter was blurred by a creeping mist. The sun was fierce, the
land seemed to glisten and drip with steam.

It is clear from this passage that at issue is not the identity of the landscapes of Africa, the object observed per
se, but the quality of the gaze, the attitude taken by the observer, and the objectives of his mediating
sensibility; in short, it is the ability or inability to observe Africa properly that is tied, in turn, to the observer's
mental conditioning as well as to the interests that are served by the observation. As the narrator of Heart of
Darkness conflates his impressions—in a practice that Gates describes as reading "signs"
arbitrarily—confusing his impressions of the African landscape with the actual situation on the ground, he
makes a crucial misjudgment. Instead of accepting his own limitations as an observer, he deflects his personal
inadequacy, his state of incomprehension, to the essence of the object observed.

A careful reading of Heart of Darkness suggests that one can view Marlow as Conrad's alter ego; for by
attempting to explain away all his protagonist's personal inadequacies, the author seems to endorse Kurtz's
refusal to accept responsibility for his own weaknesses. Marlow concedes his own inability to isolate what he
terms "the truth of things, within the toil of a mournful and senseless delusion," but he still persists in the
habit of placing the blame for his impaired vision squarely on factors related to anyone except himself: "[T]he
idleness of a passenger, my isolation amongst all these men with whom I had no point of contact, the oily and
languid sea, the uniform somberness of the coast" (78).

Because it is the narrator's overall conviction that Africa harbors extenuating factors that exert severe
emotional and physical tolls on the European men who journey there, his description of the thick of the jungle
is a perfect expression of the colonial imagination:

Trees, trees, millions of trees, massive, immense, running up high; and at their foot, hugging
the bank against the stream crept the little begrimed steamboat, like a sluggish beetle crawling
on the floor of a lofty portico. It made you feel very small, very lost, and yet it was not
altogether depressing, that feeling. After all, if you were small, the grimey beetle crawled
on—which was just what you wanted it to do.

Thus, we come full circle to Conrad's belief in the idea that the real danger Africa poses to Europeans lies in
its capacity to muffle the personality of white men. The passage indicates that this menace is all the more
devastating because Europeans are often unsuspicious of its magnitude. This is the tradition the Russian who
manages Kurtz's office also perpetuates; he too attempts to explain away the excesses of his boss.

When Marlow finally reaches his destination in the heart of the Congo's jungle, he bears witness to the blatant
atrocities committed by colonialism. Kurtz's brutality is so grave that he has decorated his home entirely with
human skulls, but the Russian refuses to see the man he serves for who he is: a criminal. Instead, he presents
Kurtz as an extraordinary individual with great impact on those around him. The Russian fails to acknowledge
him as the mad, fanatical hunter of ivory, a man so possessed by his mission, by his craving for ivory, that he
murders innocent Africans, whom he views merely as obstacles to the realization of his ambition. Persisting in
his admiration, the Russian tells Marlow: "You can't judge Kurtz as you would an ordinary man" (131).

By presenting Kurtz as someone who possesses "thunder and lightning" that enable him to subdue everyone in
his path, his devotee forces Marlow to accept a sparkling image of Kurtz. If we examine closely the racist
views Marlow shares with Kurtz's subordinate in attributing Kurtz's success to a magnetic force the exploiter ostensibly radiates, we find the veneer of ruthless white paternalism behind the project known as imperialism. It is this refusal to view Kurtz's inability to control his insatiable appetite for ivory as evidence of a lack of moral restraint in his character, of the sense of a personal spiritual void or hollowness within the colonizer that enables the narrator to attribute Kurtz's venality to the effect on him of the African environment, thus relieving him of moral culpability for his misdeeds. The landscape, the narrator insists, tends to bring out the worst in people, and he points accusing fingers at what he refers to as the absence of conventional apparatuses that assist societies elsewhere in checking moral behavior: “But the wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude” (133). By viewing Kurtz as a victim of his circumstances rather than as the victimizer he is, the narrative engages in an act of complicity with the corruption for which Kurtz should have been made morally responsible.

It is important to stress that fear and condescension corrode the human reasoning capability. This is evident in the dire consequences that result when Marlow and his creator bring their fears and condescension toward the unknown to bear also in observing the African people: They become unable to see the humanity of Africans, and their acts of omission plant the seeds of racial prejudices more deeply:

But suddenly, as we struggled round a bend, there would be a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass-roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage. The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy. The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us—who could tell? We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings; we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse.

(105)

The negative sensations Marlow feels on his first experience of Africa, the feeling of having traveled through “the night of first ages, those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign—and no memories” (105), may be attributable to what he has been conditioned to expect; nonetheless, as an individual he is responsible for his own actions.

Marlow's inability to resist his European upbringing, the notion of European superiority, the idea that Europeans are rational and have a sense of time and a language, whereas Africans can boast of none of these qualities, prevents Marlow from being able to determine whether Africans are human or not. Marlow cannot bear the sight of Africans in freedom, for such a sight contrasts too markedly with the familiar sight of blacks as slaves.

It even comes as a great surprise to the contemporary reader in a multicultural context that Conrad draws a pronounced contrast between the local population still in the primitive stage and those he calls “the improved specimen”—that is, those Africans who have been tutored in the ways of whites to serve the cause of colonization efficiently. Of the former, we have the following close-up description:

The headman, a young, broad-chested black, severely draped in black dark-blue fringed cloths, with fierce nostrils and his hair all done up artfully in oily ringlets, stood near me. ‘Aha!’ I said, just for good fellowship's sake. ‘Catch ‘m,' he snapped, with a bloodshot widening of his eyes and a flash of sharp teeth—‘Catch ‘m. Give ‘m to us.’ ‘To you, eh?’ I asked; ‘What would you do with them?’ ‘Eat ‘m!’ he said curtly, and, leaning his elbow on
the rail, looked out into the fog in a dignified and profoundly pensive attitude.

What is disingenuous about this passage is that the author, who all along has presented Africans as distinguished by their lack of expressive power, suddenly attributes to them the power of language. Thus at this stage the reader cannot accept as a direct translation the words attributed to one of the Africans as his utterance, since the narrator has failed to indicate the original language in which the African spoke. One must question the narrator's qualifications as translator. Because the text fails to provide satisfactory grounds for the assertions, it is difficult to view the words as more than the figment of Marlow's imagination, as more than what Marlow (and possibly Conrad himself) imagines the grunts and growls of natives must mean.

It is noteworthy that *Heart of Darkness* has preserved a sense of what one might term a clash between accommodation and intolerance, a clash at the very foundation of relations between Africa and Europe. In this conflict, constrained to choose between death and accommodation, some Africans chose the path of resistance, whereas others attempted to adjust to the new circumstances in their lives by being accommodative. The experience of both groups reveals the intransigence of the invaders, who regarded the former category of Africans as outright enemies and subjected the latter to a politics of identity that was no less vicious and humiliating.

Nineteenth-century imperialists detested the survival efforts of the local people who tried to make something positive of their very bad situation and thus treated these Africans with sarcastic humor and saw them as a parody of themselves, the symbol of inauthenticity. Burlesque comments, such as those in the following passage, reconfigure the indignity with which those Africans who decided to learn to live with their invaders were treated:

And between whiles I had to look after the savage who was fireman. He was an improved specimen; he could fire up a vertical boiler. He was there below me, and, upon my word, to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind legs. A few months of training had done for that really fine chap. He squinted at the steam gauge and at the water gauge with an evident effort of intrepidity—and he had filled teeth, too, the poor devil, and the wool of his pate shaved into queer patterns, and three ornamental scars on each of his cheeks. He ought to have been clapping his hands and stamping his feet on the bank, instead of which he was hard at work, a thrall to strange witchcraft, full of improving knowledge.

Although Christopher Miller believes this attitude of whites toward the Africans is the result of what he calls mutual misunderstanding, what one sees clearly in operation here is white racial bigotry. Miller reasons that “what Conrad is actually describing is a mutual fetishism: for the African, the machines of Europe are unanimated by gods; for the European, everything African is moved by the troublesome darkness and its heart” (180). But if we see equality, as we should, as the only precondition for mutuality, Miller's reasoning loses much of its persuasion, for we soon realize that such a condition does not obtain in the text between the Africans and their European colonizers. We directly sense the European perception of Africans but never the African perception of Europeans; the African voice remains absent from Conrad's text. Because Africans remain merely the subject of a reductionist narrative of Europe, *Heart of Darkness* can be regarded as an artistic replication of the power relationships that existed under colonialism.

The critic who reads *Heart of Darkness* as “the first significant work in English literature to deny the idea of progress, which had been a dominant idea in European thought for the past four hundred years” (Meyers 191),
is equally guilty of serious oversights. Had Jeffrey Meyers's consideration of Conrad's book not ignored his aesthetics, which, through Marlow, lend validation to the principles underlying colonization, he might have concluded that *Heart of Darkness* enshrines white supremacist, racialist arrogance. Meyers wants us to believe that “the antagonistic interests of civilization and colonialism” and “the disastrous clash of the white man and the African” function to suggest “the humane values that are needed to survive this conflict” (191); but what we have, more precisely, are acts that serve the cause of imperialism by locking African lives into a cycle of hopelessness.

Since there appears to be no escape for Africans—for those who have chosen the path of armed resistance and for those who by deciding to be accommodative are locked in a predicament promising neither comfort nor security—the claim that Marlow “represents the European conscience that Kurtz has abandoned in the depths of the jungle” and that he “commits himself to the Africans he encounters on his journey to the interior” rests on a curious notion of commitment. It is true, as Meyers notes, that Marlow extends some sympathy to the local people whose suffering he views as a reflection of “the white man's cruelty just as their honorable restraint represents a moral standard the Europeans fail to meet” (Meyers 191). The foregoing reading of the book suggests, however, that Marlow does not view the project of colonization as a whole as immoral or undesirable; what he questions is the peculiar practice of the system by the Belgian regime in the Congo. As a remarkable number of critics have agreed (Achebe; Brantlinger, *Heart of Darkness*; Singh), merely acknowledging the atrocities committed in the Congo—the rank greed, corruption, cruelty, and barbarity unleashed against the African population—does not exonerate Conrad from the charge of complicity in colonialist assumptions and philosophy. The grounds for Conrad's conviction lie largely in how he views the African continent as a whole with pity but denies the inhabitants who are victims of colonial repression the sense of warm human feelings and respect.

Because Conrad never viewed his African subjects as human, he cannot escape the charge of having succumbed to the prevailing European claim to superior civilization. His attempt to give voice to the magnitude of the embarrassment colonization represented for the African victims and for the colonizers themselves fails woefully. When we look closely at Conrad's prejudiced portrait of the African woman in *Heart of Darkness*, we begin to see more clearly the pitfalls of Conrad as an artist who failed to rise above the prevailing view of the day that African tribes were “primitive” and “savage.” Her contrast with Kurtz's Intended, who remains the vision of feminine ideal in the book, pointedly unveils Conrad's bias.

Perhaps Conrad draws Kurtz's Intended in faint strokes in order to emphasize that she is an abstraction, that she exists as an ideal, a potential symbol of the ungraspable beauty, much desired but ultimately unobtainable. She might be an illusion Kurtz has devised to shield himself from the wounding knowledge of what might very well be the moral squalor of her actual existence, but what is significant is Conrad's codification of beauty as white. Such is the attraction Kurtz's Intended holds for him that he sees an inseparable bond between her and the ivory hunt. His interchangeable references to the two—“'My ivory.' Oh, yes, I heard him, 'My Intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my'” (121)—is a juxtaposition of terms that explains why Marlow's reciprocating action at the end of the story is inconsequential in defusing the work's racism. Marlow's attempt to keep Kurtz's Intended equally protected by illusion calculated to cheat her out of awareness of the brutality, immorality, and decadence of Kurtz's life in no way redresses the injustice suffered by his victims. Although the repentant and remorseful Kurtz demands justice on his deathbed, Marlow, who is sole witness to his depraved life, is filled with such passionate attachment to the idea about men's duty to keep women secure in their innocent world, he tells her a white lie, that “the last word he pronounced [in horror] was—your name” (157). Thus, what finally emerges in *Heart of Darkness* is an oversimplified representation of the world, in which a sharp dichotomy is drawn between innocence and guilt, good and evil, beauty and ugliness, black and white. It is a world that places not only the black woman but blacks as a whole at the receiving end of a negative image. Despite the services she renders, the African queen remains for Kurtz not an individual but a symbol of shame and mystery, a black-magic queen, painted as a weird substance because he never grants Africans human status.
In conclusion, one must observe that because of its pervasive ambivalence, its tendency to plead the cause of Africans while at the same time presenting them as pathetic subhuman figures or elements in need of European protection, *Heart of Darkness* is a manifestation of deep moral conflicts felt not only by its author but also by his entire age. Conrad attempts to use the novella as a platform for conveying devotion to high idealism and for raising serious questions about the practice of the colonial enterprise in the Congo, but he ultimately fails to achieve any positive vision because he refuses to question adequately the tenets underlying colonization—in particular, the belief that Africans are subhuman. One of the great paradoxes in literary history is that one of the earliest Western texts to make indictments on the colonial mission ends up lending validation to the image of African peoples as an exotic curiosity to the West. In itself, the fact that *Heart of Darkness* promotes some of the most blatant stereotypes of the African image may not be surprising; but what really baffles is the lack of originality or resourcefulness Conrad displays in so doing, for the continually dichotomous world produced by Conrad's Manichaen structure is a vision whose foundation relies on a rhetoric of escape or fantasy. The oppositions drawn between African disorder, savagery, ugliness, and evil versus European order, humanity, innocence, and beauty are too obvious to be ignored as paradigms of irrationality. *Heart of Darkness* fails to offer a judicious use of the journey motif because instead of employing the ostensible journeys by Marlow and Kurtz for realistic explorations of Africa, Conrad chose to use them for purposes of what Lilian Feder has aptly termed “initiation into the mysteries of his own mind” (183). Because Conrad's imagination is too hemmed within the limiting perspectives of white racism, he fails to achieve an original angle of vision in his construction of the African's identity in *Heart of Darkness*.

**Notes**

1. All page references are to the Signet Classic, New American Library edition, with an introduction by Albert Guerard.
2. It is significant to note how Kurtz unabashedly declares that it is impossible to imagine how a white woman can survive in the jungle: “Girl! What! Did I mention a girl? Oh, she is out of it—completely. They—the women I mean—are out of it—should be out of it. We must help them to stay in that beautiful world of their own, lest ours gets worse” (121).

**Works Cited**


**Criticism: Tony C. Brown (essay date spring 2000)**


*[In the following essay, Brown maintains that the darkness in *Heart of Darkness* produces a larger “cultural psychosis.”]*

Therein consists the most elementary formal definition of psychosis: the massive presence of some real that fills out and blocks the perspective openness which is constitutive of “reality.”

—*Slavoj zek, “Grimaces of the Real”*¹

*Heart of Darkness* has perversely proved a central document in postcolonial discourse. As Homi K. Bhabha puts it, “the long shadow of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* falls on so many texts of the postcolonial pedagogy.”² Notably, Bhabha cites Edward W. Said's *Culture and Imperialism* as an exemplary example of such a text:

*Heart of Darkness* is the novel that invites the most comment and interpretation. It serves as a resource for many of the central arguments in the book. In Said's early discussions of the complex address and consolidation of the imperial idea as ideology, *Heart of Darkness* features prominently. In the later, postcolonial perspectives that deal with resistance and opposition, Said demonstrates the “anxiety of influence” generated by the novel on the anti-colonialist fictions of Ngugi wa Thiongo, *The River Between* and Tayeb Salih, *Season of Migration to the North.*³

When we turn to Said's book, Bhabha's comments are clearly borne out as Conrad's novel takes on a privileged and at times pervasive role. Importantly, however, there is a particular tension running throughout Said's discussion and use of *Heart of Darkness* to which Bhabha does not immediately direct our attention. This tension emerges from Said's recognition of an ambivalent status afforded colonialism in Conrad's novel, as it at once offers critics a perspective from which can be gained critical leverage on the discourse of colonialism and yet is itself one of the most concentrated and influential documents of modern colonial discourse.⁴ In terms of the former, *Heart of Darkness* has commonly been seen to present a subversive perspective through Marlow's perversion of the West's image of itself as the place of light and civilization. After his up-river journey into the heart of darkness, the Western metropolis is revealed to Marlow cloaked in the folds of darkness he encountered at the ends of the earth: the white woman, the Intended, resembles Kurtz's African woman; the tall houses lining the city streets appear in the profile of the posts with human heads on them outside Kurtz's Inner Station; and the pounding of his heart echoes the beat of primitive drums heard in the depths of the jungle. As Bhabha himself observes, in Marlow's revelation of the darkness at home in the very heart of Europe through such a “discourse of daemonic doubling,” he “beholds the everyday reality
of the Western metropolis through the veil of the colonial fantasm.” In doing so Marlow performs a perversion of the West's ideal-image of itself as the true seat of civilization and light—a perversion which offers a certain critical leverage for interrupting the perpetuation of this self-image.

In line with the latter pole of the ambivalent status of colonialism recognized by Said, the “long shadow” of Conrad's novel has also been seen in far less positive terms. Most famously, Chinua Achebe has argued *Heart of Darkness* constitutes a document of high European racism to be rejected and purged of all cultural currency. In these terms the “long shadow” of its influence is felt more as a dark mantle to be cast off than a critically enlightening experience. For Achebe, Africa functions in the novel as a “foil” for Europe, constituting a negative, blank space onto which is projected all that Europe does not want to see in itself, everything that is abhorrent and abject. The difference between this position and the former, which locates a subversive potential in the text, has largely to do with the respective degree of attention paid to the place of Africa in *Heart of Darkness*. It is with the place of Africa Achebe is notably most concerned, focusing on the way this place is marked by racial abjection. But in the invocation of a subversive potential in the novel's “discourse of daemonic doubling,” the place of Africa is largely ignored—a situation resulting from a failure to adequately take into account the continued repetition of Africa as a zone of abhorrence and abjection. What occurs in Marlow's viewing of the Western metropolis through “the veil of the colonial fantasm” is what might be called a “metonymy of the veil,” as one fantasy (Western metropolis as civilized place of light) is displaced by another (Western metropolis as horrific place of darkness). While this might correctly recognize the perversion of the West's ideal self-image, it ignores what must remain the constant repetition of Africa as the primal seat of darkness: in Marlow's perverse or ironic presentation of Europe qua the darkness, he must still uphold, as it were, the first term (i.e., Africa as darkness). So while Marlow effectively questions the West's self-image, he maintains, at every point, the West's image of Africa as a negative space of darkness.

A consequence of ignoring the repetition of Africa as primal darkness is a failure in critical terms to ascertain what kind of place “the darkness” actually occupies. Much, of course, has been said of the horror of the darkness in Conrad's novel; little, however, has been done to trace its precise conceptualization. Critics (postcolonial or not) have by and large simply seen the darkness as horrible, stopping short of asking how it operates to generate “the horror” in the conceptual organization of *Heart of Darkness*. J. Hillis Miller's work on Conrad might be cited as an exception, as Miller, more than anyone else, has sought to trace the peculiar conceptualization of the darkness in Conrad's writings. However, what largely remains missing from Miller's account of the darkness is a specific consideration of how the darkness works to produce the horror in *Heart of Darkness*. I want to ask in what way does the darkness thus work, and what is it that is produced through the work it does. An examination of the darkness not simply as horrible but as the horror's cause will, I suggest, show how it works to effect for Conrad what can be called “cultural psychosis.” I will specifically examine this psychosis as a frontier phenomenon in *Heart of Darkness*—a phenomenon which is later recognized by Marlow at home in Europe as a latent threat of a larger cultural psychosis. As we shall see, through the interruption of Europe's civil codes on the frontier the darkness—to bend Slavoj zek's words to my purposes—“fills out and blocks the perspective” of civilization and its constitutive codes.

In order to approach the operation of the darkness, it is worthwhile, first of all, to take into account the historical situation which gave rise to the text of *Heart of Darkness* and Marlow's journey up-river presented in it—a journey which has been readily recognized as set in the Congo Free State since the novel's first publication. In *fin de siècle* Europe, accounts of grotesque atrocities occurring in Leopold II's Congo Free State were appearing in an ever increasing quantity. A notable effect of this was the recurrence of an image of the Congo as an abject zone of horrors. The degree to which this image became embedded in the European social imagination is indicated by a headline from a 1909 edition of the London-based magazine *Truth*. “The Devil's Paradise: A British owned Congo” introduced a series of articles detailing the brutality of representatives of the Arana Brothers’ Anglo-Peruvian rubber company in their treatment of the native populations of the Putumayo area in south-western Colombia. The “Congo” of this headline is specifically Leopold's Congo Free State, and it functions as a kind of shorthand for a frontier-zone of brutality and
terror—a condition, it should be realized, that is perceived to have been brought about by the abhorrent actions in the area of European colonialists. The use of the name “Congo” in this way clearly suggests that by 1909 the Congo Free State had come to be a readily recognizable and repeatable signifier of an horrific and corrupt colonial violence: the Congo Free State always returned, so to speak, to the same place in the topography of the European social imagination, constantly occupying that special place so often marked in European conceptions of overseas colonial domains: Hell on earth.

There is, however, in the context of the late-nineteenth- and early twentieth-century discourses of colonialism, a distinctive feature of the Congo Free State's recurring image that must be observed. In the production of the Congo Free State's image as a Hell on earth, it is noticeable that the cause of the horror has an ambivalent status. It was not the case that reports of atrocities in the Congo Free State shocked their European audiences simply because they reported hideous events; rather, what was so abhorrent about these events was that they occurred as part of what was supposed to be the actions of a civilizing mission. The explicit and quite dominant role played by colonial forces in the production of the horror of the Congo disturbed a commonplace conception of the colonial zone as itself inherently barbaric. In the discourse of colonialism—particularly in a late-nineteenth-century context where the noble savage had all but disappeared—when it was a space of terror being spoken of, it was so typically the “daemonic” environments of the far-off colonies which were perceived as the terror's source. It was, of course, such an abhorrent condition which the civilizing force of European colonization was supposed to set right. In the case of Leopold's Congo Free State, though, la mission civilisatrice appeared to perform the hideous barbarism it was supposed to eradicate, effecting a degree of confusion as to the cause of those horrors reported as occurring in the colony.

It is this historical context that Heart of Darkness both emerges from and extends. Indeed, the ambivalent status of what I have called the horror's “cause” in the Congo is perhaps nowhere more famously brought out than in Heart of Darkness. In Marlow's account of his journey up-river there can be observed an obscure vacillation between the horror as an effect of colonial intervention and the location of the horror's cause as the environment itself. It could be argued there is a sense in which these two dimensions of the horror's cause double what has already been seen as the simultaneous perversion and repetition of the novel. Firstly, to show the horror of the situation as generated by European intervention suggests the colonial mission is not so much a project of bringing light to benighted savages as it is itself a process of darkening, thus perverting the West's image of itself as bearer of light and civilization. Then, secondly, locating the cause of the horror in the African wilderness would appear a fairly clear repetition of Africa as the hideous primal darkness. The first notably offers evidence for the presence of a critical view of colonialism in Conrad's novel, and is at first sight a more obvious source of “critical leverage” on the discourse of colonialism than the perversion of the West's self-image I began by discussing. However, in the oscillation between the cause qua colonial intervention and the arguably more dominant cause qua wilderness, the former loses its possible critical edge by remaining an account merely of atrocious things happening in the colonies. This contrasts to the perversion of the West's self-image which intimates the irruption of the darkness at home in Europe, representing not so much a perversion, as a repetition of the image of the colonial frontier as a place of barbarity—a barbarity, in fact, marked most notably in the distorted bodies of African men.

The cause qua colonial intervention is most clearly presented when Marlow first arrives in the colonial zone and surveys the desolation of the Company Station. The hideous panorama confronting Marlow as he makes his way unguided through the Company Station appears the direct result of the colonialists' actions in the area. What Marlow calls “the grove of death,” for instance, is a product of “The work!”, as he sardonically puts it, directly recalling the grandiose rhetoric of the civilizing mission used earlier in the novel by his aunt. The natives he finds in the grove had been “helpers” in the building of a railroad, that great self-monument of nineteenth-century imperial expansion. But they were made to work under such poor conditions they inevitably got fatally sick, and were left to crawl away and wait for death in various poses of geometric distortion, embodying for Marlow the barbarity of the colonial forces:
Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees, leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair … These moribund shapes were free as air—and nearly as thin. I began to distinguish the gleam of the eyes under the trees. Then, glancing down, I saw a face near my hand. The black bones reclined at full length with one shoulder against the tree, and slowly the eyelids rose and the sunken eyes looked up at me, enormous and vacant, a kind of blind, white flicker in the depths of the orbs, which died out slowly … Near the same tree two more bundles of acute angles sat with their legs drawn up. One, with his chin propped on his knees, stared at nothing, in an intolerable and appalling manner: his brother phantom rested its forehead, as if overcome with a great weariness; and all about others were scattered in every pose of contorted collapse, as in some picture of a massacre or a pestilence.

(pp. 156-57)

The further up-river Marlow goes, though, the more the cause of the hideous situation resides in the dark wilderness, which becomes the heart of darkness itself. If the darkness overtakes the colonialist, as in the privileged case of Kurtz, it is as a quality otherwise latent, lodged deep within him, but which irrupts due to intimate contact with the lawless wilderness. When the “civilized” person resides in Europe, where Conrad believes behavior is effectively structured and censored by the policing mechanisms of civilization, the subterranean darkness is held at bay (and it should be recalled at this point that the great perversion of Heart of Darkness is, of course, the revelation that the darkness does exist in Europe, albeit in a restrained form). This condition is, for Conrad, a positive restraining or foreclosure of something truly abhorrent. But he also believes that once the civilized soul is displaced onto the colonial frontier of the Congo, these structuring and screening mechanisms too are displaced and ultimately distorted into mere shadows of their original form as the policing practices and institutions necessary to uphold them are markedly absent. The wilderness becomes then, in opposition to the state of instituted civilization in Europe, a lawless, thoroughly uncivilized place: it manifests as an unrestrained savagery which by its very nature threatens as a massive presence that will “block” the imposition of civilized order. Indeed, Heart of Darkness can be seen to suggest that the wilderness will destroy those foolish enough to attempt such an imposition.

Of course, European civilization can stumble at home, so to speak. It certainly does not need to go beyond itself to the colonial frontier in the far-off places of the world (as one stands in Europe) to become displaced from itself through the loss of an ordering consistency. However, the perception of the frontier as a place where this readily happens persists as a common perception, and Heart of Darkness in particular stands out as one of the most influential representations of such a frontier. In other words, Conrad's novel presents a singularly sustained and influential account of what I have called “the loss of an ordering consistency” upon the displacement of the codes and conventions of civilization onto the colonial frontier. As will become clear, the colonial frontier manifests as a stumbling block for civilization in Heart of Darkness in the form of, or rather in the formless presence of, a void which forecloses upon European culture. And it is as such a formless presence that the darkness operates as the horror's cause in the novel. The terms with which to begin to think through this foreclosing of civilization come from the life of Conrad as it emerges in certain written sources.

One of the most significant accounts of the effect Conrad's Congo encounter had on him comes from his close friend and editor, Edward Garnett. Recalling conversations he had with Conrad, Garnett suggests “Conrad's Congo experiences were the turning-point of his mental life and … [their] effects on him determined his transformation from a sailor to a writer.”12 Conrad himself had said to Garnett that he thought his time in the Congo responsible for a personal transformation, though not from sailor to writer. Rather, Conrad believed he had undergone a metamorphosis from “a perfect animal” without “a thought in his head,” to a thinking, reflecting being who could mobilize the mechanisms of a critical reason.13 From such comments, Garnett received the startling impression that in the Congo Conrad's youthful “illusions” had been “swept away,” leaving him gazing into “the heart of an immense darkness”: “The sinister voice of the Congo with its
murmuring undertone of human fatuity, baseness and greed had swept away the generous illusions of his youth, and left him gazing into the heart of an immense darkness.”

Support for Garnett's observation can be found in Conrad's essay “Geography and Some Explorers,” where he writes of his African-river journey in terms which suggest a similar collapsing of youthful illusions that leave him confronting a dark void. Writing late in life (this essay was one of Conrad's final pieces of writing), Conrad recalls how as a boy he had a passion for the modern, accurate maps of what he calls the “geography militant.” To his youthful imagination these maps presented unmarked, unknown spaces, to which he dreamed of going as an explorer—explorers being, for the young Conrad, heroic men who he believed searched earnestly for the Truth. Conrad remembers one day pointing to a particularly inviting blank spot and saying he would “go there” (a gesture also performed by Marlow in Heart of Darkness). About eighteen years after making this bold declaration, Conrad found himself on the deck of “a wretched little sternwheel steamboat ... moored to the bank of an African river.” This was the very place he had declared he would go those many years before: the center of the African continent, deep in the Congo Free State. Despite this achievement, however, Conrad did not feel satisfied or triumphant. Instead, he felt a great melancholy descend upon him, and was confronted with the brutal “end to the idealised realities of a boy's daydreams!”

What Garnett and Conrad both articulate to greater or lesser degrees is the collapse of Conrad's experiential organization. They each speak of this collapse in terms of the destruction of certain fantasies—Garnett referring to Conrad's youthful “illusions,” and Conrad to the “idealised realities” of his boyhood “daydreams.” But importantly they recognize that these fantasies framed and therefore structured Conrad's reality: it was in terms of these fantasy-frames that Conrad experienced experience, so to speak; he had taken them with him to the Congo, expectantly, as frames organizing his perception. Traumatically for him, he was thrown awry when they proved inadequate. In other words, upon his encountering something which—in zek's phrase—“fills out and blocks the perspective ... constitutive of 'reality',” Conrad lost the fantasy-frames structuring his experience of and in the world. As we have seen, according to Garnett this traumatic event “left him gazing into the heart of an immense darkness”—that is, into a blank space beyond any possible imaginary identification.

The terms of Conrad's traumatic encounter point us in the direction of the Lacanian tuché, or “the encounter with the real.” Put most simply, to encounter the real is to reach a point at which “reality”—including its structuration in relation to the fantasy-frame—loses its consistency, collapsing and dissolving. Of course, for Lacan, the encounter with the real is always and necessarily missed in the case of the “normal” person, who most typically is lured towards the encounter with the real at that fleeting, transitory moment in-between dreaming and waking, but manages to awake and escape into “reality.” In the everyday run of things, then, the real is passed-over. The specific characteristic to be noted of Conrad's “encounter,” however—and as we shall see later, Marlow's too—is the failure to pass-over the real: rather, it “fills out” the frame, foreclosing on the ideal order and orderings of civilization. Or, to put it another way, Conrad's “gazing into the heart of an immense darkness” upon losing the structuring “illusions” of “reality” corresponds to the sense of a traumatic event as an encounter with the real that is not missed but confronted in all its unbearable terror.

When we consider the enormously important role of language and other cultural structures of understanding in Conrad's conception of subjectivity, the traumatic significance of the event which effectively evacuates them becomes acutely apparent. With great insight James Clifford has suggested that Conrad presents with Heart of Darkness one of the first and one of the most powerful articulations of a subjectivity anchored in the constitutional codes of culture and language. For Clifford, Conrad “built into his work a vision of the constructed nature of culture and language” and of the “arbitrariness of conventions,” which included a belief in the individual as an entity that is fashioned by such conventions and constructions. Accordingly, an irruption which forces an emptying out of culture's conventions and constructions would also force an emptying out of the fashioned self. The loss of language and its aligned structures of understanding is effectively, then, a loss of the self which has been fashioned in the co-ordinates of culture. In Heart of
such an experience of dissolution is caught, in its most extreme form, in the horror of Kurtz's fall, and in Kurtz's case death was the result of this experience. By contrast, the experiences of Conrad and Marlow, though involving a confrontation with the threat of dissolution, were not as extreme as Kurtz's, and they both survive to tell their tales—though undergoing, as we have seen with Conrad, a significant transformation of self.

There is a notable paradox—or at least seeming paradox—in Conrad's and Marlow's repetition of the event through narration in that, to do so, they must call upon the conventions and constructions of a culture whose limits this event had painfully exposed to them. Indeed, the event in question threatened the very collapse of these cultural codes constituting both themselves as individuals and the reality in which they move. In *Lord Jim*, Marlow articulates an analogous situation using the ship as metaphor for a properly ordered culture: “When your ship fails you, your whole world seems to fail you; the world that made you, restrained you, took care of you.” But in representing the event which threatened, so to speak, the destruction of the “ship” in *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad and Marlow are seeking to re-institute the authority of culture's codes, and thereby foreclose the threat of dissolution. There is a famous dream of Freud's which best enables us to think through this situation: the dream of Irma's injection. In the first part of the dream, Freud encounters, in Lacanian terms, “the real”—an encounter which disturbs, in this case, the specular dual-relationship held between Freud and Irma up until that point. The “encounter” occurs when a curious Freud, propelled by his desire, peers down the throat of his party guest Irma:

There's a horrendous discovery here, that of the flesh one never sees, the foundation of things, the other side of the head, of the face, of the secretory glands *par excellence*, the flesh from which everything exudes, at the very heart of the mystery, the flesh in as much as it is suffering, is formless, in as much as its form in itself is something which provokes anxiety. Spectre of anxiety, identification of anxiety, the final revelation of *you are this*—*you are this, which is so far from you, this which is the ultimate formlessness.*

The encounter with the real, it will be recalled, is an encounter which threatens an acute dissolution. In this case the cause of that threat appears as the night of the absolute origin, where no distinctions can be made and no conventions determine behavior. (Supporting the use of Freud's dream in reading *Heart of Darkness*, it can be said that in Marlow's journey up-river in *Heart of Darkness* he traveled down an analogue of this throat, witnessing the very “foundation of things”: “[g]oing up that river,” he says at one point, “was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world” [p. 182].)

In the second part of Freud's dream there is an abrupt switch as he finds himself in a space populated by his doctor friends. As Joan Copjec notes, in the passage from the first to the second part of his dream Freud “flees from the real … into the symbolic community of his fellow doctors.” In doing so, he guards against the terrifying real by escaping to a determined place from where he can discuss “the real” with other figures of qualified authority. In short, Freud's dream suggests that by discussing the real, and giving it signification within an authoritative context, a defense against it can be erected.

In the place of Freud's fellow doctors, it can be said that Conrad had his readers and Marlow his four ship-deck listeners (the Lawyer, the Accountant, the Director of Companies, and the anonymous framing narrator). And though Conrad once described the interior experience of the creative artist in precisely the same terms he used to describe the lawless solitude of the wilderness in *Heart of Darkness*, it is, as he was aware, in the distinctly public and structured domain of civilized intercourse that the text's signification is given, and which I have in mind when I refer to the possibility of giving signification to the event of Conrad's experience. It is in the public domain that an “artistic product” such as *Heart of Darkness* circulates—and it is also in this domain, albeit a small and fictionalized one, that Marlow tells his story: in an “objective” relationship established as such by the presence of his listeners. In the exchange between Conrad and his readers, or between Marlow and his listeners, there occurs the “giving” of signification to the event as they
each call upon the conventions and constructions of language and culture in an attempt to enable some kind of management and control of the trauma.

Sown into the conceptual economy of *Heart of Darkness*, however, there is a sharp problematization of the ability to successfully manage and control the “content” of a trauma through its signification—a problematization rendered in the pervading problematic of representation. At a heightened, climactic point in the novel there is revealed the absolute and terrifying failure of signification and its attendant authority in the midst of the dark wilderness; an examination of this heightened moment will make explicit what I earlier referred to as the foreclosure of European culture and reveal to us the operation of the darkness. As Marlow tells the part of his story where he searched for Kurtz in the jungle at night after Kurtz had escaped from the steamer to return to the wilderness, moving “towards the gleam of fires, the throb of drums, the drone of weird incantations” (p. 234), he asks his listeners to see the terror of the situation not in the threat of being knocked on the head but in the confronting of a man to whom no appeal could be made through the received civil codes of Europe. In the immense solitude of the jungle, Kurtz's soul has lost contact with the governing order of civilization as it exists in Europe: “don't you see, the terror of the position was not in being knocked on the head—though I had a very lively sense of that danger, too—but in this, that I had to deal with a being to whom I could not appeal in the name of anything high or low.”

The phrase “in the name of” is crucial here, and possesses a double significance. Firstly, Marlow's use of the phrase bears witness to the deferral necessary in asserting the authority of civilization's codes when displaced to the fundamentally different location beyond civilization's margins. Civilization does not move out to the frontier zone and repeat itself in its full presence, as if achieving the sublation of the other in the dialectical advance of the selfsame. “In the name of” reveals that the source of authority lies elsewhere, not present on the colonial frontier, but to be deferred to from this place of difference. It was precisely because the authority of civilized codes lay elsewhere that Kurtz, in his isolation, was “found out” by the wilderness: the hollow core left by the absence of civil law left him open to the wiles of the wilds. Of course, the discursive repetition of the colonial sphere as different is a major strategy of colonial power: marked by the trace of its difference-as-inferiority in relation to Europe, the frontier zones need to be subject to the redeeming forces of colonialist imposition.

Secondly, “in the name of” calls forth a recognition of the arbitrary aspect of language so important to Conrad generally, but acutely revealed here in the peculiar displacement of European language away from Europe in the depths of the night-time jungle. Notably the act of naming itself appears throughout Marlow's narrative as the most obvious of language's arbitrary practices, as various nouns are used in a way that, Marlow implies, constitutes a series of mis-namings. Furthermore, these mis-namings appear an imposition—an often brutal, physical imposition by imperial forces. Thus, what Marlow sees as the expressly arbitrary naming of natives as “enemies,” “criminals,” and “rebels” is shown to legitimate, and even incite, their murder or their enforcement into “chain gangs.” But in Marlow's night-time jungle confrontation with Kurtz, in not being able to “appeal in the name of anything high or low,” the relational and qualitative terms of sense-making—high and low—have become indistinguishable, without anchorage in any stable system of language: words appear emptied of meaning, doomed only to float detached in the overwhelming confusion of the scene. In short, they have lost the power to point beyond themselves.

Leading up to his night-time encounter with Kurtz, Marlow's general sense of indistinguishability had become increasingly prominent the further up-river he traveled. Most explicitly it had been figured in spatial terms when the steamer was stranded mid-stream amidst a heavy fog. The disorientation of the fog contrasts though with the confusion in confronting Kurtz in the wilderness in an important respect. The former presents the disorientation of a blinding whiteness, while the latter is an encounter with an impenetrable darkness; the differing effects of these two states have to do primarily—though by no means exclusively—with
epistemology and signification respectively. The indistinguishability of the fog is an expressly epistemological disorientation in the sense that due to its blinding aspect it cuts Marlow off from enlightenment. That is, it is the difficulty of knowing in the midst of the fog that is of concern for Marlow. In the tradition of metaphysics beginning with Aristotle and arguably running through Conrad at this point, the situation of blindness and deafness engendered by the fog is a situation rendering knowledge impossible. Cut off visually and aurally from everything beyond the blurred edges of the steamer, the rest of the world “was nowhere,” without “a whisper or a shadow”:

What we could see was just the steamer we were on, her outlines blurred as though she had been on the point of dissolving, and a misty strip of water, perhaps two feet broad, around her—and that was all. The rest of the world was nowhere, as far as our eyes and ears were concerned. Just nowhere. Gone, disappeared; swept off without leaving a whisper or a shadow behind.

(p. 192)

In short, Marlow is faced here with an epistemological problem generated by the redundancy of the senses necessary for generating knowledge, and as a result “the world [is] nowhere.”

In the case of Marlow's night-time confrontation with Kurtz, though, the failure to distinguish is more specifically a confusion produced by a failure of signification and its corresponding identifying practices. Marlow becomes acutely aware that the arbitrary identifying practices of civilization fall short at this point: they lack the authority and power to impose themselves in this frontier colonial situation. Kurtz, in the darkness, occupies the space of civilization's dissolution or foreclosure, being, in his “alignment” with the wilderness, out of joint with civilization (see p. 205). “I could not appeal in the name of anything high or low”: Marlow encounters Kurtz in a space beyond signification and is left without recourse to the distinguishing codes of civilization, with their controlling influence and authority. The reality structured through these codes has slipped, fallen away to reveal, in Lacanian terms, the monstrous grimace of the real. In the confusion of the colonial situation's extremity, then, the authority of the “symbolic community” of civilization is rendered problematic through the inability of words to properly take hold, as it were, in the resistance of the situation to signification.

It has to be emphasized, though, that the scene of the night-time encounter is a climactic, heightened moment in the narrative. It depicts a privileged moment among a series of strange happenings—happenings so strange, in fact, Marlow repeatedly doubts their occurrence. It is the heightened aspect of the scene that explains how Kurtz could manifest, at this point, the dissolution of civilization and its language, and yet have been virtuously defined, the further up-river Marlow went, by his supremely seductive eloquence. Of all of Kurtz's “gifts,” Marlow says, “the one that stood out preëminently, that carried with it a sense of real presence, was his ability to talk, his words” (p. 203). But in leaving the steamer to return to the jungle, Kurtz becomes “utterly lost” as the darkness of the wilderness overtakes him, sucking him into a void beyond recognition and beyond any code. This is the horror as foreclosure, the horror of a void resulting from the voiding of civilization; and this is Africa as the first term in Marlow's ironic “perversion”: the primal site of the void.

Africa as this “first term” has to be repeated as such for the “metonymy of the veil”—that is, the displacement of Europe's ideal self-image as the place of pure light and civilization—to take place. Without the organizational and conceptual force of Africa as a nodal point, the perversion of Europe's ideal self-image makes no sense. Thus, importantly, it does not allow a reconsideration or reconfiguration of Europe's image of Africa as its primal other, but only the repetition and reinforcement of this image. In short, the perversion of Heart of Darkness is limited to the revelation that Europe already contains this “otherness” which it vigorously tries-through its philanthropic discourse, for example—to put beyond the frame of its own proper reality. We might say in conclusion, then, that Marlow's perversion is, perhaps as perversion always is,
ambivalent: as much an undoing as a repetition.

Notes

3. Ibid., p. 272, n. 1.
7. Between his earlier phenomenological reading of Conrad's darkness and later deconstructive approach, Miller presents a sustained engagement with the role darkness plays for Conrad. What I have referred to as Miller's earlier reading of Conrad's darkness can be found in Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth-Century Writers (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1965), pp. 13-39. Here Miller argues that Conrad's darkness is not only “the origin from which things come, and the end toward which they go. It is a metaphysical entity”: “The darkness is present at every moment and in every thing and person, underlying them as their secret substance” (p. 28). In his later reading, J. Hillis Miller, “Heart of Darkness Revisited,” in Tropes, Parables, Performatives: Essays on Twentieth-Century Literature (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), pp. 181-94, Miller shifts attention from the content of the darkness to its textual inscription, examining the figuration of darkness in the text. According to this reading the “darkness” is that which can never be revealed in itself, only deferred to indirectly—that is, the darkness is strictly unrepresentable literally or figuratively (see p. 186).
8. Though as Christopher L. Miller has observed, the Congo Free State or even Africa is nowhere mentioned in Conrad's novel as the location of Marlow's up-river journey: “The referent of Heart of Darkness is so commonly understood to be Africa, and specifically the Congo Free State at the time of King Leopold II's reign of terror and profit at the end of the nineteenth century, that it may come as a surprise to learn that 'Africa' is never specifically named as its referent.” But as he goes on to point out, Africa returns in the phrase “heart of darkness”: “in a text where every detail points to Africa, ‘Africa’ alone is missing, encoded in a new phrase, 'heart of darkness’.” Christopher L. Miller, Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 170.
13. Ibid.

15. Joseph Conrad, “Geography and Some Explorers,” in *Last Essays*, ed. Richard Curle (London: Dent, 1926), p. 24. This scene with the map was a deeply significant experience for Conrad and he returned to it several times in his writings. Most notably, Marlow recalls an identical episode in *Heart of Darkness*: “Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all looked like that) I would put my finger on it and say, When I grow up I will go there” (p. 142). See also Joseph Conrad, “[When I grow up I shall go there],” in *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Kimbrough, p. 148.


26. In *A Personal Record* (1912), Conrad wrote: “And least of all can you condemn an artist pursuing, however humbly and imperfectly, a creative aim. In that interior world where his thought and his emotions go seeking for the experience of imagined adventures, there are no policemen, no law, no pressure of circumstance or dread of opinion to keep him in bounds.” Cited in Michiel Heyns, “‘Like People in a Book’: Imaginative Appropriation in *Lord Jim,”* in Fincham and Hooper, eds, *Under Postcolonial Eyes*, p. 78.

27. Conrad makes this connection between hollowness and the absence of civil law clear in his only other work set in Africa, “An Outpost of Progress”: “It was not the absolute and dumb solitude of the post that impressed them [the European agents Kayerts and Carlier] so much as an inarticulate feeling that something from within them was gone, something that worked for their safety, and had kept the wilderness from interfering with their hearts.” Conrad, “An Outpost of Progress,” in “*Heart of Darkness*” and Other Tales, p. 78.

28. See Homi K. Bhabha, “Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817,” in *The Location of Culture*, p. 111.


**Criticism: Dorothy Trench-Bonett (essay date summer 2000)**


[In the following essay, Trench-Bonett counters the charge that Conrad is a racist by examining the way the author utilizes names and silence in Heart of Darkness.]

Chinua Achebe makes some grave charges against Joseph Conrad in his well-known analysis of Heart of Darkness. Conrad, he says, is a “thoroughgoing racist” who ignores the cultural achievements of Africans and represents them not as people, but as “limbs and rolling eyes,” refusing even to confer language upon them. The writer has “a problem with niggers,” and uses “emotive” language and “trickery” to dehumanize his African characters and present a view of Africa as “a place of triumphant bestiality” which functions as a “foil” for an enlightened Europe. Achebe's essay deserves serious consideration, not only because racism and the denigration of Africans (and those of African descent) are real and continuing problems, but because he is a writer of skill and sensitivity himself, whose novels are of great value in presenting the people of that continent. However, neither of these facts mean that Achebe's criticism of Conrad is necessarily fair. In this essay, I propose to look in detail at two aspects of Heart of Darkness that Achebe demigrates. The first is the way that Conrad names people of color—what he actually calls Africans in his novella. The second is the question of silence. Are the Africans denied speech in Heart of Darkness, as Achebe claims? If so, is it because of racism or does their silence mean something else? Through a brief look at these two topics, I hope to be able to consider that question of what Conrad felt about Africans as “other”; and whether the views that he expresses are still worth consideration by readers of today.

Let us discuss first the question of “naming.” The Africans in Heart of Darkness are called many things in the course of the narrative. Among these are included racial epithets. Achebe, quite naturally, objects particularly to the use of the word “nigger,” which he says Conrad loves and uses “inordinately.” The word is actually used nine times. It is not a word that I myself, as a person of color, enjoy hearing or reading, and I can understand that even one use of it might be considered ‘inordinate,’ but it is instructive to not simply count, but to look at the contexts in which the offensive word is used. It is first used in the story within in a story about the death of Fresleven, which comes at the very beginning of Marlow's actual narrative. The Fresleven story is very significant. It is a microcosm of the entire text. All of the themes of Kurtz's story are here, in abbreviated form, and Marlow is warned, in this story, of what to expect if he goes to Africa (although he does not understand and does not heed the warning). What happens in this story? Fresleven, the white man in Africa, attacks the chief of an African village in a quarrel about two black hens. Marlow, who is telling this story to the not very culturally sensitive audience of Englishmen by the side of the Thames, at first refers to the chief by his title, a word of respect. But once the village leader is beaten (or as Marlow puts it, “whacked”) he becomes “the old nigger.” His dignity is stripped from him both by the beating, and by the epithet. He is the only one who is referred to by this epithet in the Fresleven story. Although they are also blacks, the chief's son who defends his father is called a “man,” and the other village members called “people,” “men, women...
and children,” and “the population” (HD [Heart of Darkness] 7). So the first “nigger” that we meet in Heart of Darkness is a victim, and the insult is inseparable from his victimization. What about the others? Is this an exceptional case, or is there a pattern to be found, in the use of this word?

I think that there is a pattern. With a few exceptions, which will be discussed in a moment, the “niggers” in Heart of Darkness are all people that we meet while they are suffering from abuse. The most striking case, of course, is the man who is beaten because the grass shed has burned down (HD 20). After the beating, this man is called a “nigger” every time he is mentioned over the next few pages, his moaning making a continuous, unpleasant background noise, so that we are not allowed to forget what has been done to him. Conrad clearly means for us to consider him a victim of injustice. “They said he had caused the fire in some way,” he has Marlow tell us, and by this point in the text what “they” (the whites) say is open to a lot of doubt. Then there are all the “niggers” who bring goods to the trading post. “Strings” of them arrive bringing ivory, and later some come bringing trash instead of the much needed rivets (15, 27). Their journeys have obviously been arduous, since they are described as having “splay feet” and being “footsore” and “sulky,” but what are they getting in return? In one case, nothing, and in the other “manufactured goods, rubbishy cottons, beads and brass wire” (HD 15), or in other words, nothing again. In short, they are victims of exploitation, being forced to trade what is of value for what is of no value at all, in a very graphic example of the systems that are put into place for the benefit of the conquerors, in colonialism. This exploitation, like the undeserved beatings, is acceptable if you inflict it on “niggers” (or “bitches” or “kikes” or “Polacks”—choose your own epithet). It is not acceptable if you inflict it on other human beings like yourself. The abusive language thus is an integral part of the abusive situation. Should Conrad be faulted for using this language to reflect this important point? Ideally, one doesn’t abuse others either with words or deeds. But it is all too easy to concentrate on using “correct” language, while ignoring the fact that the underlying situation has not changed—to congratulate ourselves for being “liberal” because we would never use certain words while failing to do anything to correct the injustice that they represent. In Nadine Gordimer's July's People (to give one example of this), the heroine, Maureen Smales is shocked by her servant July's use of the word “boy” to refer to himself. She would never use this word. But she certainly treats July like a “boy,” while rationalizing this treatment.  

Gordimer has placed Maureen into a situation where the usual racial roles are reversed—where she, a white woman, has to live like a “nigger.” Clearly, this is something she never imagined was possible. In spite of her professed liberalism, in her mind African blacks do not really belong to the same species as herself. Conrad's complacent audience—male, upper-class British readers of Blackwood's Magazine at the turn of the last century—clearly did not find it conceivable that they could ever be in the position of “niggers.” either. Conrad who, it is worth repeating, was not British himself (a fact that Achebe seems to have forgotten), reminded these readers, at the beginning of Marlow's narrative proper that the British had been in the position of the Africans at one time, referring to history that educated men of that period all knew, the history of the Roman colonization of Britain. This history, put at the beginning of Heart of Darkness, informs the whole text in many important ways, and certainly is important to remember when considering the next uses of the word ‘nigger’ in Conrad's book. The first of these is the imagined reversal of the Congo situation, when the “mysterious niggers” with their unfamiliar weapons come to the area “between Deal and Gravesend” (HD 16). Deal is, significantly, the place where Julius Caesar is supposed to have landed for the first Roman attack on Britain; Gravesend, as we are told on the first page of the novel, is visible from the narrator's vantage point on the Thames as Marlow tells his tale. Thus the invasion of the imagined “niggers” takes the route of the actual Romans, and the British “yokels” react just as the Congolese have reacted to the arrival of the whites, that is, by flight. Marlow (and Conrad) are revolutionary here in suggesting that this evacuation is the normal, human reaction to what happened in the Congo—something the English would do if they were put in the same place. During this period, after all, blacks were routinely stereotyped as “lazy,” “inferior,” and “stupid” for avoiding forced labor, or for not doing it well. The use of the word “nigger” in this place reflects on the Europeans in Africa (who are the ones who are actually behaving in the manner he describes), and the use of the word “mysterious” also reflects on them.
The final use of the word “nigger” in *Heart of Darkness* occurs towards the end of the book. It comes at the point where Marlow, finally with Kurtz, describes what happened to him in the presence of this terrible and terrifying “secret sharer.” He says: “I had, even, like the niggers, to invoke him—himself—his [i.e., Kurtz’s] exalted and incredible degradation” (*HD* 61). The use of the words “invoke” and “exalted” strongly imply the worship of a deity, especially after the remarks that the Russian, the last narrator to describe Kurtz before Marlow actually meets him, has made about the Africans “adoring” Kurtz like a god (*HD* 51; see also 53). The image of the “nigger” or other native who, upon seeing the clear and obvious superiority of the white explorer/adventurer, falls down and worships him has been one of the archetypes of Western history/literature ever since Montezuma fatally mistook Cortes for Quetzalcoatl. This image clearly appeals to something in the European psyche. It is a racist image, however, and whether it has actually ever taken place since that first tragic incident is open to a lot of doubt. There is certainly no record of any white-man-worship taking place in the Congo while Conrad was there—and yet the fact of Kurtz’ godhead in the eyes of the Africans is central to this book. The obscene adoration of Kurtz is what Marlow finds at the very *Heart of Darkness*, at the climax of the action. Conrad felt this theme was so important that when he had to describe his novella in brief, he described *Heart of Darkness*, tellingly, as “a … story of a journalist who becomes manager of a station in the interior and makes himself worshipped by a tribe of savages.”

Put like that, the theme of the book certainly sounds like a simple retelling of the old myth, which Achebe (or anyone else with African blood in their veins) might rightly resent. But when we read about how Kurtz “makes himself worshipped” (note the careful choice of words), the episode becomes much more complex. First, there is the question of how the worship is presented to the reader. Presentation is always very important in understanding what Conrad meant. It is important to note that Conrad first hears about the worship from the Russian, as stated above. Who is this “Russian” exactly and what is his significance? He has no name—he is just described by his nationality—a nationality that was hateful to the Polish Conrad.

The fact that he is a Russian should make him suspect at once, but over and above that, he is described as a figure like a “harlequin”—in short, a clown. Clearly he is not a reliable narrator (in this text filled with unreliable narrators, including, by his own admission, Marlow himself), and the reader realizes the extent to which his point of view cannot be trusted during the scene where he justifies, to Marlow, Kurtz’s habit of decorating his garden with impaled human heads. Marlow is so appalled by this justification that he refuses to listen to the Russian's speech about what a great man Kurtz is—the speech that begins with the description of how the African chiefs “crawl” in the white man's presence (*HD* 53). But Marlow has not yet met Kurtz at this point. When he does, his own wish to “invoke” Kurtz makes the Englishman realize that he is not so different from the blacks, (and the Russian)—that it might be possible for him to worship this man, and trying to distance himself, Marlow uses the racial slur in the phrase quoted above.

Conrad has already made it clear that this is not a simple issue of inferior blacks worshipping superior whites, though, first by the fact of the Russian's adoration, and now by the fact of Marlow's unwilling, but very powerful, attraction to Kurtz. Marlow, after all, is neither a “nigger” or a “harlequin” but a figure that we have come, at least to a certain extent, to like and trust, and perhaps (if we were in the original circle of intended British readers) even to identify with. There is more going on in the text here than is obvious from a first, careless reading—including a great deal of symbolism that we moderns can easily miss, since we lack the classical education and the grounding in Judeo-Christian tradition that Conrad and his first readers had.

Zdzislaw Najder was the first to point out, in his preface to *The Congo Diary*, that Conrad's descriptions of the worship of Kurtz, and of his end, very closely follow the information in classical biographies about the cult and the death of Alexander the Great. Alexander demanded that his troops and subjects worship him as a god while he was still a living man. He first demanded this of the conquered Persians, but then ordered his fellow Greeks to do so, too, although this was contrary to Greek custom. Like Kurtz, he caused the deaths of those who opposed him. Also like Kurtz, the conqueror of the world died of a fever and Conrad clearly was familiar with Arrian’s account of Alexander’s last hours. In the *Anabasis*, the ancient author retells the rumor that Alexander crawled out of his deathbed and headed, on all fours, towards the Euphrates River, hoping that if he drowned himself his followers would believe that his disappearance was an apotheosis. Kurtz's flight on
his hands and knees in the final pages of *Heart of Darkness* closely parallels this. It is interesting, also, that Marlow, following him, *sees* the man who aspired to divinity as he crawls (the Englishman, you will remember, only *heard* about the chiefs' abasement). Even more interesting, however, is the fact that the comparison between the two-bit manager of a nineteenth-century ivory station in Africa and the “great” conqueror does not raise Kurtz in our estimation, but rather, makes us question Alexander. This comparison also brings the book around in a circle to the beginning sections in which the Roman colonization of Britain was compared to the European presence in the Congo.

“Hubris” is the word that comes to mind when one reads about how Alexander began to claim that Zeus, not Philip, begot him, and hubris is certainly an important part of the theme of *Heart of Darkness*. But Conrad tends to use Christian, rather than Greek imagery, to deal with the subject of Kurtz and his pride. In the Fresleven story, when he first raises the issue of a white man being “a supernatural being” in African eyes, the phrase used is deliberately ambiguous—we are obviously meant to remember that supernatural beings are not necessarily gods. The association of the whites in Africa with devils becomes clearer and clearer as we delve more deeply into the text. The Belgian Congo, on one level, is certainly meant to be hell, as Lillian Feder and Robert O. Evans have pointed out, and Kurtz, like Dante’s Lucifer, is found at the very center of the darkness. Kurtz resembles the Lucifer of the Bible, who fell through pride (though even after his fall he remained fatally attractive), and this pride, the pride that demands worship and feeds off the abuse of others, leads not just to the fall, but eventually to the Apocalypse. Conrad’s message to the European colonizers in this book is thus very, very strong.

“Nigger,” then, is a word used in *Heart of Darkness* at certain specific points of the narrative for certain specific reasons. It is not the most frequently used word in the text that describes the African blacks. Conrad uses other words at other times, ranging from “enemy,” “savage,” and “cannibal” to such neutral terms as the ethnic description “Zanzibari” and the politically correct racial designation of the time, “Negro.” It is interesting (and I think profitable) to study the use that he makes of each word. Not all of them are used to describe the Africans exclusively. “Savage,” for instance, is first applied in the novella to Europeans, not Africans—specifically to the English, as part of the Roman theme (*HD* 4). “Cannibals” is a term applied only to some of the Africans, not all, and it is notable that none of the so called “cannibals” in the book are ever seen to actually eat human flesh—the famous passage describing them actually shows how they restrain themselves from eating, in spite of their hunger, after their hippo meat has been tossed aboard (*HD* 37). Conrad’s use of the words “enemy” and “rebel” to describe the Africans seem to me to be particularly important in this text, though. Marlow is doubtful about this designation from the first time that it is used: “There was a camp of natives—he called them enemies!” (*HD* 11; my italics). It soon becomes clear that he, like Coetzee’s magistrate, sees a dichotomy between this label and what he actually observes about the Africans’ behavior (*HD* 13, 54). By the time he reaches Kurtz’s home and sees the impaled heads, the divergence between the language of colonialism and the facts of what is happening is absolutely clear. At this point, the word “enemy” is full of bitter irony. Marlow’s statement that the heads don’t shock him (*HD* 52) is an important one. We should not be shocked at what can happen once the labeling process has been allowed to take place, the author is saying. Label innocent people “enemies” and a row of severed heads is the inevitable result.

This passage gains added resonance when one realizes that Conrad was himself from a people who had been labeled “enemies” and “rebels” after the final partition of his country Poland, in 1795. The Poles, rising up several times during the nineteenth century, to protest this act (which literally wiped their country off the map) were treated in an appalling manner that many of us, with our Western Europe-centered educations, are unaware of. But we need to know at least some of this to properly understand Conrad. He was a child of this oppression—his earliest memory was of “being in a prison yard on the road to Russian exile” with his parents. He had to watch then as his father, the “rebel,” was given salt herring to eat and nothing to drink by the Cossacks who were his guards; and later he had to watch the slow death of both parents, from prison-induced tuberculosis (Myers 14-15, 25). As the child of “political convicts,” he had to leave Poland
when he came of age or face being conscripted into the Russian army for twenty-five years (Myers 29), and later in life he would stress to his British friends that he sprang from “an oppressed race where oppression was not a matter of history but a crushing fact in the daily life of all individuals made still more bitter by declared hatred and contempt” (Myers 29). He was never able to forget these terrible formative experiences and what he saw in Africa seems to have affected him to the extent it did (the physical illness, the psychological trauma; Myers 108) because it was reminiscent of what had happened to him and his country. In this regard, he was like his friend Roger Casement, who saw analogies between the Belgians in the Congo and the British in his native Ireland, though he did not develop Casement's political activism. Instead, he wrote literature. But in this literature, it is impossible for him to see oppression as something that is always linked with race. In another attempt to describe the Congo, he changed the scene to Greenland, in the Arctic regions, and even in Heart of Darkness, where he describes what happened in the Congo with such literal exactness that historians have been able to trace many of the incidents, he carefully sets his tale in the Roman British context, making the careful reader aware that although race is the excuse for the Congo, oppression is something that can happen to anyone.

If Conrad's Polish background influences how he reacts to the naming of the “other,” it certainly also affects how he presents language in his novella. He was born in 1857 and so was seven years old when the “Russification” measures of 1864 restricted the use of the Polish language, forcing Poles to use Russian. Therefore, as a child, Conrad was legally forbidden to speak his own language in his own native land. Later in life, of course, he was an exile and spoke first French and then English, living out his life among those who could not understand his native tongue. This is an immensely difficult thing to have to do. Strangers in strange countries generally seek out others who speak their language and form communities where they are able to speak to each other. Conrad did not have this option. He wrote English so beautifully that one imagines that he spoke it beautifully as well. It is something of a shock to read the evidence of his close friends that “his pronunciation was so faulty that he was difficult to understand” and that he was often “at a loss for phrases” when he spoke (Myers 129). His Polish accent actually got stronger as he grew older, and when he was ill (a frequent occurrence), he would forget, in his delirium, all other languages besides his first one (Myers 129). He fell ill in this way on his honeymoon. His English wife did not understand his Polish “ranting” and wrote later that she was frightened by it. Conrad used this true-life experience as grist for his fictional mill in “Amy Foster,” which has been called his “most personal” short story (Myers 141). This story portrays an Eastern European named Yanko Goorall who is shipwrecked in England. Cut off from the English because he does not speak their language, he arouses “suspicion and dislike” in them (Myers 141). Like Conrad, Yanko marries an English wife, but although she is kind to him at first, she reacts as Jessie Conrad did when he reverts to the use of his own language during a fever. That is, with “terror … unreasonable terror, of that man she couldn't understand.” Unlike Jessie, Amy (the wife) abandons her husband during his fever and lets him die alone, of thirst.

Conrad clearly understood, in a visceral way, how language can make you “other,” and he mistrusted it under the best of circumstances. To his friend Cunninghame Graham, he wrote (at around the same time he was composing Heart of Darkness) that “half the words we use have no meaning whatever, and of the other half each man understands each word after the fashion of his own folly and conceit.” The text of the novella certainly expresses this mistrust of spoken communication between human beings. It is clear that no one in the book understands anyone else. Marlow's audience by the side of the Thames has no idea what he is really talking about (this is made clear by their remarks throughout the text), and his story is one that begins with misunderstanding, as he is warned about Africa when in Belgium and doesn't understand the warning, and ends with his deliberate lie to the Intended (who clearly would not be able to understand what the truth is). The most duplicitous characters in the novella are the most articulate, especially, it must be noted, Kurtz himself. In this context, can the muteness of the African characters really be seen as a sign of their inferiority, as Achebe suggests?
Conrad may have “refused to confer language on them,” but this is not a suggestion that they are in a pre-language state of development. That they can talk, even though the Europeans can't (or don't wish to) understand their languages, is made clear through the character of Kurtz' mistress, who is vocal indeed. Marlow and the Russian don't understand what she is saying, so the reader is, frustratingly, never given a translation, but surely that penultimate scene in which she harangues the crowd (a crowd that repeats what she is saying) is one of the most striking in the book (**HD 62**). This woman is an ambiguous character, of course, associated with Kurtz in his corruption, and she is, we suspect, using language as the Europeans who speak all do, in an attempt to harm. The Russian describes how she attempted to convince Kurtz to hurt him, and she is clearly inciting the crowd in some way during the time while Kurtz meets his end. Less ambiguous African characters suffer in silence in this book. Language, which confuses when it does not deceive, is absent as we are shown how they suffer and how they die, like the marionettes in the puppet shows that Conrad told Cunninghame Graham that he so preferred to actors in plays. Actors, of course, must speak dialogue, which Conrad so mistrusted. In the case of marionettes, however, he could ignore “the text mouthed somewhere out of sight by invisible men” and watch the puppets in “their rigid violence when they fall upon each other to embrace or to fight.”

The Africans in *Heart of Darkness* can be trusted precisely because we never really hear them. Truth, in Conrad's works, is never what we are told by the characters. It is always what we actually see. The author, of course, expressed this famously in the preface to *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”*—an important text for anyone who is interested in Conrad's views on black people.

It is surprising that *The “Narcissus”* is never mentioned in Achebe's attack. James Wait, the title character, is certainly a contrast to the blacks in *Heart of Darkness* in many ways, especially when it comes to speaking. A West Indian from St. Kitts (a society where blacks and whites had had contact for centuries before the period of colonization of the Congo), Wait is impressively articulate. He has a beautiful speaking voice (like Kurtz), and in contrast to the whites on the “Narcissus,” who speak with accents, use dialect, or don't speak at all, he uses perfect English at all times. He is an ambiguous figure, though. He uses speech to confuse and manipulate the rest of the crew, including the unnamed narrator (who clearly does not understand the human being that the prejudiced sailors always refer to as the “nigger,” in spite of Wait's protests against this term or the conflicting emotions that Jimmy arouses in him. Is Wait a liar, a malingering? How much is he in league with the evil (and very vocal) Donkin? It's difficult to tell. The reader feels pity for Wait, and anger too, and may also feel some empathy. Conrad was clearly more than empathetic. I believe, in fact, that in the same way that Gustave Flaubert “was” Emma Bovary, Joseph Conrad was James Wait. Alone for most of his adult life, among people who could never see him as anything but a “foreigner,” people who believed this minor difference to be of the greatest importance, Conrad shared Wait's key traits of hypochondria and of dramatic complaints that were meant to be attention-getting. This fact is very well documented. To give just one example of this behavior on his part, he cut short his courtship with Jessie, on the grounds that he was “a dying man,” and during their honeymoon in Brittany, had the first of those crises of health that plagued their marriage, crises that have been described as “both organic and imagined” (Myers 66, 102). Constantly complaining that he was on the brink of death, Conrad lived to age sixty-six, trying the patience of those around him, those who loved him and had affection for him, in the same way that Wait does. The portrait of Wait, describing the reactions of others, certainly showed that the writer was self-aware. He was not tall and strong in appearance, like Wait, and he did not have Wait's facility with the spoken word, but surely he was aware that his gift for writing was similar in its effects. But whether one agrees that Conrad was himself “the nigger” or not, it cannot be denied that James Wait is a complex and interesting character. He is not a racial stereotype. This fact makes it unlikely that the Africans in *Heart of Darkness* are meant as stereotypes, either, and the reasons why they are silent, and why they are shadowy figures, must certainly be sought elsewhere.

At the time when Conrad wrote *Heart of Darkness*, the peoples of the Congo could not speak for themselves, about their terrible situation, and reach the larger world. Although there had been many black writers, some of them writers of genius, by the end of the nineteenth century, they were largely part of the Diaspora. But writers have now emerged in Africa itself who write in European languages and thus can express their experiences to the world outside of their particular African nation. In spite of some legitimate concern about
what is then lost in “translation,” first by the act of writing itself, in a traditionally oral culture, and next, by the fact of using a conqueror’s language, there is a lot that is gained. I agree with Achebe about the importance of Africans writing about Africa—he has, himself, had brilliant achievements in this area. But does that mean that a writer like Conrad now has nothing valuable to say to us? He does not say things as an African would, or even as a liberal European would in 1999. Should we therefore label him a “racist” and throw him into history’s dustbin with the other dead, white males? In my opinion, we will lose a great deal if we do. Heart of Darkness is a masterful work that does not dehumanize the native peoples of the Congo, but shows the ways in which they were dehumanized during the terrible period of King Leopold’s reign there and passes judgment upon the evil (the “darkness”) of the human heart. The subtlety and sureness with which Conrad does this and the continuing relevance of the subject (what is Kosovo but another Congo?) make Heart of Darkness worth our continued consideration.

Notes

5. Benita Parry, Conrad and Imperialism. London: MacMillan, 1983, 1. Parry is quoted in Robert Hampson’s introduction to the Penguin edition of Heart of Darkness (1995), xxxii. She points out that the Blackwood’s audience was “still secure in the conviction that they were members of an invincible imperial power and a superior race.”
6. These men would certainly have read Julius Caesar’s On the Gallic Wars and Tacitus’ Life of Cornelius Agricola. Both remained standard texts in school well into the twentieth century. Conrad uses the section in The Gallic Wars in which Caesar describes his invasion of Britain, as well as Tacitus’ entire text throughout Heart of Darkness, which may be read on one level as a Roman-style “biography” of Kurtz. Tacitus is ambivalent about Roman imperialism, in spite of his wish to praise his father-in-law, and this shows in his text, but Conrad goes much further in his indictment of imperialism (ancient and modern); Kurtz is a nightmare distortion of Agricola, his initial superiority making his ruin that much worse. Karen Gillum has been helpful to me in pointing out this Roman connection to Conrad’s text.
7. This flight, by the way, is the reason that Marlow (and Conrad) do not describe African culture and art in the Congo in the way that Achebe thinks they should. Neither of them has seen any culture or art. There are only the deserted villages, and the uprooted native people in forced labor camps.
9. As Czeslaw Milosz points out, the very name “Conrad,” which Joseph Korzeniowski chose out of all his names to be his last name in English, “symbolizes the anti-Russian fighter and resister” to all Poles. See Czeslaw Milosz, “Joseph Conrad in Polish Eyes,” in The Art of Joseph Conrad: A Critical Symposium, R.W. Stallman, ed. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1960, 36. Conrad’s hatred of Russians was also clearly expressed in Under Western Eyes (1911), and he wrote to Cunninghame Graham that he would not attend radical meetings because there would be Russians there.
11. Arrian, Anabasis Alexandri, IV. 9-12, describes how Alexander wished to be deified. VII.25-27 describes his death, with the story about his reputed attempt to drown himself in section 27. Further information about Alexander’s desire to seen as a God, and Greek opposition to this, can be found in Dinarchus, in Demosthenes 94 and Hyperides 5. col. 31. I am indebted for these references to Karen 164
Gillum.


13. There is an additional “nigger” passage, where someone is referred to as a “fool nigger” for shooting into the bush in fear (41). Note that this “nigger” is imitating what the whites habitually do, according to Marlow.


16. The African writer Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (James Ngugi) has called these skulls stuck on poles “the most powerful indictment of colonialism,” saying that “no African writer … has created so ironic, apt and powerful an image.” As quoted in C.P. Sarvan, “Racism and the Heart of Darkness.” In Heart of Darkness. New York: Norton, 1988, 280-285.


18. It is important to note that Conrad's parents were not the only relatives of his who died in the anti-Russian struggle. He lost his grandfather and two uncles as a result of the 1863 uprising—all except one of his male relatives. Though his parents died in prison, the grandfather and one uncle died violently, as did many Poles during this bloody time. The family property was confiscated. See Myers, 19-20.


20. In The Inheritors. See Myers, 96, for a description.


22. Conrad's father, Apollo Korzeniowski, ignored this decree and taught Conrad in Polish. Later the writer would claim that he knew no Russian (Myers.255), though it seems that he actually did.


25. Letters to Cunninghame Graham 50.


**Criticism: Donald S. Wilson (essay date summer 2000)**


[In the following essay, Wilson investigates elements of homophobia and homoeroticism in Heart of Darkness.]

Writing in 1899 about the serial publication of Heart of Darkness in Blackwood's Magazine, Joseph Conrad claimed: “One was in decent company there … and had a good sort of public. There isn't a single club and messroom and man-of-war in the British Seas and Dominions which hasn't got its copy of Maga.” Evidently Conrad had written his novel exclusively for a male readership. However, there were actually two male audiences present for Marlow's tale: Conrad's literal, predominantly male readership, and Marlow's “crowd of men”—entirely male (from stem to stern, so to speak)—who bear silent witness to the
narrator-within-a-narrator's discourse. These four men—a lawyer, an accountant, a Director, and the nameless and non-occupationally established narrator, are based on an actual group of cronies with whom Conrad regularly associated:

Conrad was a lively raconteur who used to swap yarns with G. F. W. Hope, W. B. Keen, and C. H. Mears on Hope's yawl, the Nellie, anchored in the Thames. Hence, the setting and manner of the tale's opening. Hope was a company director, like the host in the tale; Keen an accountant; Mears a solicitor.4

Thus, Conrad's literal contemporary audience is paradigmatic of Marlow's fictive counterparts. Marlow's first-person narrative is not recapitulated into a vacuum; rather, he addresses a clique of late-Victorian male Londoners. The intimacy and specific referentiality of this setting presupposes its own aggregation of circumscribed masculine codes, mores, and taboos. Himself a late-Victorian male Londoner, Marlow must account for the rudiments of this subtle yet complex cultural system as he attempts to illustrate for these men his journey into the heart of darkness. I will use, among other scholarship, Eve Sedgwick's theory of Victorian “male homosexual panic” to culturally and historically contextualize Marlow's discourse, elucidating how the “crowd of men” necessarily inflects and delimits his telling of the tale.

“MALE HOMOSEXUAL PANIC”

Conrad's Heart of Darkness (1899) and Henry James's The Beast in the Jungle (1902) were published within the same three-year span, and both fall historically into the cultural context characterized by what Eve Sedgwick has termed "male homosexual panic."5 Her essay, “The Beast in the Closet,” posits The Beast in the Jungle as the prototype for late-Victorian homophobia-inflected literature. Although, as Alan Sinfield points out, the category "homosexual" (and indeed, its necessary, normative opposite "heterosexual") was by the late nineteenth century yet to be officially recognized,6 the British gentry, as rulers of both private and public spheres, yet perceived and felt embattled by an increasingly crystallized—using the term anachronistically—“homosexual” social presence. As a result, Victorian men further circumscribed their already hermetically sealed nexus of male privilege and domination. Unlike females, however, the amorphous “homosexual” could not be as easily recognized and thus summarily excluded from the male domain; indeed, that particular enemy seemingly came from within. Thus,

[b]ecause the paths of male entitlement, especially in the nineteenth century, required certain intense male bonds that were not readily distinguishable from the most reprobated bonds, an endemic and ineradicable state of what I am calling male homosexual panic became the normal condition of male heterosexual entitlement. … [This] secularized and psychological homophobia … has [at least since the eighteenth century in England and America] excluded … segments of the continuum from participating in the overarching male entitlement—in the complex web of male power over the production, reproduction, and exchange of goods, persons, and meanings.7

This pervasive homophobia, however, was not without cost to its male practitioners. The constant fear of discovery and attendant castigation not only kept self-recognized sexual “deviants” in the closet, but emotionally anaesthetized ostensibly sexually “normal” males as well, effectively abrogating their freedom to question their own sexuality. Thus, the “freedom” male privilege subsumed was of a double-edged nature. Regarding social and economic status, male members of the gentry and middle classes were guaranteed, at the very least, the prospect of upward mobility and affluence. Sexually and psychologically, however, fear of discovery on both interior and exterior levels had these men walking a very fine, very circumscribed line. This was the background against which Joseph Conrad conceived his Heart of Darkness.
Without question, Conrad was on some level aware of and forced to account for this acute homophobic milieu in his novel. Yet given the tale's potentially scandalous central theme—one man's ambiguous obsession with and quest for another man—Conrad had to proceed with the utmost caution and care. Nonetheless, he clearly intended for *Heart of Darkness* to be his most interior, suggestively analytic, and overtly symbolic and psychological novel to date. Indeed, Marlow's fervent desire to meet Kurtz, as well as the exact nature of “the horror” he encounters within the Congo, are never explicitly delineated within the text. Sedgwick posits that the burgeoning Modernist predilection for elision was a principal means by which male homosexual content could be repressed in texts, for “at the threshold of the new century, the possibility of an embodied male-homosexual thematics has … a precisely liminal presence. It is present as a—as a very particular, historicized—themes of absence, and specifically of the absence of speech” (*Epistemology* 201). Conrad, who along with James penned his tale at the incipiency of the Modernist period, indeed integrates in the text a “themes of absence,” as well as a pervasive nebulousness. Note the prevalence of phrases denoting absence and/or indeterminacy throughout *Heart of Darkness*: “a thing monstrous and free” (37), “unspeakable secrets … unseen presence … impenetrable night” (62), “muffled shocks … weird incantation … strange narcotic effect … mysterious frenzy … bewildered wonder … blank fright … abstract terror … unconnected with any distinct shape,” “something altogether monstrous” (63), “some vague notion … [Kurtz,] indistinct like a vapor … murmur of many voices” (64), “vague sounds,” “monstrous passions” (65), “inconceivable mystery” (66), “[Kurtz's] was an impenetrable darkness” (68), “outside it was beastly, beastly dark” … “impalpable grayness” (69). The thematic correlation and similarity in diction with *The Beast in the Jungle* is eerily striking: “The thing,” “8 a mysterious fate” (285), “the void” (291), “strange … the oddest oddity … his long riddle … I don't focus it. I can't name it … the abyss” (295), “the great vagueness … what monstrosity” (296), “dreadful things … I couldn't name” (297), “horrors” (298), “the thing that I've never said … [something] more monstrous than all the monstrosities we've named” (299), “[Marcher's] fortune, impenetrably muffled and masked” (307).

The connection between James's metaphorical “jungle” and Conrad's literal Congo wilderness is fundamental and inescapable; both are mysterious, uncharted, and impenetrable realms representing a lack of definitive structure and/or organization. James's (Marcher's) “jungle,” in which “something or other lay in wait for him … like a beast crouching [emphasis mine]” (287) obscures, in Sedgwick's reading, the indeterminate “something” that is in fact an absence of heterosexuality, an ambiguous space which she claims is at least “homosexually tinged” (*Epistemology* 205). Conrad's (Marlow's) “jungle” is the Congo itself, which “seemed to beckon with a dishonoring flourish … a treacherous appeal to the lurking death, to the hidden evil, to the profound darkness of its heart [emphasis mine]” (*HD [Heart of Darkness]* 35). In stark contrast to “civilized” Victorian London society, in which social codes and mores (especially regarding sexual conduct) are rigidly prescribed and enforced, the jungles of Africa conceal their own “beast”—the ungovernable wilderness, wherein Marlow is forced to acknowledge the existence of “certain midnight dances ending with unspeakable rites” (50). Conrad's imperialist “knowledge” of “the horrors” of the jungle, which he shares with both his contemporary fictional and literal male audiences, offers the reader an implied (at best) understanding of what this nebulous “horror” actually represents—“the thought of [the native's] humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly” (38). This distinctly imperialist “horror” of a possible kinship with heathens subsumes all the manifest acts of barbarism which Marlow's discourse reveals: heads impaled on stakes, human sacrifice and cannibalism, native death squads, etc. Yet, to borrow Sedgwick's terminology, Conrad's explicit appeal to his male comrades—“We [Men] Know What That [the “horror” of the jungle] Means” (i.e., overt acts of “uncivilized” brutality and savagery)—fails to provide a definitive reference for the allusions to the “indistinct” and “unspeakable” aspects of the jungle which pervade the text. Based on the sheer number of such allusions, as well as their complete lack of a referent within the text, I would argue that the significance of the textual “abyss” these references engender reaches beyond a Modernist formal gesture on Conrad's part. Indeed, I will show that although he leaves much of the narrative open for analysis and interpretation, Conrad remains extraordinarily mindful of his homophobic male audience by defusing and explaining away any sexually ambiguous and risqué statements, homosexual innuendo, or double-entendres during Marlow's highly abstruse discourse. This practice of selective omission
and abjuration opens the narrative to the following questions: does the anarchic depravity of the jungle and all its “unspeakable rites” resonate for Marlow with homoerotic overtones? What, if anything, did Marlow encounter within the Congo and indeed, within himself? Could such “unspeakable secrets” (62), resulting in “pure abstract terror” (63), possibly have been tinged with homoeroticism, causing Marlow to react in a fashion commensurate with that of a Victorian homophobic Londoner?

An explication of Conrad's fundamental role in this discourse, vis-à-vis his literary creation Charlie Marlow, exemplifies a pattern of homophobic disclosure/refutation. Viewed in Sedgwick's Victorian homophobic context, the “relationship” between Conrad and the fictional—and highly recondite—Marlow is certainly problematic. The pair share too many essential congruities not to be potentially equated with one another by many of Conrad's readers. Both are veteran seamen who experienced the “horrors” of the Congo firsthand; both are known storytellers (we are informed of Marlow's “propensity to spin yarns” [9]); and perhaps most importantly, both are white males who call the British Isles home. It is not my intention, of course, to summarily conflate the two; however, given these crucial similarities, and in light of their shared Victorian homophobic milieu, Conrad must certainly have been aware of Marlow's ostensible role as his literary representative. With these factors in mind, Conrad would certainly have had to be vigilant in maintaining a level of propriety in his character commensurate with his conservative epoch. Conrad's 1917 Author's Note to Heart of Darkness makes clear that there exists between character and author a very strong and lasting bond of friendship: “[The] story marks the first appearance in the world of the man Marlow, with whom my relations have grown very intimate in the course of years [emphasis mine]” (3). Yet, as the text will show of Marlow himself, Conrad is careful to follow statements alleging “intimacy” between two men with explanatory assertions:

The origins of that gentleman [Marlow] (nobody has far as I know has ever hinted that he was anything but that)—his origins have been the subject of some literary speculation of, I am glad to say, a friendly nature. … It is pleasant to remember that nobody has charged him with fraudulent purposes or looked down on him as a charlatan.

Beyond his “intimate” association with the tale's narrator (inside-a-narrator), Conrad readily admits the autobiographical nature of Heart of Darkness: “the story is mainly a vehicle for conveying a batch of personal impressions” (x). If Conrad's journey paralleled Marlow's to a significant extent, then the author's literal voyage may well have involved a great deal of introspection and attendant self-examination (“I had plenty of time for meditation” [33] Marlow explains). Early in the novel, Marlow states that the Congo expedition was to him

the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience. It seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me—and into my thoughts. It was sombre enough too—and pitiful—not extraordinary in any way—not very clear either. No. Not very clear.

(11)

This passage makes clear that the journey “seemed to throw a kind of light … into [Marlow's] thoughts,” yet what is originally depicted as an epiphanic moment is swiftly obfuscated by the statement “[it was] not very clear either. No. Not very clear.” Once again, the exact significance of Marlow's profound “illumination” is never delineated via a textual referent. Does Marlow's unnamed fictive revelation stem from a literal occurrence experienced by Conrad in the Congo? Furthermore, did this wilderness experience render the imperialist (and given his standing and cultural milieu, likely homophobic) Conrad frightfully uncertain as to his sexual identity, only to return him to a society in which sexual preference (via the heterosexual imperative) was preordained and rigidly enforced? Little is known of Conrad's sexual activities abroad, yet Ronald Hyam's claim that the imperial field provided male Britons with the chance to observe (and practice) a variety
of “deviant” activities forbidden at home does invite a certain amount of speculation. Indeed, these deviant activities frequently were of a homoerotic nature, for the imperial realm featured “a built-in tint towards same-sex activity, because the empire was often an ideal arena for the practice of sexual variation” (5-6). Of course, it is impossible to know whether or not Conrad's Congo experiences were of a homosexual nature, nor are these truths ultimately essential to this discussion. What we do have is the text, and the text alone characterizes Conrad's “intimate” friend Marlow as unwilling and/or unable to divulge to both his male comrades and himself the precise nature of his “sombre” discovery.

Conrad chooses not to begin the tale in complete moral and ethical alignment with Marlow; the subtle yet unseemly nature of the coming jungle narrative (and the lurid light it might cast over Marlow) demands a distance between the two. Thus, we are introduced to Marlow, via Conrad's first-person narrator, as an outsider in relation to the circle: “The worst that could be said of [Marlow] was that he did not represent his class. He was a seaman, but he was a wanderer too” (HD 9). From this statement, and the narrator's solely occupational description of the other men on hand, we gather that Marlow is anomalous both because he cannot be reduced to a mere occupational epithet (and thus cannot be readily identified in terms of class rank), and because he refuses to put down solid roots in the imperial Motherland. These dubious distinctions exhibit a lack of respect by Marlow for the very patriarchal system which offers both himself and his audience affluence and prosperity. Another fundamental asymmetry between Marlow and the men is his proficiency at storytelling, marked by an extraordinary eloquence (compared to that of his monosyllabic listeners—“[Marlow's remark] was accepted in silence. No one took the trouble to grunt even”)—and a predilection for complex and convoluted narratives. “The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical.” Again, Marlow works against type; the “ideal” sailor adheres to a rugged masculine code of unpretentiousness and inarticulateness. The narrator, well familiar with Marlow's trademark introspection and abstruseness, is noticeably agitated by these bothersome idiosyncrasies, exclaiming: “we knew we were fated … to hear about one of Marlow's inconclusive experiences” (11).

According to Sedgwick, Victorian males were motivated by constant fear of the stigma of the ambiguous sexual “other,” for during the Victorian era, men may “enter into adult masculine entitlement only through acceding to the permanent threat that the small space they have cleared for themselves on this terrain may always, just as arbitrarily and with just as much justification, be foreclosed” (Epistemology 186). Although he is presented as an enigmatic outsider to the circle, Marlow is a male Victorian Londoner, and he thereby endeavors—quite demonstrably—to strengthen the “intense male bond” (185) he shares with his fellow men. In his discourse on the history of imperialism, Marlow extols the bravery and intrepidity of Britain's Dark Age (male) Roman settlers; “Oh, yes—he did it. … They were men enough to face the darkness. … He has to live in the midst of the incomprehensible which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical.” Again, Marlow works against type; the “ideal” sailor adheres to a rugged masculine code of unpretentiousness and inarticulateness. The narrator, well familiar with Marlow's trademark introspection and abstruseness, is noticeably agitated by these bothersome idiosyncrasies, exclaiming: “we knew we were fated … to hear about one of Marlow's inconclusive experiences” (11).

Marlow's efforts to gain acceptance within the circle of males are typified by ever-increasing subtlety and craft. Reminiscing on his passage to Africa, Marlow recounts his “isolation amongst all these men with whom
[he] had no point of contact” (17). The implication here is that Marlow failed to achieve the same level of camaraderie with those strange men which, now, among “brothers,”” allows him to recapitulate the darkest, most intimate (and therefore potentially compromising) epoch of his life. Subsequently, Marlow taps into the shared masculine and nationalist ideology of his “brethren” when he emasculates the French he encounters along the coast of Africa:

It appears the French had one of their wars going on thereabouts. Her ensign drooped limp like a rag, the muzzles of the long six-inch guns stuck out all over the low hull, the greasy, slimy swell swung her up lazily and let her down, swaying her thin masts. … Pop, would go one of the six-inch guns; a small flame would dart and vanish, a little white smoke would disappear, a tiny projectile would give a feeble screech—and nothing happened. Nothing could happen [emphasis mine].

Interestingly, Conrad’s original manuscript described the guns as ten inches in length. When Heart of Darkness appeared in Blackwood’s Magazine, Conrad dropped the length to eight inches. When published in the Youth collection in 1902, the length decreased yet again to six inches, where it remained. Incorporated with the overall phallic metaphor (“drooped limp as a rag,” “thin masts,” “tiny projectile”), Conrad’s gradual arms reduction reflects Marlow’s desire to gain the acceptance of his immediate male circle by belittling males not part of the closed group. To this end, Marlow contrasts his own masculine (or rather—once again—non-feminine) pugilistic faculties with those of the impotent French: “You know I am not particularly tender: I’ve had to strike and to fend off. I’ve had to resist and to attack sometimes … according to the demands of such sort of life as I had blundered into [emphasis mine]” (19). Marlow’s reliance on the men’s tacit understanding of “the demands of such sort of life” manifestly portrays his feelings of security within the group; yet his recurrent personal appeals to the listeners (“you know”)—especially those connected to questions about his masculinity—resonate strongly with anxiety and/or uncertainty regarding their conception and acceptance of his “normative” sexual identity.

Marlow has adequate reason to suspect the sentiments of his audience; they are, upon occasion, vocal in their objections to the tale. While describing his “horrible” realization of a kinship with the African natives, Marlow covers a sign of weakness (repulsion caused by the howl of the native) by pontificating on the superiority of men:

Yes, it was ugly enough, but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise. … And why not? The mind of a man is capable of anything … Let the fool gape and shudder—the man knows and can look on without a wink. … He must meet the truth with his own true stuff—with his own inborn strength [emphasis mine].

(38)

Marlow contrasts the innate male inclination toward (and code-governed duty to accept) the “frankness” of the colonial experience with his previous discourse on his aunt’s prototypically feminine and fragile dream world. However, Marlow—in many ways an “other” to the group—defines masculinity to the men, a subversion of power within the circle which elicits an immediate response: “Who’s that grunting? You wonder I didn’t go ashore for a howl and a dance? Well, no—I didn’t. Fine sentiments, you say? Fine sentiments be hanged!” Conrad, working through Marlow, exhibits an acute awareness of both literal and fictive male audiences, as evidenced by this and other such interjections by the listeners throughout the text. The presumption here is that masculinity is the bedrock of British imperialist culture; thus, anything deemed eccentric and/or outside this sphere would be by definition marginalized. Skillfully employing outbursts of incredulity by Marlow’s listeners, followed by furious countercritical fulmination by Marlow, Conrad strengthens his character’s coveted status as a “normally” sexually oriented male. The audience’s immediate silence indicates the success
of this tactic. In this particular exchange, Marlow gains a newfound masculine aggression from his confrontation with the mates. To submit to their authority now could prove irreparably damaging; instead, Marlow faithfully appeals to a masculine standard apparently shared by all “real” men—the innate ability and fervent desire to work with one's hands—the call to maintenance.

I had no time. I had to mess about with white-lead and strips of woolen blanket helping to put bandages on those leaky steam-pipes—I tell you. I had to watch the steering and circumvent those snags and get the tin-pot along by hook or by crook. There was surface-truth enough in these things to save a wiser man.

Marlow uses similar tactics in a subsequent exchange with the men. When one objects to his somewhat effeminate display of grief, Marlow refuses to submit to the challenger. Instead of employing circumlocution in an attempt to reason his way back into their graces, Marlow strikes at the men below the belt (so to speak), undercutting their own sense of masculinity:

"Absurd!" he cried. "This is the worst of trying to tell. … Here you are all moored with two good addresses like a hulk with two anchors, a butcher round one corner, a policeman round another, excellent appetites, and temperature normal—hear you—normal from year's end to year's end. And you say, Absurd! Absurd be—exploded! Absurd!"

Marlow contends that his pampered, civilized, and satiated audience would no doubt fold under the rigors of the wilderness. But his invective cuts far deeper into the male psyche: "My dear boys, what can you expect from a man who out of sheer nervousness had just flung overboard a pair of new shoes? [emphasis mine]."

With those words, Marlow ascends to the apex of the phallic totem pole. His is the world of men; mere boys cannot hope to gain entrance until they have witnessed the “horrors” which it naturally subsumes. Armed with renewed courage and virility, Marlow is now brazen enough to make this potentially incriminating confession of a venerable and somewhat effeminate sensibility: “And I think of it, it is amazing I didn't shed tears. I am, upon the whole, proud of my fortitude.”

Marlow's bravado and extreme volubility in asserting his manhood, however, tends to lead him astray from the prescribed concept of accepted male deportment. As before, Conrad doubles back and carefully removes any possible manifestation of effemeness, often using the instance to effectively redouble Marlow's ostensible manhood. Marlow's cowardly reaction to an inexplicable, malignant jungle presence exemplifies this practice of reparation: “It was so startling that I leaped to my feet and looked back at the edge of the forest, as though I had expected an answer of some sort” (HD 35). This boldfaced assertion of pusillanimity connotes an extreme unwillingness by Marlow to confront danger, and if left alone, it could breed doubt in the minds of his listeners. Marlow's appendage—"You know the foolish notions that come to one sometimes”—implies that male displays of weakness are both infrequent (only “sometimes”), and are to be scorned (“foolish notions” as they are) by “normal” men (“You know”—i.e., his listeners).

Unlike the prior passage in which Marlow is openly aware of his slighted masculinity, there are instances in the text in which the emasculation is subtler, even tinged with varying degrees of homoeroticism. For instance, Marlow must account for his sexually ambiguous association with his African helmsman: “I missed my late helmsman awfully—I missed him even while his body was still lying in the pilot house” (51). By removing the African man's humanity via imperialistic method—reducing him to an asexual mechanism—Marlow renders this relationship as unsusceptible of a sexual resonance:

Perhaps you think it passing strange this regret for a savage who was no more account than a grain of sand in a black Sahara. Well, don't you see, he had done something, he had steered;
for months I had him at my back—a help—an instrument. It was a kind of partnership. He steered for me—I had to look after him, I had to look after his deficiencies, and thus a subtle bond had been created of which I only became aware when it was suddenly broken.

Despite Marlow’s skillful imperialist rhetoric, he can only offer a stumbling justification for his ostensibly homoerotic desiring of his helmsman: “[F]or months,” I had him “at my back”—yet he was only “an instrument”—that is—“He steered for me”—you see—“I had to look after his deficiencies.” Having negotiated this pitfall, Marlow again blunders into taboo territory: “And the intimate profundity of that look he gave me when he received his hurt remains to this day in my memory—like a claim of distant kinship affirmed in a supreme moment [emphasis mine].” The “kinship” which Marlow cites refers back to his earlier confession of “the thought of [the native’s] humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly” (38). The idea of a racial connection with savages (the oppressed) represents, of course, the most obvious and significant “horror” to the imperialist (the oppressor’s) psyche; yet, as with other instances of indeterminacy in the text, this highly abstruse—and possibly homoerotic—“supreme moment” represents an even greater threat to the male psyche. Perhaps Marlow’s most egregious error lies in his sentimental depiction of the highly-charged gaze he shares with the dying African man. Kimberly Devlin claims that colonialism “is the perfect expression of the violence of the gaze, and not only in the metaphorical sense of the term”:

Colonialism imposes upon the colonized society the ever-presence and omnipotence of a gaze to which everything must be transparent. The exercise of power, especially when the latter is arbitrary, cannot permit the maintenance of shadowy zones; it considers them equivalent to resistance.12

Between oppressor and oppressed, the gaze operates as “a castrating eye,” effectively reinforcing a hierarchical power structure. When the gaze is shared between oppressor and oppressor (two white males of some economic standing), however, the balance of power tends to result in uneasiness, and more often than not, avoidance of eye contact altogether. The pervading darkness which obscures Marlow and his white male companions (all of some economic standing) eliminates the possibility of scopic phallic friction: “It had become so pitch dark that we listeners could hardly see one another. For a long time already [Marlow], sitting apart, had been no more to us than a voice” (HD 30). Yet the “intimate” gaze which Marlow and the helmsman share works against imperialist form, crossing (and indeed ignoring) both circumscribed racial and sexual boundaries, bringing the men closer to their highly ambiguous—and thus highly proscribed—“supreme moment.” This is a likely reason why Marlow immediately follows this statement with the denunciatory “Poor fool! If he had only left that shutter alone” (51)—quickly restoring himself to his rightful, dominant position as a white male heterosexual. Marlow’s disposal of the helmsman’s body also resonates with homoeroticism: “[H]is shoulders were pressed to my breast; I hugged him from behind desperately.” Yet by inflating the physical act itself, Marlow again deflates a possible sexual connotation, lauding his manly strength in the process: “Oh! He was heavy, heavy; heavier than any man on earth I should imagine.” For good measure, he callously throws in this last: “Then without more ado I tipped him overboard”—eliminating any remaining ostensive shred of compassion for the man.

One glaring sexual abnormality for which Marlow must account is his lack of a female significant other. Like his bachelor counterpart Marcher, Marlow must project at least the semblance of “normal” sexual relations—regardless of his true sexual preference—for the sake of the watchful homophobic community. Unlike Marcher, whose “little office under Government” (BIJ 288) requires that he settle in London, Marlow is both a wanderer and a sailor, who cannot be moored to one location, and ostensibly, one woman. The sailor’s life is itself a viable pretext for his (assumed) single lifestyle, yet Marlow, in his effort to represent “normal” sexuality to the men, contrives a relationship with a metaphorical female—his boat. In keeping with the nautical tradition, Marlow ascribes a female gender to his craft,—“my influential friend, the battered, twisted, ruined tin-pot steamboat. … She rang under my feet like an empty Huntley & Palmer biscuit-tin
kicked along a gutter [emphasis mine]” (HD 31). However, Marlow deflates the boat's aesthetic inferiority, and emphasizes its ability to accentuate his manhood:

_She was nothing so solid in make, and rather less pretty in shape, but I had expended enough hard work on her to make me love her._ No influential friend would have served me better. _She_ had given me a chance to come out a bit—to find out what I could do. No. I didn't like work. I had rather laze about and think about all the fine things that can be done. I don't like work—no man does—but I like what is in the work—the chance to find yourself [emphasis mine].13

Marlow's steamboat operates in much the same fashion as Marcher's companion May Bartram; the presence of both “females,” in varying degrees, projects a clear and distinguishable façade of heterosexuality upon their respective men. Unlike May Bartram, however, Marlow's metaphoric “woman” does not project as overt and recognizable a guise of conventional sexuality on a social scale, which explains the particular emphasis Marlow places on the importance of the boat when describing it to the group. However, it allows Marlow to rationalize the lack of a real woman in his life, thus helping to solidify his status as a man both on an interior level, and within the circle.

**MARLOW AND KURTZ—THE REAL “HORROR”**

From the perspective of late-Victorian society, Marlow's intimate “relationship” with Kurtz is extraordinarily problematic. Marlow's association with Kurtz, who is an object of significant interest and fascination, can be included in “the forms of investment that force men into the arbitrarily mapped, self-contradictory, and anathema-riddled quicksands of the middle distance of male homosocial desire” (Epistemology 186). Indeed, although it is Marlow's yearning to explore the earth's “blank spaces” (HD 11) that brings him to the Congo, his incipient (and highly ambiguous) desire to confront Kurtz propels him, and his narrative, onward into the “heart of darkness.” Accordingly, Marlow negotiates this aspect of the tale with utmost caution. In terms of Marlow's exterior motivations, Conrad constructs a legitimate agency with which to bring the two together (i.e. “the Company” wants their man returned). Yet the text shows that there is something altogether inexplicable about Kurtz—about _the man_ himself—which attracts Marlow to him. Perhaps Kurtz represents another intriguing “blank space” for Marlow to probe and plumb. Conrad clearly intended that Kurtz be enigmatic, yet shortly after the novel's Youth debut, the author seems to rethink this decision: “What I distinctly admit is the fault of having made Kurtz too symbolic or rather symbolic at all” (x). Is Conrad, like Marlow, doubling back to cover a “fault” in a fit of panic? Contemporary critics of the novel aside, the concept of Marlow “exploring” another man, if indeed it was interpreted in such a manner, might well have been construed as homoerotic by Conrad's conservative, homophobic, white, male contemporary base readership. _Marlow's_ conservative, homophobic, white, male audience, however, might also recognize the homoerotic overtones subsumed here. Indeed, the text depicts Marlow as highly aware of “the horrors” of this contingency, evidenced by his endeavors to diffuse the manifest sexual tension between himself and Kurtz throughout the narrative.

Contradiction tends to be a component byproduct of Marlow's attempts to disambiguate his discourse regarding Kurtz: “I had plenty of time for meditation and now and then I would give some thought to Kurtz. I wasn't interested in him. No” (33). This is in itself a contradiction; why would Marlow turn his thoughts to Kurtz if he had no interest in him? Marlow continues: “Still, I was curious to see whether this man who had come out equipped with moral ideas of some sort would climb to the top after all and how he would set about his work when there.” Here Marlow not only admits to being interested in Kurtz, but he offers a detailed explication of this interest—whether or not Kurtz's imperialist “work” has borne fruit (itself another implicit appeal to the audience's imperialist disposition). Later, when Marlow recollects that the native attack on the boat might signify Kurtz's death, he explains that Kurtz's mortality had become his “dominant thought”: “There was a sense of extreme disappointment as though I had found out I had been striving after something
altogether without a substance” (47-48). Marlow makes it clear that he had been eagerly anticipating a body—Kurtz's body—at the end of his “striving.” Marlow here exhibits a sudden awareness of the potentially compromising turn that his tale has taken. With marked celerity, he latches onto the concept of mere conversation as the impetus for his desire to meet the man: “Talking with … I flung one shoe overboard and became aware that that was exactly what I had been looking forward to—a talk with Kurtz.” Again, note the implicit contradiction (as well as the overt appeal to his male comrades for understanding) in his next utterance: “I made the strange discovery that I had never imagined him as doing, you know, but as discoursing. … The man presented himself as a voice.”

Having established an “innocent” rationale for his interest in Kurtz, Marlow again strays from the straight and narrow:

I thought, By Jove! it's all over. We are too late; [Kurtz] has vanished—the gift has vanished … I will never hear that chap speak at all—and my sorrow had a startling extravagance of emotion … I couldn't have felt more of lonely desolation somehow had I been robbed of a belief or had missed my destiny in life.

The concept of Kurtz as Marlow's “destiny in life” evokes shades of Marcher's quest to confront an inexplicable predestination. Marlow's ejaculation of grief for Kurtz, similar to Marcher's anguish over May, is both extraordinarily impassioned and effeminate, and immediately met with a characteristically masculine, inarticulate objection from the circle: “Why do you sigh in this beastly way, somebody? Absurd? Well, absurd. Good Lord! mustn't a man ever. … Here, give me some tobacco.” It is unclear whether the word “absurd” is actually used by his listeners as a rebuke; nevertheless it springs quickly to Marlow's lips, as if a self-assessment of his attraction to Kurtz. Marlow's grunts of indignation, culminating in a growling demand for tobacco, underscore a growing reluctance to employ (feminine) eloquence in his consciously masculine discourse. Conrad's invisible first-person narrator here reemerges, noting that Marlow's face, illuminated by matchlight, “appeared worn, hollow, with downward folds and dropped eyelids with an aspect of concentrated attention.” The narrator's assessment of his fragile physiognomy fails to denote the hardness—the grizzled virility—characteristic of a mariner. Can we also infer that the discerning nameless narrator perceives Marlow's “concentrated attention” as an increased effort to “normalize” his professed affinity for Kurtz?

Marlow successfully employs the Russian (who is both an outsider to the British imperialist dominion, and, we are told, “the admirer of Kurtz” [58]), and his manifest ardor for Kurtz, as foils for the possibility of his own inconceivable affections. Note the blatantly erotic metaphor used to illustrate how, “when encamped in the forest, they had talked all night”: “They [came] together unavoidably, like two ships becalmed near each other, and lay rubbing sides at last” (55). As Marlow augments the sexual tension between Kurtz and the Russian, he draws the men's attention away from a similar link between himself and Kurtz: “‘We talked of everything,’ [the Russian] said quite transported at the recollection. ‘I forgot there was such a thing as sleep. The night did not seem to last an hour. Everything! Everything! … Of love too.’ ‘Ah, he talked to you of love!’ I said much amused [emphasis mine].” Marlow's insouciant tone seems to belie an interior celebration over the transcendence of heterosexuality signified by the Russian's puerile infatuation with Kurtz. The Russian exhibits a keen awareness of his transgression: “‘It isn't what you think,’ he cried almost passionately. ‘It was in general. He made me see things—things [emphasis mine].’” The Russian's elliptical diction (“it,” “things”) underscores his inability to articulate the exact nature of his very intense, very profound connection with Kurtz. Indeed, “What [Marlow is supposed to] think” of two men discussing love represents yet another textual “hole” in the discourse left to be filled by a tacit male understanding of Victorian sexual propriety. Note how Marlow stresses the “almost passionate” fervor of the Russian's appeal—an appeal to Marlow's belief in the heterosexual imperative. The Russian now stands in relation to Marlow as Marlow stood in relation to his audience; “what [Marlow] think[s],” or rather what his glibness seems to imply about the possibility of a sexual relationship between Kurtz and the Russian, is what his male audience may well believe—that they very likely share a sexual bond. However, when the Russian depicts the native's abject
subservience to Kurtz, and its component association with sexual domination, Marlow is palpably irritated:

[Kurtz's] ascendancy was extraordinary. The camps of these people surrounded the place and the chiefs came every day to see him. They would crawl. … ‘I don't want to know anything of the ceremonies used when approaching Mr. Kurtz,’ I shouted. Curious, this feeling came over me that such details would be more intolerable than those heads drying on the stake under Mr. Kurtz's windows [emphasis mine].

Clearly, Marlow's terror reaches well beyond the visible horrors of the jungle (“heads drying on a stake”), and into the “indistinct” and “impenetrable” realm to which Conrad alludes throughout the text. Marlow finds this “curious,” yet not to the extent that he is willing to examine “this feeling” in greater depth. Is this evidence of Marlow's desire to “crawl” to and be dominated by Kurtz, causing him to be “curiously” enraged (he “shouted”) by its homoerotic implications? Marlow's subsequent reference to him as “Mr.” Kurtz—an implicit suggestion of submission—strongly suggests just that.

Upon finally encountering Kurtz in the flesh, Marlow is stricken by the exiguous state of his masculinity:

I saw the man on the stretcher sit up, lank and with an uplifted arm, above the shoulders of the bearers. … I saw the thin arm extended commandingly, the lower jaw moving, the eyes of that apparition shining darkly far in its bony head that nodded with grotesque jerks.

Kurtz—Kurtz—that means 'short' in German—don't it? … His covering had fallen off and his body emerged from it pitiful and appalling as from a winding-sheet. I could see the cage of his ribs all astir, the bones of his arm waving.

Having relied on the tales of Kurtz's barbarous jungle exploits as a basis for his fantasy vision of the actual, corporeal man, Marlow is clearly disappointed to discover a decrepit, moribund shadow of his envisaged virile warrior. Unable to account for his extreme disappointment, Marlow represents his anger in a form more compatible with his audience's masculine sensibilities: “I resented bitterly the absurd danger of our situation, as if to be at the mercy of that atrocious phantom had been a dishonoring necessity.” Marlow appeals to his audience's collective male ego for understanding; there is perhaps no more “absurd” and “dishonoring” a threat to manhood than being rendered impotent by the authority of an effete, emasculated inferior.

Perhaps it is Kurtz's inability to physically dominate that now attracts and intrigues Marlow. Upon securing him from the hands of the natives, Marlow has Kurtz placed in a private chamber: “They laid him in one of the little cabins—just a room for a bed-place and a camp-stool or two [emphasis mine].” The room resonates with an atmosphere of intimacy, and the single bed, and camp-stool “or two” (perhaps accommodating his own night of private conversation with the man), suggest numerous erotic possibilities. When Marlow discovers that Kurtz has escaped his sanctuary/cell, however, he is momentarily paralyzed with an inexplicable fear:

I was completely unnerved by a sheer blank fright, pure abstract terror, unconnected with any distinct shape of physical danger. What made this emotion so overpowering was—how shall I define it—the moral shock I received, as if something altogether monstrous, intolerable to thought and odious to the soul had been thrust upon me unexpectedly.

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(59)
Once again, Marlow's horror cannot be connected to a specific, “physical” threat to his person. Rather, he is “unnerve[d]” by something so “monstrous” and “intolerable to thought” that he cannot withstand the horrible “moral shock” an examination of his feelings would inflict. Indeed, Marlow seems to be recollecting an extraordinarily repugnant occurrence: one of brutish, physical domination, and violation (“altogether monstrous,” “intolerable to thought,” “thrust upon me”). His description sounds very much like a rape. Does he subconsciously feel that Kurtz has betrayed an unspoken trust by fleeing his sanctuary (perhaps for his native mistress whose heterosexual love supersedes Marlow's possible homoerotic attachment)? To Marlow such considerations are inscrutable—“intolerable to thought”; the very notion “odious to [a homophobe’s] soul.” Just as Marcher's unspeakable doom was “his lack” (BIJ 305) of a prescribed heterosexual desire for May, Marlow's “monstrous” dilemma is the absence of a determinant heterosexual presence in his affiliation with Kurtz. Yet despite his bewilderment, Marlow attempts to account for this moment of befuddlement and emasculating prostration to an inexplicable power:

This lasted of course the merest fraction of a second and then the usual sense of commonplace deadly danger, the possibility of a sudden onslaught and massacre, or something of the kind, which I saw impending was positively welcome and composing. It pacified me, in fact, so much that I did not raise an alarm [emphasis mine].

(HD 63)

Marlow even welcomes a brush with mortality (the “sudden onslaught and massacre”—a “commonplace deadly danger”) when it provides a logical, heterosexual explanation for his inexplicable, unsettling terror.

However, as Marlow pursues Kurtz into the heart of the dark jungle, the ambiguity of his motivations escalates in direct relation to the narrative's increasing homoerotic tension. “I was anxious to deal with this shadow by myself alone—and to this day I don't know why I was so jealous of sharing with anyone the particular blackness of that experience [emphasis mine]” (64). As he re-experiences this powerful event, he seems to lapse in and out of an awareness of his audience, and becomes noticeably lax and risqué in his choice of diction:

I remember the exultation with which I said to myself, “He can't walk—he is crawling on all-fours—I've got him.” The grass was wet with dew. I strode rapidly with clenched fists. I fancy I had some vague notion of falling upon him and giving him a drubbing.

Marlow is clearly caught up in a powerful moment—perhaps the central moment in the tale, given his deceleration of the narrative's temporal flow, and careful attention to minutiae (the wet grass, the rapid stride, the clenched fists). Realizing that Kurtz is once again under his power, Marlow is eager to return the experience of violation he experienced on the ship. Yet he is uncertain as to his method of retribution; he definitely does not desire to rape Kurtz (an unthinkable concept indeed). The only acceptable manner in which he can vent his anger and frustration is through pure, socially-sanctioned, masculine violence—fisticuffs. Perhaps with his audience in mind, Marlow quickly adds—“I don't know. I had some imbecile thoughts.” An examination of these “thoughts” reveals Marlow's ambivalence toward and fluctuation between sexual polarities: “The knitting old woman with the cat obtruded herself upon my memory as the most improper person to be at the other end of such an affair. I saw a row of pilgrims squirting lead in the air out of Winchesters held to the hip.” Neither image affords Marlow consolation during his possible crises of sexual identity. The woman, though sexually apposite, is aged and thus “most improper” as an object of desire; the image of the men (for whom attraction is strictly proscribed) errantly discharging rifles metaphorically suggests unfocussed sexual urges. Once again, Marlow quickly rationalizes his moment of weakness: “Such silly things—you know.”
Marlow suddenly shifts the dynamic between himself and Kurtz, likening the chase to horseplay between two children: “I actually left the track and ran in a wide semicircle (I verily believe chuckling to myself) … I was circumventing Kurtz as though it had been a boyish game.” Early childhood is accepted and understood to be an asexual period of life; thus, in the context of puerile tomfoolery, Marlow's statement, “I came upon him and if he had not heard me coming, I would have fallen over him, too,” is bereft of any perceivable sexual connotation. Marlow's powerful thirst for vengeance has also been usurped by a strong sense of compassion—and empathy: “This clearly was not a case for fisticuffs, even apart from the very natural aversion I had to beat that Shadow—this wandering and tormented thing” (65). There clearly is a kinship between these two; Marlow too is “a wanderer,” and seemingly “tormented” by conflicting (and forbidden) sexual impulses (indicated by his sexless and nondescript rendering of Kurtz—“thing”). Regardless of his identification and commiseration with the man, however, Marlow continues to portray himself as the heterosexual stalwart, and Kurtz as the deviant: “I tried to break the spell, the heavy mute spell of the wilderness that seemed to draw him to its pitiless breast by the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts, by the memory of gratified and monstrous passions [emphasis mine].” Once again, Marlow refuses to explicate exactly what this “mute spell of the wilderness” subsumes, nor can he acknowledge a personal affiliation with these “forgotten and brutal instincts” and “monstrous passions”; they are (and must be) attributed solely to Kurtz. In a final attempt to exculpate himself of any sexual misconduct, Marlow isolates the causality of Kurtz's indefinable madness hermetically within the man's very being, exclaiming: “But his soul had gone mad. Being alone in the wilderness, it had looked within itself and, by heavens I tell you, it had gone mad [emphasis mine].”

THE TRUTH BEHIND “THE LIE”

Marlow's meeting with and subsequent lie to Kurtz's Intended is the closest he comes to questioning his own sexuality outright. Despite being alone in a dark room with a captivating woman, Marlow remains for the most part insensible to her feminine allure. Indeed, although the man is dead and buried on a distant continent, he cannot distinguish Kurtz's disembodied image from that of the Intended: “I saw her and him in the same instant of time—his death and her sorrow—I saw her in the very moment of his death. Do you understand? I saw them together—I heard them together” (73). Apparently the “horror” Marlow experienced in the Congo was not intrinsic to the Congo; even in the midst of civilization his disconcerting affinity for Kurtz has not subsided.14

The Intended, whose heterosexual love for Kurtz represents the Victorian standard, demands that Marlow settle on a sexual preference. Kurtz's physical demise has rendered her spiritually bereft; she can no longer bear life without him, evidenced by her plea to Marlow to “[r]epeat [Kurtz's dying words] … I want—I want—something—something—to—to live with” (HD 75). She is a martyr to heterosexuality; her perpetual mourning for Kurtz champions and reinforces the heterosexual imperative. However, Marlow continues to glimpse an echo of Kurtz within this beacon of Victorian sexual righteousness: “I remembered his abject pleading, his abject threats, the colossal scale of his vile desires [emphasis mine]” (72). Note that Marlow once again depicts Kurtz as the sexual deviant. Although he shares the Intended's sorrow, Marlow privately admits to “a sensation of panic” (73) which one could infer to be the result of the “horrible” realization that he possesses his own “vile desires” for Kurtz—a perverted reflection of the Intended's rapture. He cannot acknowledge the source of his grief, not to the Intended, not to his homophobic male audience, and not to himself. Thus, Marlow is paradigmatic of true “male homosexual panic”—an entrapment between oppressive social norms (that which is “right”) and interior sexual ambivalence (that which is necessarily “wrong”—no matter what that actually is). Marlow's consternation is so intense that his visit with the Intended becomes unbearable: “I asked myself what I was doing there, with a sensation of panic in my heart as though I had blundered into a place of cruel and absurd mysteries not fit for a human being to behold [emphasis mine].” Yet the Intended's torturous interrogation continues: “‘You knew him well,’ she murmured after a moment of mourning silence.” In response, Marlow supplements his reference to male “intimacy”—“Intimacy grows quickly out there,’ I said”—with the proviso: “I knew him as well as it is possible for one man to know
Given his audience, Marlow more than likely refers to Victorian society's definition of the limits of one man's "knowledge" (in the Biblical sense) of another man. In this context, his "admission" of intimacy with Kurtz is actually a categorical denial of sexual desire and/or carnal knowledge. Unaware of the effects of her interrogation, the Intended presses on: "'And you admired him!' she said. 'It was impossible to know him and not to admire him. Was it?' 'He was a remarkable man,' I said unsteadily. Then before the appealing affinity of her gaze that seemed to watch for more words on my lips I went on, 'It was impossible not to … [emphasis mine].'" Marlow's "unsteady" hold on his emotions is exacerbated by the "appealing affinity" of the Intended's gaze. How can he persist in thinking of Kurtz while in the presence of her captivating femininity?—and yet he does! So eerily consonant is their shared devotion to Kurtz that she completes his thought, saving him perhaps from compromising himself: "'Love him,' she finished eagerly, silencing me into an appalled dumbness."

Marlow's "appalled dumbness" stems both from hearing the Intended speak his own unutterable words, and the painful confirmation of her love for the man. Marlow is jealous. "'But you have heard him. You know!' she cried. 'Yes, I know,' I said with something like despair in my heart" (74). Marlow's "despair," however, quickly turns to resentment: "'His end,' said I with dull anger stirring in me, 'was in every way worthy of his life'" (75). The Intended speaks from a position of authority. The love she shared with Kurtz is legitimate; she has experienced an aspect of the man that Marlow will never know. Faced with the knowledge of their felicitous love, he can no longer implicate Kurtz in his own mind; Marlow is now the deviant. "'And I was not with him,' she murmured. My anger subsided before a feeling of infinite pity." Despite his envy, Marlow cannot help but continue to comprehend her anguish with marked acuity. Her unfettered expression of love is intolerable: "'He needed me. Me! I would have treasured every sigh, every word, every sign, every glance.' I felt like a chill grip on my chest. 'Don't,' I said in a muffled voice. … 'Don't you understand I loved him—I loved him—I loved him [emphasis mine].'" As the Intended sets Marlow reeling through the conflicted chaos that is his panicked psyche, she simultaneously offers him the means by which he can find equanimity, and (although he is unaware at the time) save face with his audience: "'The Lie.' "'I pulled myself together and spoke slowly. 'The last word he pronounced was—your name.'" The Intended holds the power in this domain; Marlow must submit to her authoritative right to love Kurtz. Nevertheless, Marlow has emerged victorious. By telling "The Lie," he no longer is forced to ponder the possibility that his abject fascination with Kurtz is sexually tinged. The Intended may have Kurtz, but she is still only a woman. Marlow falls back on the same patriarchal power structure whose strained masculine bonds engendered "male homosexual panic," and marginalized women in Victorian society. It is his duty as a man to keep the Intended from the "harmful" realities of life (however indistinct they seem to be in this context). Addressing the men directly, Marlow's terse statement expresses all the information they require in order to share in his ascendancy: "'I could not tell her. It would have been too dark—too dark altogether …’" (76).

Yet "The Lie" is actually a double lie. When Marlow explains to the men that he cannot share with the Intended the truth of Kurtz's depraved final months ("his abject pleading, his abject threats, the colossal scale of his vile desires, the meanness, the torment, the tempestuous anguish of his soul" [72]), he is, in effect, relying on a shared imperialist notion of what "the horror" of the jungle really represents—"the triumph of the wilderness" over civilization. These truths, of course, are much "too dark" to share with a woman, yet somehow just palatable enough for men. But Marlow, and indeed, his male audience, are in effect lying to themselves. The implicit acknowledgement between the men that "We Know What [the horror] Means" is a fallacy, for a Victorian male's very accession to heterosexual entitlement has, according to Sedgwick, "always been on the ground of a cultivated and compulsory denial of the unknowability, of the arbitrariness and self-contradictoriness, of homo/heterosexual definition" (Epistemology 204). It is the same cultural conditioning which requires Marlow and his audience not to examine but to assume their own heterosexual preference that causes them not to examine why the jungle really frightens them, as well as why it actually drove Kurtz insane (and eventually killed him). Despite the homoerotic resonance evident throughout the narrative, there is no literal proof that what is behind Marlow's "abstract terror" and "blank fright" is necessarily homoerotic. It is absence itself which frightens Marlow and causes him to fill in this "blank" space...
with knee-jerk, imperialist dogma (“civilization versus savagery”). Thus, “the fearful or triumphant interpretive formula “We Know What That Means” … is a lie[,] … the particular lie that animates and perpetuates the mechanism of homophobic male self-ignorance and violence and manipulability.” Ironically, it is the very intensity of this male bond—that which allows the men to share amongst themselves an unspoken knowledge of “the horror”—which is itself the horror. This intense male bonding masks what they would actually find most “horrible” of all—intense male bonds! Luce Irigaray's study, “Women On the Market,” offers a particularly germane and compelling elucidation of the contradictory nature of such relationships. Irigaray claims that men use women as exchange objects to append a heterosexual pretext to their own homosexual need to interact with and be amongst other men:

The use of and traffic in women subtend and uphold the reign of masculine hom(m)o-sexuality, even while they maintain that hom(m)o-sexuality in speculations, mirror games, identifications, and more or less rivalrous appropriations, which defer its real practice. Reigning everywhere, although prohibited in practice, hom(m)o-sexuality is played out through the bodies of women, matter, or sign, and heterosexuality has been up to now just an alibi for the smooth workings of man's relations with himself, of relations among men.15

Marlow and friends do not “traffic in women” per se (i.e., through exchange ceremonies such as matrimony or other socially sanctioned institutions), yet the results of their “merger” parallel Irigaray's conclusions regarding interrelations among males. Conrad's circle of men use their tacit male “knowledge” of superiority over the Intended (i.e., “Let's keep the woman out of this; she can't handle it”) as a heterosexual pretext to intensify their own very exclusive, very intimate confederation. As long as Marlow and crew metaphorically join hands under a patriarchal flag and sing praise to their own “normal” sexuality, they effectively annul the homoerotic significance intrinsic to such activity.

Formerly ostracized by the group, Marlow is successful in gaining the acceptance of his male audience (or, at the very least, their respect for his journey into the abhorred unknown), a “victory” which parallels Conrad's successful depiction to his homophobic readership of a similar journey into the void. We see at the novel's climax that the fictive audience's previous grunts of protest and disbelief have been replaced with silence. A seemingly unspoken collusion exists between the men, broken only by the Director's sudden and dutiful exclamation “We have lost the first of the ebb” (HD, 76). There is a concord in tone between Marlow's narrative and the narrator's comments in the tale's final sentence: “The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky—seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness.” The narrator's implicit concurrence with Marlow's assessment of an underlying (and indeed—“immense”) “darkness” to human truth, and the shared reticence of Conrad, Marlow, the Narrator, and any of the other men to examine this “darkness” (the sentence acts, after all, as a narrative coda), is proof of their willingness to accept “the horror” of the void at face value. Furthermore, the message that this fictive male acceptance invites Conrad's literal male readership to read seems to follow as such: “Perhaps this Marlow chap is just an ‘ordinary’ man who, faced with a darkness we civilized men have never encountered, yet instinctively understand, reacted in a perfectly ordinary, logical, and sexually ethical fashion.” Apparently, for Victorian male homophobes, no light can be shed on this particular heart of darkness.

Notes

6. See Alan Sinfield, The Wilde Century. (1994; London: Cassell), 3. Sinfield posits that the Oscar Wilde trials of 1895 began the process of constructing an acknowledged definition of homosexuality out of such pejorative yet accepted attributes as effeminacy, idleness, decadence, and aestheticism. It was the abominable thought of Wilde's sodomitical sexual acts, however, “a brotherly passion for which language has no name,” which represented the major barrier to society's recognition of homosexuality.
9. Ronald Hyam, Empire and Sexuality. The British Experience. (1990; New York: Manchester University Press), 18. Hyam is mainly referring to how “Victorian men found beauty and sensuous appeal in a seemingly exotic East, especially in comparison with the plainness and dourness of Africa [emphasis mine].” However, Hyam never credits his—it would seem—highly subjective (and problematic—does he refer to the landscape or the populace?) assessment of Africa with a textual and/or historical source, and Conrad's eroticised description of Kurtz's native mistress, her “fecund” jungle habitat, and his male helmsman, aid in situating his sensual proclivities very much in Africa.
10. See footnote in HD, 17.
11. Bette London, The Appropriated Voice: Narrative Authority in Conrad, Forster, and Woolf. (1990; Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press), 47. Bette London is one of the few critics who emphasize the implicit dynamic between Marlow and his audience, and she makes a similar and interesting assertion: Marlow's masculinity has been slighted because his attendant relationship to Kurtz has placed him in a position of powerlessness and passivity. He has become, in essence, Kurtz’s “other” Intended. London claims that in order to restore his wounded manhood, Marlow reverses roles with his audience, himself taking the place of Kurtz, with the men becoming his Intended. In this manner, Marlow is “implicitly projecting them as female, or at least … challenging their masculinity.”
13. HD, 31. See Bonnie Kime Scott, Refiguring Modernism. Vol. 1: The Women of 1928. (1995; Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 238. Scott describes an experiment in critical form by Virginia Woolf which offered a dialogue between male and female readers of Heart of Darkness. The female reader, Penelope, who was allowed the limited education which “her father's library” afforded, offers this insight upon hearing the male reader, David's, objection to the paucity of women in the work:

There are the ships, the beautiful ships. … They are more feminine than his women, who are either mountains of marble or the dreams of a charming boy over the photograph of an actress. But surely a great novel can be made out of a man and a ship, a man and a story, a man and death and dishonour?
14. See Nina Pelikan Straus, “The Exclusion of the Intended from Secret Sharing in Conrad's Heart of Darkness,” Novel (1987): 123-137, 134. Straus is one of the few critics who come tantalizingly close to making this connection: “[By] projecting his own love onto the form of the Intended, Marlow is able to conceal from himself the dark complexity of his own love—a love that strikes him with horror—for Kurtz.” However, Straus claims that Marlow admires Kurtz because he fulfills the role of “Strong Poet”; the “love” to which she refers is not sexual, but rather a love based on mutual (and apprenticed) aesthetic appreciation.
This is not to claim that the conventions of high art are homosexual, but rather to suggest that Marlow's relation to Kurtz as his commentator is a paradigm of the relation of the male critic's relation to the Strong Poet. That a homocentric loyalty exists … is not surprising, for it confirms relations of love between men who are each other's “narcissistic objects”; or to put it another way, whose enterprise as readers and critics (hearers- speakers) affirms the greatness of the one and the possessive attempt to appropriate that greatness of the other.

Straus does not explore why this love between men strikes Marlow with “horror,” so much so that he must conceal it from himself. More importantly, Straus fails to account for Marlow's male audience, for whom, ultimately, “The Lie” is fabricated.


Criticism: Peter Edgerly Firchow (essay date 2000)


In the following essay, Firchow discusses Conrad's vision of Africa as found in Heart of Darkness.

True symbolism is where the particular represents the more general, not as a dream or a shadow, but as a living momentary revelation of the Inscrutable.

—Goethe, Maxims

An historian of hearts is not an historian of emotions, yet he penetrates further, restrained as he may be, since his aim is to reach the very fount of laughter and tears.

—Conrad, “A Familiar Preface”

Joseph Conrad's African experience was of relatively short duration. Not counting his somewhat muddled preparations in London and Brussels or the slow sea journey to and from the Congo Free State, it actually lasted a little less than six months, from mid-June to early December 1890.1 Psychologically and emotionally it must have seemed a great deal longer, what with the disappointment of not being able to assume command of the small steamer that had been promised him by company officials back in Belgium; the increasing discomfort of illness; and the unavoidable necessity of having to associate uninterruptedly, often in a subordinate capacity, with people whose behavior and moral outlook he soon came to despise. It is perhaps partly for this reason that late in 1898, nearly ten years later, when he suddenly and unexpectedly stopped work on two other projects—the narratives that would eventually turn into Lord Jim and The Rescue—in order to describe his African experience in Heart of Darkness, he not only lengthened the experience by about a third to some eight months but even arranged to have it climax in a voyage to a distant, timeless past before the beginnings of chronology. Paradoxically, once there, his fictional alter ego Marlow encounters a man whose name (Kurtz) signifies brevity itself and whose memory, despite an acquaintance of no more than a few days, remains deep and indelible.

It is Marlow's search for this elusive figure—and the meaning of both search and figure—that forms the plot of Heart of Darkness, as well as the allegedly dark center of the tale that Marlow tells his friends aboard the yawl Nellie while awaiting the turn of the tide in the Thames estuary. That this search is also and inevitably a search for himself—even for the self—is something that the teller of the tale knows full well and that it does
not take most readers long to grasp. It is a tale notoriously and heavily weighted with symbolism, for as Conrad once put it ironically in a letter to Elsie Hueffer—the wife of his sometime friend and collaborator, Ford Madox Ford—“What I distinctly admit is the fault of having made Kurtz too symbolic or rather symbolic at all” (Letters 3:211). Much later, in another letter to a different correspondent, Conrad explained what he had meant by “too symbolic”: “A work of art is very seldom limited to one exclusive meaning and not necessarily tending to a definite conclusion. And this for the reason that the nearer it approaches art, the more it acquires a symbolic character” (HD [Heart of Darkness] 231). It is not coincidental, therefore, that the narrator of the frame story explains to his readers that Marlow's tales differ from those of other mariners in that, among other things, they consist of “inconclusive experiences.” They differ in this respect because they belong to the realm of art, a realm where for Conrad there were no final answers but where it was nevertheless paradoxically necessary to keep looking for such answers.

One of the most important of these uncertain certainties, these questioning quests—both in the story itself and in the telling of that story—is what it means to be fully human. As the Dwarf remarks in the epigraph from Grimm's Fairy Tales that Conrad selected when he republished Heart of Darkness in book form, “‘No; something human is dearer to me than the wealth of all the world.’” For Marlow the most immediate symbolic concretization of the answer to the urgent and profound question of what it means to be human is Kurtz, “the man in the name”—a man whose name suggests “shortness” to Marlow and who therefore in this sense at least is rather like a dwarf, though he strikes Marlow later as being nearly seven feet tall. Stripped to its essentials, Kurtz's story is also rather like a fairy tale about someone who gets lost in a dark forest and then falls victim to the black magic of powerful “sorcerers” whose spell can be broken only by a “pure,” rescuing knight like Marlow. Significantly, the spell is, in fact, only dissipated once the riverboat has escaped the dark magical heart of the forest. Not until then does Kurtz, in a final moment of sudden self-illumination, realize the “horror” of what he has become. Only then is he permitted to die.²

Not surprisingly, what Marlow finds—or, rather, what they find, since there are two Marlows here, the younger actor and the older reflector (and reflector)—is not a single answer but rather several answers, not all of them complementary or even contradictory. That is, he finds, as it were, several Kurtzes. It is these sometimes conflicting answers, these multifaceted Kurtzes, along with the sometimes conflicting Marlows who find those inconclusive answers (or fail to), that form the chief focal points of interest for this book. Inevitably those answers in turn provoke further questions to which yet more (tentative) answers are provided. That is, alas, how criticism—in this respect like Conrad's conception of fiction—works.

Heart of Darkness implies that a fair answer to such questions is possible only in a context where our supposedly distinctively “human” qualities are put to the severest possible test, preferably in conditions of great physical hardship and the most extreme isolation. For Conrad, here as virtually everywhere else in his fiction, it is axiomatic that the nature of human nature is discoverable only under duress. For him the study of the human psyche is and must always be psychopathology. To undertake such a study, the experimenter/explorer must therefore be prepared to subject herself or himself (or his or her fictional alter egos) to the most radical vivisection. That is why Heart of Darkness is set in a place that, along with the Arctic and Antarctic regions, was for Europeans in the mid-to-late nineteenth century the last of the great geographical unknowns.³ The frantic search for the sources of the Nile was not occasioned merely by a scramble for loot and imperialistic prestige—it was that, of course—but at least for some of the best literary minds of the period, including Conrad's, it also represented more powerfully than anything else in their experience the quest for a “final” symbolic answer to the question of who we are. Thus, not only for Conrad but also for contemporaneous European writers as different as Gustave Flaubert and H. Rider Haggard, envisioning Africa in fiction became an analogue for the exploration of the hidden, dark regions of their inner selves. The visions they produced often—perhaps even invariably—turned into misconceptions and misrepresentations of Africa and Africans, as the Nigerian novelist and critic Chinua Achebe, among others, has powerfully argued.
Nonetheless, valid as this criticism may be from a (admittedly anachronistic) historical or sociological point of view, it needs to be remembered that, like Conrad, these writers were working in the medium of fiction, not in the supposedly more factual (or at least fact-oriented) medium of history or sociology. With the possible exception of a relatively small number of misguided and marginalized aesthetes, present-day readers are not likely to resort primarily to Conrad's story if they feel the need or desire to inform themselves about the condition of Africa either now or during the late nineteenth century; or, if they do refer to it for that purpose, then it is only to determine how Conrad's vision differs from their own by using *Heart of Darkness* as a stepping-stone to works of history or sociology or even criticism, such as Achebe's. It is in this sense that so much of the current critical reception of Conrad's story is misleading and even wrongheaded, producing further misconceptions rather than new perceptions. Conrad's main purpose in *Heart of Darkness* is to convey a *vision* of Africa rather than to provide a detailed description of its geography, socioeconomic conditions, and inhabitants; that *vision* must therefore be responded to primarily imaginatively and evaluated chiefly in aesthetic rather than sociological or ideological terms. Not that the latter are irrelevant: a *vision*, after all, is usually made up of elements that have some profoundly significant relation to reality. They help us, as the Russian Harlequin admiringly remarks of Kurtz, to “see things,” including economic, social, and political things, even if only secondarily. Or, to quote the celebrated words of Conrad's own artistic manifesto, the preface to the *Nigger of the ‘Narcissus, ’* written not long before (1897): “My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you *see!*” (147).

In reading Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, then, we are not seeking to determine what the “real” Africa was like, assuming that such a determination is or was ever possible; instead, we want to know how (and why) Conrad envisioned Africa as he did, and what that *vision* meant to him and to his readers. It is, in other words Conrad's “image”—a word also used by Chinua Achebe—of Africa that is the object of discussion here, an image that, as the word itself suggests, was produced ultimately by Conrad's imagination. For some time already, such images (or literary stereotypes as they are more usually called) have been subjected to close literary analysis, though Achebe and other postcolonial critics of Conrad seem to have paid little attention to these precedents. But before taking up the question of how imagology (as the systematic study of literary stereotypes is called) specifically relates to *Heart of Darkness*, it needs to be stressed that in the final analysis we can expect to find answers to our questions about *Heart of Darkness*—including questions about its expression of racism or imperialism—only in the geography of Conrad's imagination and in the experiences that helped to shape it.

The most important of those experiences was the half-year or so that Conrad spent in Leopold II's *L'Etat Indépendant du Congo* or “Congo Free State,” as English-speakers, following Stanley's example, tended to call it. Crucial as this experience was, however, it was not the only constituent element in establishing Conrad's imaginary Africa. Among other important differences between Conrad's actual experience and his rendering of that experience in *Heart of Darkness* is the striking figure of Kurtz. That the climax of the story should be situated in this emaciated would-be demigod with a head as white and shiny as ivory itself is almost, as Conrad put it, “too symbolical.” In this respect the plot of *Heart of Darkness* seems nearly as improbable as that of H. Rider Haggard's novel *She*, which culminates in the heart of Africa with the discovery of an ageless white female god. The racial (and even racist) aspects of both of these mysterious figures are integral to our understanding of both Conrad's and Haggard's fictions, though in the former case at least we must always bear in mind the ironic as well as the symbolic dimensions of his “envisioning.” That the object of Marlow's obsessive quest in *Heart of Darkness* should be a white man has struck Achebe, and no doubt many other contemporary readers, as trivial and even offensive. Again, valid as this criticism is from the point of view of population statistics, it is not valid from the point of view of the imagination of a European artist like Conrad. Aside from the wisdom of writing about what one knows—that is, in Conrad's case, chiefly Europeans and how they perceive and relate to non-Europeans—rather than about what one does not know (again in Conrad's case, Africans and their perceptions or conceptions of Europeans), finding a white man (or, quite literally, a *blank*)
at the center of what was then generally envisioned as the center of the dark continent was and continues to be one of the most devastating ironies of the story.

That is not to say that Conrad's actual experience of Africa and Africans did not contribute powerfully to the creation—to the envisioning—of this story. The fact that Conrad lived for a time in the Congo—and nearly died there—gives *Heart of Darkness* an authenticity that undoubtedly has contributed to its enduring power and appeal. It also complicates matters. Is Marlow merely a mouthpiece for Conrad? A convenient mannikin on which or whom to hang his own experience(s)? Or is he a “persona”—a real though possibly simplified aspect of Conrad's own personality from which the author nevertheless remains (or remains partially) distanced? Or perhaps a mere mask to hide behind? And why bother to have a Marlow at all? Why not tell the story from an omniscient point of view or from that of an only vaguely realized or “dramatized” narrator? Again, the answers to these questions are and will be to some degree inconclusive, yet they must be asked, for on them depends the larger answer to who “we” are, and what our essential identity is. And they must be asked primarily in a way that recognizes the status of *Heart of Darkness* as primarily an aesthetic construct, as a work of the imagination.

In “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness,*” Chinua Achebe explicitly examines, as his title makes clear, the image of (black, sub-Saharan) Africa that Conrad depicts in his novel. In Achebe's view that image is almost entirely negative, a portrait of a dark, irrational, timeless place populated by a dehumanized race of savages who lack language and who are hungry for human flesh. It is this image of Africa that he believes *Heart of Darkness* has perpetuated among several generations of readers, though he emphatically does not claim that it is uniquely the product of Conrad's individual imagination. On the contrary, the extraordinary power it has exercised and continues to exercise on its primarily Eurocentric audience resides in its confirmation of an already existing image or stereotype of Africa as the “Other,” as the imagined (and imaginary) composite of all those things that white Eurocentrics most fear and abominate, especially in themselves—of the “horror,” in short. This image of Africa “was and is,” so Achebe tells us, “the dominant image of Africa in the Western imagination and Conrad merely brought the peculiar gifts of his own mind to bear on it” (*HD* 261). Whether we agree with this assertion or not, it is clear that Achebe does not mean to imply that Conrad was actually attempting in *Heart of Darkness* to portray Africa as it really was or still is; rather, he was really portraying Africa as it existed in his mind, and, more generally, as it existed (and still exists) in the modern European collective imagination. In this sense *Heart of Darkness* is not really about Africa at all; it is really about the deepest psychic fears in Conrad's and his readers' psyches.

But if we grant the validity of Achebe's assertion, then it cannot also be true that in *Heart of Darkness* Conrad is merely showing a “preposterous and perverse arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props to the break-up of one petty European mind”—that is, Kurtz's mind (Achebe, *HD* 257). There is a basic contradiction here, for either imagined Africa is of supreme importance to the European mind as an obsessive “Other,” or else it is merely a chance setting for a novel by a literarily gifted Anglo-Pole who happened to portray in passing a place of little or no significance to the European imagination as a whole. But if the latter, then it would seem hardly worthwhile to waste one's time and ink on so unimportant a phenomenon. The fact is that *Heart of Darkness* does loom very large, not just in the Western imagination (whatever that may be) but also in Chinua Achebe's imagination, so that for good or ill (mostly the latter, of course, in Achebe's view), *Heart of Darkness* is and will no doubt remain one of the most profoundly significant landmarks in the long and mostly melancholy history of conceptions and misconceptions between Europeans and Africans.

Given the fact that Achebe explicitly professes to be dealing in his essay with the European “image” of Africa, it is odd that he never goes much beyond generalizing about the “Western imagination” and its supposedly stereotypical view of Africa. It is as if this “deep” psychological revulsion against Africa on the part of the West is something that can be assumed by all of us without further proof or investigation beyond the blundering remarks of a white passerby whom Achebe happens to meet in an Amherst parking lot, a naive letter he receives from a young student in Yonkers, a reference that he makes to an unnamed essay written by
the historian Hugh Trevor Roper, an equally undocumented quotation from the celebrated physician and musicologist Albert Schweitzer, and an ignorant article that he runs across in the *Christian Science Monitor* that fails to distinguish clearly between dialects and languages in Africa. The reader is then asked to accept this random and ill-assorted collection of anecdotes as a convincing portrait of how the Western mind envisions Africa.

Perhaps even more astonishing than Achebe's miscellaneous evidence is that critics—among them at least one of the most distinguished of American critics, Gerald Graff—have not challenged Achebe about it, insisting at least that he provide a few more examples of a less eclectic nature (Graff 27-28). (It should be noted, though, that other aspects of Achebe's argument have been strongly challenged.) This is not to say that Achebe is necessarily wrong; it is simply to observe that he has not proved that he is right. What is more, given Achebe's explicit interest in images and in the operations of the imagination, it would have been useful and certainly more persuasive if Achebe had taken the trouble to analyze some of the more notable prior examples of Western literary images of Africa. One wonders especially what he might then have made of Kurtz's companion and apparent mistress, the regal Black Amazon figure who is obviously, though Achebe does not admit it, the only character in the novel who is depicted in a wholly sympathetic way. In strictly historical terms, this character no doubt owes a good deal to the use of an elite female army unit in the Kingdom of Dahomey—much in the news in 1897 when the British launched a devastating attack against Benin—but this fact does not account for the Black Amazon's essential nobility or her apparently tragic romantic involvement with Kurtz. It is her image rather than her "reality" that matters here, for it is an image that deeply affects our whole understanding of the nature of Africa. It is her image that in fact adds a radically different, supplementary meaning to the word "heart" when used in connection with Africa (in terms of her manifest courage, for example, or her deep and passionate commitment to Kurtz). Had Achebe examined this striking figure more carefully, he might have seen that in describing this relationship Conrad was alluding intertextually to Virgil's Dido and Aeneas. Once the intertextual connection is recognized, it also becomes clear that in portraying Kurtz's life with the Black Amazon in the heart of Africa, Conrad is not merely providing a "backdrop" for the breakup of a trivial Western psyche. The intertext here, after all, is the *Aeneid*, one of the chief archetypal narratives in the Western literary tradition and certainly one that has massively shaped the Western literary tradition and, along with it, its imagination, not least with respect to the ways in which the West has traditionally envisioned Africa. Like Kurtz, Aeneas becomes entangled with an African queen and her people, both of whom he later abandons. Like Kurtz again, Aeneas acts reluctantly and against his own emotional inclinations because he fears that if he fails to do so he will be untrue to himself as well as to his "higher" duty to the gods and to his mission vis-à-vis his own culture. Not that the resemblances are precise or wholly consistent (part of the intertextual relation is surely ironic)—but even so there is a sense in which it is true that Aeneas, like Kurtz, has caught a glimpse of the "horror" of yielding to a supposedly "soft and sinful" option rather than adhering to the straight and narrow path of "virtue."

If reading *Heart of Darkness* and the *Aeneid* intertextually in this way has any validity, if indeed it offers a specific and demonstrable insight into Conrad's image of Africa, then it follows that, whatever else one may say about it, his image of Africa is not "quite simply" the result of an inveterate desire in "Western psychology" to set Africa up as a foil to Europe or as "a place of negations" versus "a state of grace" (*HD* 251-52). A contrast is clearly drawn between Europe and Africa in both the *Aeneid* and *Heart of Darkness*, of that there can be no doubt; to that extent Achebe is undoubtedly right, but it is by no means a simple and straightforward contrast, with all the positives on one side and all the negatives on the other. Paradoxically, in part because of the controversy stirred up by Achebe's attack, *Heart of Darkness* has come to be recognized by more and more critics as fundamentally and essentially very much of a mixed thing, a tale full of ambiguities and unresolved contradictions. Its indictment of imperialism, for example, is scathing, but only of a certain kind of imperialism; it mocks the sham policies elaborated in a despicable European Whitefield Sepulchre that are shabbily administered by hypocritical "Pilgrims" in the Congo, but at the same time it espouses the virtues of "real work" that is carried out by the British elsewhere in Africa. It shows overwhelming pity for the oppressed Africans in the so-called Grove of Death, but it also finds the antics of
the African fireman as comic as “a dog in a parody of breeches” (HD 38). It simultaneously denies and uphold the ideals for which the Europeans claim to have to come to Africa, for their torch is one that both sheds light and burns villages. It is horrified by the atrocities committed by Kurtz but at the same time explicitly affirms that he was a “remarkable” man. Not that this deeply mixed quality of the story is aesthetically or even ethically to be censured, for it is precisely because of these contradictions and ambiguities that it remains vital and relevant and true.9

This essentially ambiguous or “mixed” quality of Conrad’s tale becomes even clearer if we take another suggestive intertext into account, namely Goethe's Faust, again one of the archetypal stories in the Western literary tradition. Kurtz, like Faust, is a “universal” man, immensely gifted in various ways, as artist, writer, publicist, explorer, administrator. Like Faust too, he has gone beyond the conventions of his society to dabble (and more than dabble) in forbidden knowledge. And like Faust again, Kurtz is deeply torn between the power and pleasure that such new knowledge conveys and the pangs of guilty conscience at the crimes he has committed in the process of gaining that knowledge, thereby forfeiting his “soul.” Suggestively, the contrast between these two Fausts—the “good” and the “bad”—is drawn symbolically in much the same way in both Faust and Heart of Darkness. That is, by means of contrasting two radically different types of women: the innocent and trusting German Gretchen, whom Faust betrays and abandons (the Intended of Conrad's story), and the splendid and foreign Helen, beautiful and sexually sophisticated (Conrad's Black Amazon). Again the two texts are not to be read in terms of straightforward equivalence—Kurtz's abandonment of the Intended, for example, is figurative rather than actual, as in Faust's case; but the parallels are nevertheless striking. This is true especially of the vision of the “horror” that descends on Kurtz at the climactic point of his existence, a vision that Marlow interprets paradoxically as both a sign of Kurtz's profound degradation and a hope of his possible salvation. For like Kurtz, Faust was a “remarkable man,” someone who “struggled” (HD 67) and failed spectacularly; who wrought destruction upon the humble and innocent while claiming to pursue a higher civilizing mission (notably in the Baucis and Philemon episode); but also someone who nevertheless is saved because of the intensity of his quest for an “idea” beyond himself. In the end Kurtz's harsh moral condemnation of himself is, as in Faust's case, what saves him. Comparing his own possible last words and what might have been his own verdict on himself had he followed Kurtz into the abyss—“a word of careless contempt,” he thinks, is what he would probably have uttered—Marlow concludes that he much prefers Kurtz's moral passion to his own habitual, self-deprecating cynicism: “Better his cry—much better. It was an affirmation, a moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats, by abominable terrors, by abominable satisfactions. But it was a victory” (HD 70, my italics). Despite everything, then, Kurtz is, so it would appear, saved, and we must envision him, as Goethe does in the case of Faust, dwelling among the angels.10

Conrad’s retelling of the Faust story in Heart of Darkness is, of course, also encrusted with ironies. One of the chief ironies is that it is told by Marlow, whose closest equivalent in Goethe’s verse play is Faust's famulus, Wagner, a humble and somewhat obtuse personage. Not that Marlow is dull-witted or in any way ridiculous—after all, he is British rather than Belgian or even German—but he does function, as critics have often noted, as a kind of alternative to Kurtz. If nothing else, his determination to find Kurtz in the “heart of darkness,” his taking Kurtz's side against that of the Pilgrims, his falling ill and nearly dying after Kurtz's demise: all these suggest that Marlow is to be viewed as an apprentice or “junior” Kurtz/Faust—a kind of younger brother, as it were. But when viewed from such a perspective, the Faust story of course becomes radically skewed. For one thing, it becomes funny.11 Not “funny,” perhaps, in the sense of provoking us to uproarious laughter, but definitely comic in the sense of what has come to be called “black humor.” For Conrad this is what comedy was inevitably like in any case. “It is very difficult to be wholly joyous or wholly sad on this earth,” Conrad wrote with apparent regret toward the end of his life in the preface to A Personal Record. “The comic, when it is human, soon takes upon itself a face of pain” (xviii). He had not felt much differently about it as a young man. Writing to his “aunt” back in Belgium while stopping in the Canary Islands en route to the Congo, Conrad expressed grave doubts about his own future, implying that, as far as he was concerned, there might not be a great deal of it. “And, consequently,” he wondered, “why be sad about it? A little illusion, many dreams, a rare flash of happiness followed by disillusionment, a little anger and much
suffering, and then the end. Peace! That is the programme, and we must see this tragi-comedy to the end” (Letters 1:51). Life, as depicted in Conrad's fiction, may not always be nasty, brutal, or even short, but it certainly has a marked tendency to be informed by a grim and cruel comedy whose values and choice of victims are not easily comprehended. What is easily grasped, however, is that this comedy almost always involves taking an “absurd” stand that is characterized by a curious mixture of skepticism and idealism. Symbolic of that comedy is the perpetual smile on the shrunken lips of the severed head that Marlow sees just before he meets Kurtz for the first time; it is a face of pain, which nonetheless wears a kind of smile, or to be more accurate, a horrible grin.

All of this may come as a surprise to many readers of Conrad, who would probably agree with H.G. Wells that Conrad possessed no sense of humor whatever. “‘One could always baffle Conrad,’” Wells patronizingly maintained, “‘by saying “humour” [as an explanation for apparently odd behavior on the part of English people]. It was one of our damned English tricks he had never learnt to tackle’” (qtd. in Baines 234). One wonders in this connection just how perceptive Wells himself was in grasping the subtle dimensions of Conrad's sense of the comic, for there are unquestionably humorous elements in Heart of Darkness. Some of his thumbnail sketches of character are almost Dickensian. This is striking in the case of the old doctor in Brussels who takes Marlow's pulse, wants to measure his head “in the interests of science,” and inquires if there is any history of madness in his family. Here, surely, is a satirical edge that cuts in a variety of directions: against a pseudoscience in Europe that will later find its equivalent among the sorcerers in the heart of Africa; against the madness of the whole imperial enterprise in Africa, as confirmed later when Marlow watches a French cruiser firing pointlessly and without apparent effect into the vast African coastline, or when he observes an analogous “objectless blasting” of a hillside at the Outer Station; and, finally, against Marlow himself, who despite having received a clear warning that what he is about to do is utterly mad, resolves to go forward anyway. Similarly, the Accountant at the Outer Station, whom Marlow at first mistakes for a “vision,” got up as he is in “a high, starched collar, white cuffs, a light alpaca jacket, snowy trousers, a clean necktie, and varnished boots. No hat. Hair parted, brushed, oiled, under a green-lined parasol held in a big white hand” (HD 21). This “hairdresser's dummy”—for, like most of the Belgians in the story, he is dehumanized—is clearly intended to be perceived as a comic figure, despite (or even because of) the “respect” he elicits from Marlow. He foreshadows another peculiarly attired but more significant figure who, in a very different way, is also meticulous about his appearance, and for whom Marlow also evinces a modicum of esteem. This is the so-called Russian Harlequin, whose explicit linkage with the Harlequin tradition unmistakably signals that he is meant to be thought of at least partly in comic terms. At once amazingly innocent and profoundly shrewd, he is a kind of wonderful mixture between Parsifal and Papageno, able to diagnose quite precisely the degree of danger emanating from Kurtz's moods but at the same time utterly deceived by his imposing airs. The phrase he repeats about Kurtz—that “he enlarged my mind”—turns out to be grimly humorous in the context of the shrunken skulls that his despotick friend has set up on poles in front of his house. And in a way that affects the whole tone of the story, the Harlequin's symbolic attire makes one see the characters and events as if suddenly altered by a twist of the narratorial kaleidoscope: for his very person implies that we live, as Yeats was later to phrase it memorably, “where motley is worn.” “We” (or some of us at any rate) live in a casual comedy that makes no sense and leads nowhere, in a kind of happenstance world inhabited by a comic opera chorus of sham Pilgrims, along with a Mephistophelean Brickmaker who makes no bricks and whose diabolic schemings yield not souls but a few wretched privileges like candles to help light up a vast heart of darkness. Likewise casually comic are the Manager, who is able to live because he has no entrails, and his grotesque uncle who, like a malevolent Sancho Panza, comes riding into camp on a donkey. They too live in a world where motley is worn and where, to allude again to Yeats, they spend their time fumbling in greasy tills and adding prayer to shivering prayer. Only Kurtz and Marlow seem more or less exempt from this comic horror, though the former is surely funny for the overwhelming, Cecil-Rhodesian extent of his egotism, and the latter for his “fantastic vanity” in hoping not to be considered less appetizing by his cannibal crew than the other whites on board his little steamer (HD 43).
In its deliberate mixture of the comic with the tragic, of the farcical with the profoundly serious, *Heart of Darkness* is very much a modern work of art, as T.S. Eliot clearly recognized when he first thought of choosing a phrase from the novel (“Mistah Kurtz—he dead.”) as an epigraph for *The Waste Land* but rejected that idea and used the phrase instead for the grimly humorous “The Hollow Men.” Certainly H.L. Mencken recognized the marvelous way in which Conrad combines the comic and the tragic, the farcical and the sublime, in this story. “Here we have all imaginable hopes,” he concluded after rereading the novel in 1922, “reduced to one common denominator of folly and failure, and here we have a play of humor that is infinitely mordant and searching. … The farce mounts by slow stages to dizzy and breath-taking heights. One hears harsh roars of cosmic laughter, vast splutterings of transcendental mirth, echoing and reëchoing down the black corridors of empty space” (519).

Successfully combining apparently disparate elements in this way, *Heart of Darkness* turns out to be very much of a “mixed” thing. And be refusing to accommodate its vision to a single point of view (the story is told by two narrators, neither of whom attempts to suppress the voice of the other, or even the voices of the other characters); by insisting on combining a mode of presentation that is at once intensely realistic and profoundly symbolic (as in the infamous Grove of Death, for example); by infusing virtually everything with an apparently corrosive irony that at the same time allows the sham gold to be separated from the real (Marlow himself, perhaps Kurtz); by fusing comedy with tragedy—by all of these means it reveals that it is intent on portraying not a single, chemically pure truth but one that is whole, reflecting the often contradictory and sometimes incomprehensible world we live in. It is this power of unifying opposites, of making the reader see reality and symbol simultaneously, that makes us certain of the heart's affections as well as the profound truth of the imagination.

**Notes**

1. Conrad left Bordeaux on the *Ville de Maceio* on May 10, 1890, and disembarked at Boma, the capital of the Congo Free State, on June 10, 1890. Three days later he traveled by boat to Matadi (the Outer Station of the novel), where he stayed for two weeks before leaving on foot for Kinshasa (the Central Station) on June 28, arriving there on August 2. After ten days' rest, Conrad left for Stanley Falls aboard the steamer *Roi des Belges*, which reached its destination on September 1. After a week's stay in Stanley Falls, the *Roi des Belges*, now under Conrad's temporary command and with the dying Georges Antoine Klein on board, returned downstream. Back in Kinshasa on September 24, Conrad was refused a place in Alexandre Delcommune's Katanga expedition, though this had been promised him in Brussels. Seriously ill, Conrad left Kinshasa on October 23 for the coast, reaching Matadi on December 4 and departing for Europe shortly thereafter (Knowles 13-15).

2. According to Frederick Karl's biography of Conrad, the epigraph from Grimm's *Fairy Tales* is intended by Conrad to refer only to the accompanying dedication of the book to Jessie Conrad (*Joseph Conrad* 539 n). This assertion is doubtful, however, since the fairy tale in question is “Rumpelstiltskin” and the “something human” refers to the miller's daughter's first child. If directed at Jessie, therefore, the allusion might have been understood by her as offensive rather than complimentary. Oddly enough, in his earlier *Reader's Guide* Karl had argued that “the appropriateness of the epigraph to the *Youth* volume … is nowhere more apparent than in Conrad's study of the loss of heart and its terrible consequences: specifically, the loss of responsible heart in Kurtz” (134). In R.C. Churchill's view, the epigraph may be usefully applied to the whole body of Conrad's work, pointing to its characteristically broad and generous humanity (980).

3. In old age Conrad remembered how as a boy he had been fascinated by the tragic history of Sir John Franklin, who was lost with all his crew while attempting to find a Northwest Passage through the Canadian Arctic. It was this initial fascination with the frozen North that eventually extended to the explorers of tropical Africa (*Last Essays* 15-22). Significantly, in Conrad's only other novel dealing with Leopold II's imperial adventures, *The Inheritors*, the exploitative “Empire” is located in the Arctic.
4. The terminology is from Wayne Booth, who takes a middle position. Conrad does of course begin by telling the story from the point of view of a nameless, though clearly not omniscient, narrator, a strategy very similar (except for the great difference in length) to that adopted in *Lord Jim* (Booth 152-54).

5. Max Weinrich's way of distinguishing a dialect from a language is to call a language “a dialect with an army and navy” (qtd. in Pinker 28).


7. According to Richard Burton, the effective fighting force of this Amazon unit in 1864 consisted of 1,700 women out of a total population of 150,000 people (263). The entry “Dahomey” in the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* claims, however, that as much as a quarter of the female population was enrolled in the army and that they were the best and most courageous warriors, apparently impervious to pain.

8. Thomas Cleary and Terry Sherwood are, to my knowledge, unique among Conrad's critics in making the connection between Dido and the Black Amazon, but they do not take into account that this intertextual relationship reveals Conrad's positive conception of her. Instead, they argue that “Kurtz's surrender to his Dido is the mark of his corruption,” citing as evidence for this hypothesis Kurtz's having been compelled by Marlow to leave Africa. Aeneas, on the other hand, being a true hero, departed of his own accord (185-86). For a discussion of other Virgilian elements in *Heart of Darkness*, see Feder.

9. This sense of trying to get at the often contradictory totality of a situation is evident also in Conrad's much-censured piling up of adjectives. In Conrad's case, however, this strategy leads to the peculiar result that the more one attempts to pin down the truth of a thing, the more elusive it becomes. Hence, with respect to Erich Auerbach's famous distinction between the hypertactic style (characteristic of the *Odyssey*) and the paratactic style (characteristic of the Bible), Conrad adheres unmistakably to the former, but his actual stylistic effects nevertheless tend to resemble the latter. That is, though he seeks to bring everything he (or Marlow) sees into a brightly illuminated foreground by using a plethora of qualifications and subordinating clauses, he succeeds paradoxically only in pushing everything further into a profoundly obscure and ambiguous background. In this sense, as in so many others, Conrad's fiction is very much a “mixed” thing (Auerbach 3-23).

10. This is not quite so absurd as it may at first appear. After all, Marlow does put forward the very Christian (not to say Catholic) idea that the only important moment of life is the moment of death: “[P]erhaps all the wisdom, and all truth, and all sincerity, are just compressed into that inappreciable moment of time in which we step over the threshold of the invisible” (*HD* 69). If Marlow is right about Kurtz's repentance in the last moments of his life—and there is certainly no trace of obvious irony here to make us doubt it—then Kurtz has been absolved of his sins. In this sense too, of course, Kurtz has preceded Marlow into that ultimate “heart of darkness,” which is death, but which for those who possess the “true stuff” is also salvation.

11. There are also (or at least there are intended to be) comic elements in Goethe's *Faust*, especially in the prologue.

12. In these satirical portraits Conrad notoriously wreaked revenge on the brothers Camille and Alexandre Delcommune. In real life, far from possessing no entrails, Camille Delcommune died of hematuria only two years after Conrad had left the Congo (*BCB* 2:184). As for his older brother Alexandre, his expedition to the Katanga region suffered appalling casualties, losing more than 500 of the original contingent of 670 members. Alexandre himself survived, however, and on his return to Belgium in April 1893 was given a triumphal reception. He eventually went on to become one of the principal administrators of the Belgian colonial service, dying in 1922 (*BCB* 2:259-61).

**Criticism: Padmini Mongia (essay date summer 2001)**
In the following essay, Mongia considers the charges of racism against Conrad and Heart of Darkness.

I am interested in touching upon numerous concerns raised by *Heart of Darkness*, all of which radiate around the fraught issue of race and its construction in the novel. For many Conradians, this issue boils down to the charge of racism leveled against the novel, and Conrad, most prominently by Chinua Achebe. Achebe wrote his essay now over twenty years ago. Since it was published, there have been several responses that have apparently revealed the many problems with his argument to demonstrate solidly its ineffectuality. Many of these responses are developed in terms of an opposition between the African author who speaks out of his “race”—therefore only with hostility—and the critical expert—the “objective” European critic. These responses are therefore mounted in terms of Achebe’s “misrepresentation” of Conrad’s text; in terms of Conrad’s difference from other European authors at the time; and in terms of the invalidity of bringing a contemporary understanding of race and racism—assumed uncritically to be a progress over the past—to bear on a text of the 1890s. First, I want to unravel some aspects of these responses and examine the structures they rely on. Next, I want to ask why, given the apparently extremely ill-thought-out bases of Achebe’s argument, do Conradians continue to “answer” him?

My point of entry into the discussion of race in *Heart of Darkness* is not an attempt to lay to rest the question whether or not Conrad was a racist, even if such a project were possible. So, I do not intend to work through Achebe’s specific charges and the responses to them with the aim of showing the rightness or wrongness of either. Instead I want to use the responses to Achebe’s essay in order to enter a different kind of discussion, one that will enable us, by our addressing the assumptions behind these critiques, to view his charge of racism from a fresh perspective. I should clarify immediately that the essays I am considering here are those that choose to respond to Achebe directly and not the many other works that address race, empire, and colony in increasingly more novel and challenging ways. I should also clarify that throughout this essay, when I say the Euro-American academy, I am referring not only to the geographical regions evoked by the term but also to a strain of critical inquiry that is found as much in South Africa and India as it is in Pennsylvania and Stockholm. What I am referring to is an epistemological rather than a geographical position. It is not easy, of course, to categorize this strain without resorting to gross simplifications, but I hope, as I proceed, that some of the assumptions and approaches that help define this academy will become clearer.

To begin with, let me sum up what I see as the main concern of Achebe’s argument. In his essay “An Image of Africa,” initially presented as the Chancellor’s Lecture at the University of Massachusetts in 1975, Achebe uses *Heart of Darkness* to develop the following argument: that there is “the desire—one might indeed say the need—in western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe, a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar in comparison with which Europe’s own state of spiritual grace will be manifest.” Achebe makes this point early in the essay and arrives at it via two episodes; the first is an encounter with an older man who expresses wonder and surprise at the very notion of African literature. The second moment is a letter from a high school student expressing delight that Achebe’s novel, *Things Fall Apart*, taught him about the “customs and superstitions of an African tribe” (782). In this second episode, Achebe stresses the unquestioned Western assumption that tribes are to be found elsewhere, particularly in Africa. Both these moments Achebe sees as symptomatic of the Western psychological need to set Africa up as a place of negations. Only via his interest in this larger argument does he approach Conrad and *Heart of Darkness*; he does so to explore this symptom in more detail, this time as a novelist reading a novel. I have spent so much time on this opening because it is important, I think, to view Achebe’s entire essay, including his charge that “Conrad was a bloody racist,” within the larger context Achebe is at some pains to establish.

Why does Achebe choose *Heart of Darkness* as opposed to some other novel which might just as well or better demonstrate his case? The reason is crucial, I think, to an understanding of his main concern. Achebe
says: “Conrad … is undoubtedly one of the great stylists of modern fiction and a good storyteller into the bargain. His contribution therefore falls automatically into a different class—permanent literature—read and taught and constantly evaluated by serious academics” (783). Conrad's place, as Achebe suggests, in the canon of high literature is so secure that it insulates the novel against the kind of polemical reading Achebe mounts. Subsequent responses to his essay might well be read as only underscoring his point.

Let us now glance at some of the responses to Achebe. There are many, many essays that set out to undermine Achebe's reading. Here I will focus chiefly on Hunt Hawkins's “The Issue of Racism in Heart of Darkness” and also Cedric Watts's “A Bloody Racist: About Achebe's View of Conrad.” Hawkins's essay is short, with a series of “defenses” of Conrad, and utilizes all those features that we see in other responses to Achebe as well. His essay is therefore a sort of ur-example of the kind of approach I am interested in examining and offers me a convenient anchor through what follows next. Watts's essay, too, is an important response to Achebe, a fact well-underscored by its inclusion in the Critical Assessments series edited by Keith Carabine.

The main perspective that critics use to frame their response to Achebe is the idea that he reduces the complexity of Conrad's novel by his mean-minded appraisal of its construction of race. Hawkins's essay begins with this point, although he arrives at it after granting Achebe some validity. Hawkins says that an argument such as Achebe's brings “a fresh perspective to Conrad studies,” carries “a measure of truth,” and that “the image which Conrad projects of African life could hardly be called flattering” (163). In the very next sentence, though, Hawkins goes on to say that “it is overly severe simply to write Conrad off as a racist” (163). Instead, Hawkins suggests that a better understanding of Conrad's “complexity” can be reached by “studying the series of defenses which can, and have, and should be offered on his behalf” (164-165).

Immediately, then, before we even begin the critique of Achebe, a certain structure has been put in place. This structure posits Achebe and his position as “simplistic” against which is pitted the complexity of not only Conrad but the Conradian critic responsive to this complexity and therefore one able to reproduce it in his reading. Conrad and the appropriate critic then join forces in order to undermine Achebe's reading.

How indeed does Hawkins arrive at the charge that Achebe “simply writes Conrad off as a racist?” If indeed Achebe were doing so, would he spend the better part of an essay on the enterprise? Would he not dismiss Conrad as he does other writers, for instance, and thereby write Conrad off? In fact, I would suggest that because Achebe cannot simply write Conrad off as a racist, he writes his critical essay in the first place. My summary of Achebe's essay earlier demonstrates, I think, that because Achebe takes Conrad and his work seriously, no such simple “writing off” is possible at all. Further, Hawkins's swift but certain move to reduce Achebe's essay to a simple “writing off” illustrates the point Achebe tries to make in his essay: that Conrad's place in the canon of high-literature is so secure that it blinds the reader and critic to the operations of racism in the text. It seems that in mainstream Conrad criticism, a charge such as racism can only be approached as a sign of a simple reductive reading as opposed to a valid approach, one amongst many, surely, but nevertheless valid, that a critical reader might bring to the novel.

In a similar vein, Cedric Watts's argument is peppered with statements that essentially reduce Achebe's position to simple-mindedness. So, Watts says: “In Things Fall Apart, Achebe showed himself capable of fine discriminations; it is a pity that that capacity appears to have been eroded by bitterness” (406). Other comments such as “spleen has clouded his judgement” or that Achebe is “unable to perceive” (410) only perpetuate a structure in which the critic who sees racism as a valuable charge is reduced to being blinded by external pressures so that the complexity of the text, and indeed of its possible readings, is evaded. Why is it that the charge of racism has to be reduced to a simplification as indeed no other kind of critical approach does? How many papers have we all read on Heart of Darkness with titles such as “Marlow as Buddha: Wisdom or Perversion,” or “Marlow's Journey to Hades,” or “Colour Imagery in Heart of Darkness,” or “The Heart of Horror” or even “The Art of Horror” etc.? Why is it that all these works and their limited interests can be seen as contributing to the body of knowledge on Heart of Darkness without it being necessary to dismiss the readings as simplistic? Why, then, is racism seen as the sole issue that reduces the text as opposed
To develop further the “simplicity” of Achebe's argument, critics resort to another gesture familiar in almost all critiques of Achebe's essay. This gesture relies on the use of another “Third World” writer or critic, with a view opposed to Achebe's, to suggest that his perspective is indeed mean-minded. Hawkins, therefore, relies on the Kenyan novelist Leonard Kibera, who says “I study *Heart of Darkness* as an examination of the West itself and not as a comment on Africa” (Hawkins 64). Further on in the essay, Hawkins quotes the positive comments made by the Sri Lankan critic D. C. R. A. Goonetilleke and the black South African Ezekiel Mphahale as additional evidence that Achebe's view is jaundiced. Similarly, Watts says, “I have taken heart from my acquaintance Lewis Nkosi, the black playwright and critic, who has worked on Conrad with me at Sussex” (405). What is the interest in quoting other “Third World” voices here? The argument is unstated but is in fact quite clear. Other “Third World” writers, all immediately assumed to have a critical understanding and interest in questions of race and racism, do not think Conrad racist. Therefore, Achebe is hostile and blinkered. What is troublesome in this sort of move is the essentializing of race the gesture relies on. Basically, this essentializing suggests that only blacks and browns can address meaningfully what is or is not racist. Therefore, since several “colored” folk have found Conrad praiseworthy, Achebe's position is by no means valid. This strategy enables an evasion of Achebe's argument while his position is undermined by pitting one Third-World voice against another, and where it is already clear which perspective we are supposed to find limited.

Let us consider some of the assumptions that go into such a move. I think it is clear that the evocation of Third-World voices is necessary for these critics because all folks from the Third World are supposed to be interested in and critical of issues of race and racism. They are also supposed to, instinctually, have greater access to these nuances. The issue of racism, therefore, is made into an instinctual field, an issue that is felt or unfelt depending on the color of the critic. Questions surrounding racism are thus denied any scholarly validity; if color determines one's knowledge then surely the realm of research and study in understanding racism has been effectively bypassed.

Watts says: “Achebe is black and I am white. … There seems to be an insinuation, as Achebe proceeds, that whites are disqualified on racial grounds from judging the text” (405). Where is this insinuation in Achebe's argument? Yes, Achebe suggests that white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its operations are completely missed in a text such as *Heart of Darkness*. But from this point, how do we get to the insinuation that whites are disqualified from judging the text? To my mind, we don't. Instead, it seems to me that Achebe presents his argument precisely in order to jostle the white establishment into a consideration of race that would allow them to see its operations even in texts considered high literature. But a move such as Watts's, I think, perpetuates a dangerous distinction between black and white and virtually implies that there are areas of critical study intrinsic to different color groups. Surely if Achebe is arguing that only blacks are qualified to comment on race in *Heart of Darkness*, there is no room at all for any kind of dialogue or debate and he might just as well not have bothered writing his essay at all. This essentializing of racial difference and the critical knowledge it apparently brings in its wake only makes it impossible to disagree with Achebe's charge that the West produces and reproduces a racial “Other” against which it can profitably measure itself.

Further, when white critics say, as some do, that they are not equipped to talk of race because they are white, an absolute and final marginalization of the issue is being undertaken. A tremendous and dangerous abdication of responsibility is going on here. Not only is whiteness also a construct, but much recent critical work addresses this construction in ways which allow access to the cultural and sociological pressures that determine it. So, certainly the very notion of whiteness as somehow a given needs to be questioned. And the critic who absolves himself or herself of the authority for a meaningful engagement with the question of race is the critic who refuses to hear an Achebe and who contributes, ironically, to exactly the kind of problem a text such as *Heart of Darkness* poses.
A further defense Hawkins and others offer is that although Africans are presented as negative, so too are Europeans, in fact even more so. What is the nature of this defense? Does the fact that Conrad casts a critical eye upon all he surveys exonerate him from Achebe's charge, even if we agreed that this eye was impartial in its critique or even in the balance more critical of Europeans? I think not. For surely the point that Conrad has his problems with Europeans and their greed and excesses cannot neutralize the case Achebe and others make regarding his racist view towards Africans? This sort of argument refuses to take on the reasons why Achebe argues for the dehumanization of blacks, which Hawkins himself, as I have pointed out, could agree with in part. If we can agree that Conrad's presentation of Africans is selectively and specifically derogatory, as his presentation of Europeans is not, then surely suggesting an equivalence between his representations of both groups is deliberately naive.

Another common argument along the same lines states that Conrad proffers many positive comments on Africans which Achebe chooses to ignore. Cedric Watts finds some of these moments in Conrad's presentation of Africans as “vital” in sharp contrast to the “hollow” Europeans. Watts says that, far from dehumanizing blacks as Achebe suggests, Conrad presents them as “by far the happiest, healthiest, and most vital” (407). However, as much recent work on colonial discourse has shown us, vitality and naturalness are by no means unqualified positive statements. Quite the contrary. Let us remember that this “naturalness” of the “native,” was one of the chief arguments that justified the civilizing mission of the Europeans, for it was this natural vital energy that needed to be reined in. One of the commonest tropes in colonial discourse pits the knowledge/power of the European against the natural, instinctual, purely physical energy of the native. How then can we celebrate the vitality of the Africans in the novel?

The most important argument made against Achebe is the one that states that Conrad was ahead of his time. Cedric Watts says: “If Achebe had but recalled that Heart of Darkness appeared in 1899, when Victoria was on the throne, when imperialistic fervour was extreme and the Boer War soon to begin, he might have been more prepared to recognize various unconventional qualities of Conrad's tale” (406). Hawkins argues that Marlow learns to recognize the humanity of the Africans, and that “such a recognition on the part of Marlow, and Conrad, was remarkable for his era” (168). At the same time, this argument also resorts to placing Conrad in his time. Hawkins, therefore, quoting Sarvan, says Conrad “was not entirely immune to the infection of the beliefs and attitudes of his age” but he was “ahead of most in trying to break free” (169). Robert Hampson points out that the readers of Blackwood's Magazine, where the story first appeared, would have been, like Marlow's audience on the Nellie, made up of males of the colonial class whose attitudes would be fairly predictable. Hampson argues that Conrad therefore shapes his story with this audience in mind. Let us accept these positions and accept that, given Conrad's moment, it is hardly surprising that the text reflects certain attitudes and that Conrad, by proffering a critique of at least some aspects of imperialism, undermines any simple celebration of it. However, there are two parts to this argument: the one stressing Conrad's difference from other writers of the 1890s, and the other stressing the many codes he shared with them. For an understanding of Achebe and specifically his charge of racism, it seems to me obvious that we must consider the second of these positions. For if we accept Conrad's historical and cultural location, must we not also accept that his views are shaped by that moment and indeed the very ontological possibilities available to him in the 1890s? To my mind, not acknowledging this locatedness, with its constraints that we may now find troubling, is to force Conrad and his text into a dangerous aspecificity.

What is at stake if we agreed with Achebe that Conrad was a racist? Usually, critics tend to find it reductive that we bring to Conrad a perspective tinged by our own times and our apparently more progressive attitudes towards race and difference. So, the argument goes, is it not unfair that we read Conrad after, for instance, having read Achebe? Watts says, “Marlow, however, cannot be blamed for lacking the benefit of Things Fall Apart, which appeared nearly sixty years after he told his tale” (408). How could one argue against Watts here? But at the same time, surely it behooves us, as readers of Heart of Darkness almost a hundred years after it first appeared, to read from our times? If these times are supposed to be an advance over the sort of reductive thinking of a century ago, then surely we should be able to call a work racist because we think it is
so, without claiming that some abhorrent and irreparable damage has been done to the institutions of high culture.

But therein lies the rub, because the problem with accepting Heart of Darkness as relying on dangerous racist tropes threatens the august institutions of high culture. And this threat, in the twenty years since Achebe wrote his essay, has only increased. How else can we understand the constant need to write back to him? Achebe's essay on Heart of Darkness is by no means the final or best word on the constructions of race in Conrad. Especially now, it is only one work amongst many that deals with the question of race in the novel. Yet he remains the critic to be responded to, as is amply demonstrated by Phil Joffe's essay at the 1991 Poland conference, subsequently published in the proceedings in 1993. Joffe's essay, too, approaches the question of race in the terms that have been relied on by Conradians since Achebe first published his piece. So, we find the familiar polarity between the simplicity of Achebe's position against which is pitted the “complexity of Conrad's text,” a complexity that Joffe's students also seem to divine, for he says students “register the ambivalences and contradictions in Marlow's discourse without concluding that Conrad has a racist agenda” (84). Given that Joffe teaches in South Africa, to a diverse group of students, the effect this statement is supposed to have is clear.

If indeed the bases of Achebe's argument are entirely too simplistic, why has it not been possible to dismiss his essay entirely? The fact that Achebe is a prominent writer is not enough of an answer, for surely there are many other instances where prominent writers have written pieces that have not been considered worth the kind of debate Achebe has generated? Not only has this not been the case but Achebe's argument seems to have offered the most commonly used structure for approaching race in the novel. Anybody who works on Conrad and/or teaches Heart of Darkness in the Anglo-American academy (and beyond) is by now familiar with Achebe's 1975 essay and his infamous charge that Conrad was “a bloody racist.” While Achebe's 1978 piece revised the phrase to read, “Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist,” the former phrase has become an almost as entrenched quotation as Conrad's own “the horror, the horror.” With the inclusion of Achebe's essay in the Norton Critical edition of 1988, Achebe's perspective has become virtually as canonized as Conrad's novel, so that Conrad and Achebe are often taught in the Euro-American academy alongside each other. Now that Heart of Darkness is taught virtually inseparably from the Achebe essay, one could read the inclusion of Achebe in college curricula to signify an acknowledgment, albeit uneasy, of the significance of addressing race when exploring the novella. Yet I would like us to consider the inclusion of Achebe's essay as an instance of the marginalization of race as a significant theoretical issue in the teaching of literature.

Achebe deploys a certain train of binary thinking in his essay, with the intent, I think, of shocking and deliberately provoking the critical establishment. Ironically, though, his provocation has led the mainstream Euro-American academy to engage with the question of race, racism, and racial difference in Conrad only in terms that perpetuate and indeed strengthen these binary distinctions. Achebe's essay was presented in 1975, long before the canon wars and long before postcolonial readings gained a firm ground. It is not surprising that Achebe's essay is deliberately meant to provoke. But how do we explain the obsessive need not only to respond to Achebe but to do so only in terms that solidify differences between black and white, between simplicity and complexity, between the appropriate historical or ahistorical readings? I think only if we accept a refusal on the part of this academy to allow race and its constructions to be anything other than reductive approaches. Because Achebe's famous charge can be read as “extreme,” it becomes possible to dismiss his argument rather than take it seriously. Rarely does the critic consider the larger argument Achebe is trying to mount, which he establishes at the beginning of his essay.

Heart of Darkness is a text read and evaluated constantly. In order to understand Achebe's frustrated rage and indeed to understand the politics of race surrounding the novel, the fact that Heart of Darkness exists as a “classic” cannot be ignored. A “classic” in its materiality exists quite differently than, say, a work like Haggard's King Solomon's Mines. As a text of high modernism and a work considered “among the half-dozen greatest short novels in the English novel” (Achebe 783), Heart of Darkness also needs to be approached in
terms of its popularity in literature courses in Europe, America, and India. The text has a life much larger than the story it apparently tells, and this larger life forces us to pause and consider the kind of weight a "classic" carries, the making of canons, and the role of the critic and the teacher in the production and perpetuation of canons and of their sacrosanct status. All these aspects of Heart of Darkness's iconic status cannot be ignored for a full understanding of why the discussions of race and racism in the novel have been so charged and virulent.

The canonization of Achebe's "An Image of Africa," sets the terms and limits of discussions of race and empire in Anglo-American college classrooms. The inclusion of Achebe in the critical canon allows us to find ourselves within a familiar Conradian structure, a structure where Conrad needs to be rescued by the complex critic from the contaminated space of "racism" and brought back firmly to the world of high literature. For clearly we are on a battlefield. Hawkins, remember, felt it necessary to offer defenses on Conrad's behalf. The situation might be described something like this: Conrad has been attacked, he is under siege, and rescue is necessary. Defenses must be proffered, and who better to do so than the critic who has access to his complexity because, indeed, he shares it. This is a structure that Conradian critics are familiar with, evoking as it does those Conradian structures "between men." I am thinking here of the group on the Nellie, or the recurring construction of "us" that patterns Lord Jim. Several critics have argued for Marlow's need to rescue a Jim or a Kurtz for this world of men. This pattern is echoed in the structure of rescue I've been exploring, where the Conrad critic needs to rescue Conrad and his text from the charge of "racism" in order to bring him back to the canon of "high" art, where "racism" needs must have a more shadowy and contested existence.

Notes


2. I want to thank Jakob Lothe for inviting me to speak on Achebe in Oslo in 1996. I appreciate responses I received there from him, Cedric Watts, Jeremy Hawthorn, and Andrew Roberts.

3. I am thinking here of work such as Chris Bongie's Exotic Memories (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991) or Christopher Gogwilt's Joseph Conrad and the Invention of the West (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), which approach imperialism, colonialism, and racism by taking into account a range of historical and sociological complexity. It is also only fair to point out that the positions taken by Hawkins and Watts in the essays I discuss here do not represent both critics' substantive work historicizing and politicizing readings of Conrad.


5. The Critical Assessments series makes a significant contribution to the production of a canon of Conrad criticism. The monumental four-volume set contains a separate segment devoted to Heart of Darkness with the following subtitle: "Race, Imperialism and the Third World." The confluence of terms here only underscores my argument later in this essay that matters of "race" are perceived by the critical establishment as separate from "critical," "literary" assessments. Only such an understanding helps me explain the place and position of the "third world" in the title. See Keith Carabine, ed., Joseph Conrad: Critical Assessments, 4 vols. (Sussex: Helm Information, 1992).
6. My argument has been sharpened by Hunt Hawkins' responses to both an oral and written version of this paper. I am grateful to him for the careful reading and commentary he offered on an earlier version of this essay. Our dialogue has led both of us to complicate our readings of Achebe and of the critics. Were we to write our respective essays today, neither of us would do so in their current form/s since we would both be posing different questions.

7. All these titles have, of course, been fabricated.

8. See, for instance, Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), a provocative examination of the Africanist presence in American literature. See also Ruth Frankenberg's work on the construction of whiteness and several recent issues of *American Quarterly* devoted to the topic.


**Heart of Darkness, Joseph Conrad: Further Reading**

**CRITICISM**


Investigates the role of the two women in the waiting room in *Heart of Darkness*.


Maintains that “one of the central themes of *Heart of Darkness* is Europe's wanton destruction of Africa.”


Examines the representation of Africans in *Heart of Darkness* and contends that Conrad's attitude toward imperialism in the novella is ambiguous.


Focuses on Marlow's personal journey in *Heart of Darkness*.


Considers Conrad’s attitude toward women through an examination of *Heart of Darkness*.


Views *Heart of Darkness* as an exploration of English liberal nationalism and cultural imperialism.

Asserts that “Marlow's narrative is the account of his coming to the awareness that mankind's most cherished belief, that civilization is ennobling, is the most deadly act of self-deception.”


Probes Marlow's relationship with the Russian sailor in Heart of Darkness.


Contends that the white fog incident in Heart of Darkness functions to clarify “issues concerning western civilization and western world view.”


Contends that Heart of Darkness is a text inaccessible to female readers and regards Conrad's book as essentially a male-oriented fiction.


Considers the “tricky line between adventure critic and adventurer that Marlow is attempting to tow throughout Heart of Darkness.”

Additional coverage of Conrad's life and career is contained in the following sources published by the Gale Group: Authors and Artists for Young Adults, Vol. 26; Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: Biography & Resources, Vol. 1; Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults, Vol. 2; British Writers, Vol. 6; British Writers: The Classics, Vol. 1; British Writers Retrospective Supplement, Vol. 2; Concise Dictionary of British Literary Biography, 1890-1914; Contemporary Authors, Vol. 131; Contemporary Authors, Vol. 104; Contemporary Authors New Revision Series, Vol. 60; Dictionary of Literary Biography, Vols. 10, 34, 98, 156; DISCovering Authors; DISCovering Authors: British Edition; DISCovering Authors: Canadian Edition; DISCovering Authors Modules: Most-studied Authors and Novelists; DISCovering Authors 3.0; Encyclopedia of World Literature in the 20th Century, Ed. 3; Exploring Novels; Exploring Short Stories; Literary Movements for Students, Vol. 1; Literature and Its Times, Vol. 2; Literature Resource Center; Literature and Its Times Supplement, Ed. 1; Major 20th-Century Writers, Eds. 1, 2; Novels for Students, Vols. 2, 16; Reference Guide to English Literature, Ed. 2; Reference Guide to Short Fiction, Ed. 2; Short Stories for Students, Vols. 1, 12; Short Story Criticism, Vols. 9, 67; Something About the Author, Vol. 27; Twayne's English Authors; Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism, Vols. 1, 6, 13, 25, 43, 57; World Literature and Its Times, Ed. 4; and World Literature Criticism.

Analysis

Point of View
Heart of Darkness is framed as a story within a story. The point of view belongs primarily to Charlie Marlow, who delivers the bulk of the narrative, but Marlow's point of view is in turn framed by that of an unnamed narrator who provides a first-person description of Marlow telling his story. The point of view can also be
seen in a third consciousness in the book, that of Conrad himself, who tells the entire tale to the reader, deciding as author which details to put in and which to leave out. Beyond these three dominant points of view are the individual viewpoints of the book's major characters. Each has a different perspective on Kurtz. These perspectives are often conflicting and are always open to a variety of interpretations. Whose point of view is to be trusted? Which narrator and which character is reliable? Conrad leaves these questions to the reader to answer, accounting for the book's complexity and multilayered meanings.

**Setting**
The novel takes place in the 1890s and begins on a boat sitting in the River Thames, which leads from London to the sea, waiting for the tide to turn. Marlow's story takes the reader briefly onto the European continent (Belgium) and then deep into Africa by means of a trip up the Congo River to what was then called the Belgian Congo, and back to Europe again. The Congo is described as a place of intense mystery whose stifling heat, whispering sounds, and strange shifts of light and darkness place the foreigner in a kind of trance that produces fundamental changes in the brain, causing acts that range from the merely bizarre to the most extreme and irrational violence.

**Structure**
The book's structure is cyclical, both in geography and chronology. It begins in the 1890s, goes back several years, and returns to the present. The voyage describes almost a perfect circle, beginning in Europe, traveling into the heart of the African continent, coming out again, and returning almost to the exact spot at which it began. The novel was originally published in serial form, breaking off its segments at moments of high drama to make the reader eager to pick up the next installment. When the full text was published in 1902, it was divided into three parts. Section I takes the story from the present-day life of the unidentified narrator to Marlow's tale, which began many years before and unfolds over a period of several months. This section leads from London into Belgium and from there to the Congo's Central Station. It ends with Marlow expressing a limited curiosity about where Kurtz's supposed moral ideas will lead him. Section II takes the journey through a series of difficulties as it proceeds deeper into the African interior and finally arrives, some two months later, at the Inner Station. It is here that Marlow meets the Russian and is told that Kurtz has “enlarged” his mind. Section III covers the period from Marlow's eventual meeting with Kurtz to his return to Europe.

**Symbolism**
The title of the book itself, *Heart of Darkness*, alerts the reader to the book's symbols, or items that suggest deeper interpretations beyond their literal meanings. The “heart of darkness” serves both as an image of the interior of a dark and foreign continent as well as the interior workings of the mind of man, which are dark and foreign to all observers. The literal journey into the jungle is a metaphor, or symbol, for the journey into the uncharted human soul. On another level, the voyage into the wilderness can be read as a voyage back to Eden, or to the very beginning of the world. On still another level, the actual trip into and then out of the African continent can be seen as a metaphor for sin and redemption. It parallels the descent into the depths of human degradation and death (in Kurtz's case; near-death in Marlow's) and the return to the light, or life. As the book begins, the *Nellie* is waiting for the tide to turn. This can also be taken as a metaphor for the brewing revolution in the Congo at the time, for the tide of history was about to turn. The dying Kurtz himself, who is half-French and half-English and of whom Marlow says, “All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz,” can be seen as a symbol for a decaying western civilization. Other symbols in the book include the river, whose flow, sometimes fast and sometimes stagnant, mirrors the stream of life; the knitting women waiting outside Marlow's interview room, who recall the Fates of Greek mythology and thus can be seen as potential judges; and the cross-legged pose in which Marlow sits during his narration, suggesting the figure of the enlightened Buddha and thus a kind of supreme wisdom. The presentation of Kurtz as a talker, a voice who enlarges the mind of his listeners, can also be taken as a symbol for Conrad himself. As a writer, Conrad talks to his listening readers and enlarges their view of the world. Marlow's function, too, is a metaphor for the author's: they both tell stories; they both make people see and feel.
Analysis: Places Discussed

*London

*London. Capital and largest city of Great Britain. The story opens with five men on a cruising yawl on the River Thames on a hazy evening at sundown. One of the men present is named Marlow. He is the only one of the men who is still active as a sailor or naval officer. Marlow begins telling a long story by remarking that the Thames has a dark history. He is referring to ancient times when the Romans first colonized England. At that time, London was an uncivilized place for the relatively sophisticated Romans to be entering.

*Brussels

*Brussels. Capital city of Belgium. Marlow tells a story concerning his voyage to the heart of the African continent. The company that has hired Marlow to fix a river steamer and become its captain is headquartered in Brussels. At the time of the story, the 1890’s, Belgium was a colonial power in control of a large portion of central Africa. Marlow must visit the company offices to obtain his commission and get orders concerning his new job. The people who work at the company headquarters treat him as though they do not expect him to return. The entire story Marlow tells shows that he has strong contempt for the way the Belgians have managed the country. He compares the city to a sepulcher—white on the outside but full of rotting bones.

*Congo River

*Congo River. Greatest waterway in Central Africa. Joseph Conrad never names these places by their proper names, but it is obvious from his descriptions of them and their place on the map of Africa that he is referring to Congo Free State and to the lengthy Congo River. Marlow also discusses the company’s lower station and a central station, analogous to Stanley Falls, far up the Congo River in the center of Africa. The trip that the steamer, captained by Marlow, makes up the Congo River to relieve Kurtz is eventful and dangerous both because of African attacks and because of tropical diseases. The journey into the heart of the dark rain forest is symbolic of the journey into the dark depths of the human soul.

Analysis: Historical Context

European Presence in Africa

In 1890 Joseph Conrad secured employment in the Congo as the captain of a river steamboat; this was also the approximate year in which the main action of Heart of Darkness takes place. Illness forced Conrad's return home after only six months in Africa, but that was long enough for intense impressions to have been formed in the novelist's mind. Today, the river at the center of Heart of Darkness is called the Zaire and the country is the Democratic Republic of the Congo, but at the time Conrad wrote of them, the country was the Belgian Congo and the river the Congo.

European explorers first discovered the Congo River in 1482 and maintained a presence on it for hundreds of years thereafter, never traveling more than two hundred miles upstream. It was not until 1877, after the English-born American explorer Henry Morton Stanley had completed a three-year journey across central Africa, that the exact length and course of the mighty Congo River were known. Stanley discovered that the Congo extends some 1,600 miles into Africa from its eastern coast to its western edge, where the river empties into the Atlantic Ocean, and that only one stretch of it is impassable. That section lies between Matadi, two hundred miles in from the mouth of the Congo, and Kinshasa, yet another two hundred miles further inland. In Heart of Darkness, Conrad calls Matadi the Company Station and Kinshasa the Central Station. Between those two places, one is forced to proceed by land, which is exactly what Marlow does on his “two hundred-mile tramp” between the two Stations, described in the book.
In 1878, King Leopold II (reigned 1865-1909) of Belgium asked Stanley to found a Belgian colony in the Congo. The King charged Stanley with setting up outposts along the Congo River, particularly at Matadi. Leopold II described his motives to the rest of Europe as springing from a desire to end slavery in the Congo and civilize the natives, but his actual desires were for material gain. In 1885, at the Congress of Berlin, an international committee agreed to the formation of a new country to be known as the Congo Free State. In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad refers to this committee as the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs. Leopold II, who was to be sole ruler of this land, never set foot in the Congo Free State. Instead, he formed a company, called simply the Company in *Heart of Darkness*, that ran the country for him.

The Ivory Trade
A prevalent feeling among Europeans of the 1890s was that the African peoples required introduction to European culture and technology in order to become more evolved. The responsibility for that introduction, known as the “white man's burden,” gave rise to a fervor to bring Christianity and commerce to Africa. What the Europeans took out of Africa in return were huge quantities of ivory. During the 1890s, at the time *Heart of Darkness* takes place, ivory was in enormous demand in Europe, where it was used to make jewelry, piano keys, and billiard balls, among other items. From 1888 to 1892, the amount of ivory exported from the Congo Free State rose from just under 13,000 pounds to over a quarter of a million pounds. Conrad tells us that Kurtz was the best agent of his time, collecting as much ivory as all the other agents combined.

In 1892, Leopold II declared all natural resources in the Congo Free State to be his property. This meant the Belgians could stop dealing with African traders and simply take what they wanted themselves. As a consequence, Belgian traders pushed deeper into Africa in search of new sources of ivory, setting up stations all along the Congo River. One of the furthermost stations, located at Stanley Falls, was the likely inspiration for Kurtz's Inner Station.

Belgian Atrocities in the Congo
The Belgian traders committed many well-documented acts of atrocity against the African natives, including the severing of hands and heads. Reports of these atrocities reached the European public, leading to an international movement protesting the Belgian presence in Africa. These acts, reflected in *Heart of Darkness*, continued, despite an order by Leopold II that they cease. In 1908, after the Belgian parliament finally sent its own review board into the Congo to investigate, the king was forced to give up his personal stake in the area, and control of the Congo reverted to the Belgian government. The country was granted its independence from Belgium in 1960, and changed its name from the Democratic Republic of Congo to Zaire in 1971. A relatively bloodless revolution in 1997 returned the country's name to the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Analysis: Setting
The story opens as a nameless narrator aboard the cruising yawl *Nellie*, anchored in the Thames River in England, begins to relate secondhand the story of Charlie Marlow's river voyage in the Belgian Congo. Set in the late nineteenth century, most of the story takes place at outposts along the river, each of which brings Marlow closer to his quarry: the Belgian trader, Mr. Kurtz. At the end of the story, Marlow returns to Brussels to visit Kurtz's fiancee. The setting of *Heart of Darkness* is practically indistinguishable from the novella's symbolic framework. The rich cultural details and natural symbols afforded by the African landscape surround Marlow, consume Kurtz, and shed light upon Conrad's exploration of man's inner darkness.

Analysis: Literary Techniques
Conrad uses a variety of techniques to advance his narrative and to imbue it with a parable like quality of universal experience extrapolated from specific incidents. The technique of narrative frame, while not original with Conrad and pervasive in medieval story-telling as in Chaucer and Boccaccio, became in his hands a
newly fashioned instrument both for distancing events from the narrator and plunging the narrator into them. Conrad's narrative is often related by an anonymous narrator who identifies so strongly with Marlow that his own identity and Marlow's become interchangeable. Usually, the anonymous narrator is describing the events of Marlow's recent past, such as a voyage to darkest Africa. But Marlow's character is much more complex than the anonymous narrator recognizes, and so Marlow must speak for himself as he relates his distant past—a past which the anonymous narrator has no knowledge of. This interchange between the narrator's perception of Marlow's journey and Marlow's own account establishes irony both in point of view and in narrative voice.

Another important technique is Conrad's highly charged and sometimes poetic language, his use of light and darkness, color and chiaroscuro in descriptive passages of considerable beauty. This use of language highlights the concrete details of observation and opens out to the reader a range of emotion which the details evoke in both the narrators and in the reader. His language, moreover, gives not only a clear sense of physical place but also hints at the effect of the exterior landscape upon the interior landscape in a carefully articulated polyphonic counterpoint.

**Analysis: Literary Qualities**

Conrad uses a variety of techniques to advance his narrative and to imbue it, like a parable, with a quality of universality derived from specific experience. The technique of the narrative frame, while pervasive in the medieval tale-telling of such poets as Geoffrey Chaucer and Giovanni Boccaccio, became in Conrad's hands a newly fashioned instrument that allowed the narrator to be a distant observer of events he had witnessed. As is the case in many of Conrad's works of fiction, *Heart of Darkness* is related by an anonymous narrator who identifies so strongly with Marlow that the two characters' identities merge. The anonymous narrator describes events of Marlow's recent past, but Marlow must speak for himself as he relates his distant past—a complex psychological matrix of which the anonymous narrator has no knowledge. The interplay between the narrator's perception of Marlow's journey and Marlow's own account establishes irony in both point of view and narrative voice. Conrad's highly charged and sometimes poetic language, combined with his use of light and darkness, highlights the author's powers of observation and evokes a range of emotion transferred from narrator to reader. Conrad's language, moreover, not only gives a clear sense of physical place but also hints at the effect of exterior setting upon the interior landscape of the soul.

*Heart of Darkness* has stylistic precedents in the tales of Chaucer and Boccaccio, and thematic precedents in the epic poetry of Virgil and Dante. Its dark vision of the universe recalls the novels of Thomas Hardy. Building upon the tradition of the Victorian novel and the history of the British Empire, Conrad and several of his contemporaries began to develop tales of adventure and travel set in exotic places. Late Victorian writers, such as Robert Louis Stevenson, H. Rider Haggard, and Rudyard Kipling, had already set their works in the South Seas, Africa, and India by the time Conrad began writing. In his use of a protagonist who remains apart but can still be recognized as "one of us," he both shares the Romantic spirit and anticipates twentieth-century literature of alienation. In the love of the sea his tales reflect, he is the literary heir of Homer, Victor Hugo, and Herman Melville.

**Analysis: Social Concerns**

The combined exploitative forces of capitalism and imperialism are the objects of Conrad's social criticism in *Heart of Darkness*, objects that, in varied contexts and settings, he would fix upon in much of his work. In this tale, quarried from his own Congo adventure (1890), Conrad focuses his moral irony on the universe at large and the hollow conventions by which men seek to deal with it. Among the forces at work in the novella are the International Association for the Civilization of Central Africa, founded by the Belgian King Leopold II in 1875 and having as one of its tenets the spread of European and Christian civilization in Africa. This, indeed,
is a major dimension of what was known as "the White Man's Burden" and has its parallel in the novella's International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs to which Kurtz writes a seventeen page report that concludes with an exhortation to exterminate all the brutes. One of Conrad's narrators, Charlie Marlow, undercuts the ostensibly noble motive of civilizing the Congo by remarking that the Thames River and its environs, the seat of the British Empire, had been also one of the dark places of the earth, an outpost of the Roman Empire, every bit as primitive as the Congo, and the object of unabashed exploitation in the name of conquest and empire. Whatever the motive, the effects upon the conquerors and the conquered are similar. One example among many of the futility of the civilizing venture takes place on the voyage out as the French ship taking Marlow to his post passes a French man-of-war anchored off the coast and shelling an unseen native encampment somewhere in the bush. Nothing happened or could happen; and this takes on, for Marlow, a touch of insanity.

The capitalist mercantile ventures, the handmaidens of imperialism, are the proximate cause of Marlow's freshwater voyage into the vast heart of a continent and into an actual and a symbolic heart of darkness. These ventures have as their object the enhancement of wealth and power in Europe and as their by-products the exploitation both of the native population and also of the traders who are condemned to exploit the natives. From Marlow's first visit to what he calls a dead house in a sepulchral city to his voyage to Africa with fellow travelers who are predominantly soldiers, customs agents or traders, to his encounters with the lost souls at the outposts of progress and his meeting with the much heralded and insane Kurtz, his experience of capitalism at work is expressed in terms of death and decay, and in terms of its dehumanizing power.

Additional Commentary

The combined exploitative forces of capitalism and imperialism are the objects of Conrad's social criticism in Heart of Darkness. Conrad focuses his moral irony on the hollow conventions through which people seek to mold the universe to their own specifications. The imperialists' self-appointed duty to govern and "civilize" nonwhite societies prompted King Leopold II of Belgium to found the International Association for the Civilization of Central Africa in 1875. Dedicated to the propagation of European civilization and Christian tenets throughout Africa, this organization has its parallel in the novella's International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs. Kurtz writes a seventeen-page report to the society that concludes with the exhortation: "Exterminate all the brutes!" Marlow opens his narrative by remarking that the Thames River and its environs, the seat of the British Empire, had also been "one of the dark places of the earth." Once an outpost of the Roman Empire, every bit as primitive as the Congo and the object of unabashed exploitation, England has been both conquered and conqueror, and, as such, demonstrates the blurred line between the two conditions. The civilizing venture proves fickle for both the society whose customs are overthrown and the one whose morals are sacrificed in the name of conquest.

Kurtz's capitalist mercantile ventures, the handmaidens of imperialism, draw Marlow into the vast heart of a continent and into an actual and a symbolic heart of darkness. These ventures are intended to enhance European wealth and power, but their byproducts are the exploitation of the native population and the moral deterioration of the traders. From Marlow's first visit to what he calls "a dead house in a sepulchral city" to his encounters with the lost souls at the outposts of progress and his meeting with the insane Kurtz, his experience is expressed in terms of death, decay, and the dehumanizing power of capitalism at its worst.

Analysis: Compare and Contrast

• **1890s:** The iron steamship has supplanted the sailing ship. The British, French, and Dutch Merchant Marines are associated with colonization and the development of manufacturing. With the introduction of the steel steamship in the mid-nineteenth century, Great Britain takes first place in ship building and shipping.
Today: The turbine and diesel engine bring new power and speed to shipping, and a new age of nuclear-powered shipping is launched. Ocean-going vessels are still the dominant means for world transport of commercial goods.

- **1890s:** The African slave trade has begun to die out in the Belgian Congo. The Brussels Act of 1890 is signed by eighteen nations and greatly limits the slave trade. But forced labor continues in the Congo with appalling brutality as the lucrative trade in rubber and ivory takes up where trade in human beings left off.

Today: Slavery is all but abolished throughout the world, although it is reported to still exist in parts of Africa and Asia.

- **1890s:** Because of the ivory trade, the collection of ivory (present only in the tusks of elephants) thrives in Africa, where elephant tusks are larger than they are in Asia. Antwerp (Belgium) and London are major centers of ivory commerce, with Europe and the U.S. being major importers.

Today: The diminishing number of elephants, due largely to their wholesale slaughter for tusks, leads to a complete ban on ivory trading. A new method of determining the origin of a tusk through DNA testing enables zoologists to fight poaching and determine where the elephant population is large enough to safely permit a limited trade.

- **1890s:** The Congo Free State is established by King Leopold II of Belgium and is to be headed by the King himself. Leopold II never visits the Congo in person, and when reports of atrocities committed there by his agents reach him, he orders that all abuses cease at once. His orders are ignored. Belgium annexes the Congo in 1908.

Today: The Belgian Congo is the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the Congo River is the Zaire. The Congolese army mutinied in 1960 and the Congo was declared independent. In 1989, the country defaults on a loan from Belgium, resulting in the cancellation of development programs. Since 1990, a trend of political turmoil and economic collapse continues, even after a relatively bloodless revolution in 1997.

- **1890s:** Christian Missionaries are very active in the Belgian Congo. They are mostly Roman Catholic and pursue what is known as the "white man's burden" to bring western religion, culture, and technology to the nations of Africa.

Today: More than three-fourths of the inhabitants of the Democratic Republic of the Congo are Christian. Many also follow traditional religious beliefs and a substantial number belong to African Protestant groups. The population of the Congo comprises about two hundred ethnic groups, the majority of whom speak one of the Bantu languages, although the country’s official language is French.

**Analysis: Topics for Discussion**

1. Because of his experiences in Poland, Conrad hated totalitarianism. What evidence do you see of this hatred in *Heart of Darkness*?

2. Marlow opens his story by saying that, during Roman times, England was the heart of the uncivilized world. What point is Marlow trying to make?

3. Why does Kurtz instruct the natives to attack Marlow, who is coming to rescue him?

4. Conrad, who himself experienced exile and loneliness as a child, wrote numerous stories about isolated characters. Does Kurtz's isolation have anything to do with his decline? What inner resources does a person
need to survive?

5. Why doesn't Marlow tell Kurtz's fiancee the truth about Kurtz's final words?

6. What is the significance of Marlow's thinking the Congo River is a snake?

7. What has Marlow learned from his journey? Why does he almost not escape from Africa?

8. What is the importance of Africa as a setting for the novella? Could the story have taken place in any other location and still have the same meaning?

**Analysis: Ideas for Reports and Papers**

1. Critics have pointed out that Marlow's journey is a descent to the underworld, similar to Dante's in *The Divine Comedy*. Explain the critics' position.

2. Watch the film *Apocalypse, Now!* and compare it to the novella. Why is Vietnam an appropriate setting instead of Africa?

3. List all the uses of light and dark or black and white imagery, and explain how they develop the themes of the novella.

4. Discuss how the novel's physical settings reflect the psychological landscape of the characters. Cite examples from the text.

5. Discuss the effect of having an unknown third person tell Marlow's story. Is the story about Kurtz, Marlow, or someone else?

**Analysis: Topics for Further Study**

- Research the Belgian atrocities, committed in the Belgian Congo between 1889 and 1899, and compare them to the evidence of same presented in *Heart of Darkness*.
- Research Henry Stanley's three-year journey (1874-1877) up the Congo River and compare the stations Stanley founded along the river to those mentioned in *Heart of Darkness*.
- Compare the view of women, as presented in *Heart of Darkness*, to today's view. Argue whether Conrad should or should not be considered a sexist by today's standards.
- Compare the view of Africans, as presented in *Heart of Darkness*, to today's view. Argue whether Conrad should or should not be considered a racist by today's standards.
- Research a contemporary psychological study of the effects on an individual of isolation, solitude, or a wild jungle environment and compare it to Kurtz's situation.

**Analysis: Literary Precedents**

*Heart of Darkness* has precedents in the tales of Chaucer and Boccaccio, the epic poetry of Virgil and Dante, in the literature of the Romantic Rebellion and, in its vision of the universe, in the novels of Thomas Hardy. One must also recall Conrad's earlier fiction as setting precedents for this and his other work. With the traditions of the Victorian novel and the history of Empire behind them, Conrad and several of his contemporaries began to develop tales of adventure and travel set in exotic places. Writers of the Romantic Revival in the late Victorian era such as Robert Louis Stevenson, H. Rider Haggard, and Rudyard Kipling had
already set their works in the South Seas, Africa, and India; and Conrad is surely part of the Romantic
Revival, especially in the quest for experience in remote parts of the world. In his use of a protagonist who
can remain apart and alone but who can still recognize "one of us," he both shares the Romantic spirit and
anticipates the literature of alienation of the twentieth century. In his tales and love of the sea he is the literary
heir of Homer, Victor Hugo, and Herman Melville.

Analysis: Related Titles / Adaptations

His first novels, Almayer's Folly (1895) and An Outcast of the Islands (1896), established Conrad as an
observer of persons under stress, self-destructive aliens in a luxurious but decaying environment. The Nigger
of the "Narcissus", the first of Conrad's novels of shipboard life, depicts a crew facing moral problems of
conduct and struggling to survive during a storm at sea. Lord Jim, the foremost artistic work of his early
phase, introduced Marlow, Conrad's famous narrator and alter-ego, and also introduced the author's
experimentation with chronology, narrative, and symmetrical plotting.

In his later period, dating from publication of "The Secret Sharer" and Chance in 1913, Conrad garnered
public appreciation with his novels Victory and The Shadow-Line (1917). Victory is a Dickensian
examination of evil, idealism, and isolation. The Shadow-Line reverts to themes he had explored in "The
Secret Sharer" and Lord Jim—the moral initiation into maturity.

The film Apocalypse, Now! (1979) translates Heart of Darkness to the military world of Southeast Asia during
the Vietnam War. Innovative and compelling, the film stirred considerable critical and public controversy.
Four years in the making with a $30 million budget, the film received much publicity both before and after its
release. Director Francis Ford Coppola, who had also produced The Godfather, treated his subject matter as
art rather than focusing on the social injustices of the Vietnam War, which angered some people. Marlon
Brando starred as Col. Walter E. Kurtz, Martin Sheen as Capt. Benjamin L. Willard, and Robert Duvall as Lt.
Col. Kilgore. Capt. Willard's role—the Marlow of the movie—is to find and kill Kurtz.

Analysis: Media Adaptations

- Directed by Nicolas Roeg. Heart of Darkness was adapted for television and broadcast on TNT in
  1994. The film features Tim Roth as Marlow and John Malkovich as Kurtz, and is available on
  cassette from Turner Home Entertainment.
- The structure of Heart of Darkness was incorporated into Francis Ford Coppola's award-winning
  1979 film Apocalypse Now, starring Marlon Brando and Martin Sheen. The insanities presented in the
  book as stemming from isolation in the African jungle are in the film transposed to the jungles of
- Two sound recordings of Heart of Darkness exist. Both are abridged and produced on two cassettes
  each. One was recorded by HarperCollins in 1969, is narrated by Anthony Quayle, and runs 91
  minutes. The other is a 180-minute recording, published by Penguin-High Bridge audio in 1994, with
  narration by David Threlfall.

Bibliography: Bibliography and Further Reading

Sources


Further Reading


Hewitt, Douglas. Conrad: A Reassessment. Bowes, 1952. Chapter 2 treats Heart of Darkness together with the other early tales that also have Marlow as their narrator.


Bibliography


Hay, Eloise K. *The Political Novels of Joseph Conrad*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963. Presents the view that *Heart of Darkness* is not the masterpiece critical acclaim would suggest. Explores the social events and political climate of the time to show some of the influences on the plot and style.


**Analysis: What Do I Read Next?**

- In *Lord Jim*, published in 1900, another maritime tale, Conrad deals with issues of honor in the face of grave personal danger and colonial imposition of will upon a native people. Marlow again becomes a narrator. Here he tells the story of Jim, a simple sailor who tried and failed to adhere to an honorable code of conduct.
- *Nostromo* (1904), Conrad's largest and most ambitious novel, has multiple heroes and flashes forward and back over a wide time frame. The familiar Conradian preoccupation with colonial interests in remote lands is here transposed to a fictional South American country seething with political unrest.
- Conrad's novel of political terrorism, *The Secret Agent* (1907), illustrates the author's fascination with a hero who, unlike Kurtz, seeks to remain neutral and avoid commitment in a world of conflict. Against his own will, Adolf Verloc, the book's double agent, is forced into actions which result in more than one murder and a suicide.
- Set in the author's native Nigeria, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) shows the tragic effects of European colonialism on one man.
- Winner of the 1991 National Book Award for fiction, *Middle Passage* by Charles Johnson relates the story of a free black man living in New Orleans who stows away on a ship only to discover it is a slave trader bound for Africa.
- In *Travellers in Africa: British Travelogues, 1850-1900*, Volume 1, Tim Youngs collects actual nineteenth-century British accounts of African voyages, and includes discussion of social, cultural, and racial attitudes. The volume includes an analysis of *Heart of Darkness* as a travel account, and compares Marlow's version of the Congo with that of British-American explorer Sir Henry Morton Stanley.

**Analysis: For Further Reference**


**Quotes: Essential Quotes by Character: Kurtz**

**Essential Passage 1: Chapter 1**

One day he remarked, without lifting his head, "In the interior you will no doubt meet Mr. Kurtz." On my asking who Mr. Kurtz was, he said he was a first-class agent; and seeing my disappointment at this information, he added slowly, laying down his pen, "He is a very remarkable person." Further questions elicited from him that Mr. Kurtz was at present in charge of a trading-post, a very important one, in the true ivory-country, at "the very bottom of there. Sends in as much ivory as all the other put together...."

**Summary**

Marlow has come to the Congo to recover the body of a Company captain, Fresleven, who was killed in an argument over two black hens. At the Outer Station, Marlow meets the Company’s chief accountant, who is impeccably dressed and keeps the accounts in immaculate order. While Marlow is waiting to journey further up the river, he visits the accountant, who tells him about Mr. Kurtz. Kurtz is an agent at the Inner Station and most likely the best agent in the Company. It is assumed that he will rise far in business, so great is his promise. Working at a trading post, Kurtz ships out more ivory than all the other agents combined, thus becoming an invaluable financial asset. The accountant, who epitomizes order and civilization in the midst of the chaos of the jungle, elevates Kurtz to a god-like status, one in whom all the hopes of colonialism and civilization reside.

**Essential Passage 2: Chapter 2**

...You should have heard him say, "My ivory." Oh, yes, I heard him. "My Intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my—" everything belonged to him. It made me hold my breath in expectation of hearing the wilderness burst into a prodigious peal of laughter that would shake the fixed stars in their places. Everything belonged to him—but that was a trifle. The thing was to know what he belonged to, how many powers of darkness claimed him for their own. That was the reflection that made you creepy all over. It was impossible—it was not good for one either—trying to imagine it. He had taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land—I mean literally. You can’t understand.

**Summary**
Marlow continues the tale of his travels up the river, occasionally stopping to ponder on the significance of the journey and of the man who was Kurtz. He recalls that Kurtz, in the delirium preceding his death, called out to those things that meant the most to him, things that were “his”—his Intended (fiancée), his ivory, his station, his river. It all belonged to him: he was the god of all he surveyed. Yet Marlow points out that Kurtz himself belonged to the darkness, the evil, that he found in Africa. Kurtz had been absorbed into the heart of darkness. Marlow reflects that this is impossible to fully comprehend for those who have not traveled into such dark regions.

**Essential Passage 3: Chapter 3**

...Soul! If anybody ever struggled with a soul, I am the man. And I wasn't arguing with a lunatic either. Believe me or not, his intelligence was perfectly clear—concentrated, it is true, upon himself with horrible intensity, yet clear; and therein was my only chance—barring, of course, the killing him there and then, which wasn't so good, on account of unavoidable noise. But his soul was mad. Being alone in the wilderness, it had looked within itself, and, by heavens! I tell you, it had gone mad. I had—for my sins, I suppose—to go through the ordeal of looking into it myself. No eloquence could have been so withering to one's belief in mankind as his final burst of sincerity. He struggled with himself, too. I saw it—I heard it. I saw the inconceivable mystery of a soul that knew no restraint, no faith, and no fear, yet struggling blindly with itself. I kept my head pretty well; but when I had him at last stretched on the couch, I wiped my forehead, while my legs shook under me as though I had carried half a ton on my back down that hill. And yet I had only supported him, his bony arm clasped round my neck—and he was not much heavier than a child.

**Summary**

Marlow has arrived at the Outer Station and found Kurtz ill and surrounded by his native “worshippers.” Despite the resistance he knows he will encounter, Marlow intends to carry Kurtz back home to civilization. Initially, Kurtz does not want to leave, because he has become a god to the people in the region. He had even sabotaged Marlow’s boat in order to prevent Marlow from coming to rescue him. Therefore, it is not just the native people with whom Marlow must battle but Kurtz himself. As Marlow finally carries Kurtz to the boat and cares for him there, he sees that the station manager is waging a battle of the soul, a battle between the dark and the light.

**Analysis of Essential Passages**

Kurtz represents an enigma in the philosophy of nineteenth-century colonialism. For colonizing nations, Great Britain in particular, entering third-world countries was ostensibly considered an act of rescue, an act of “saving” native people from the darkness of ignorance and backwardness. Their mission was to be a light to the world.

Yet the character of Kurtz presents a different picture. Because he is a trader in the Congo for financial benefits, it is only Kurtz's secondary mission to bring “light” to the people. His success garners him many enemies among the other traders, yet his reputation among the native population grows to phenomenal heights. He becomes something akin to a god, a living idol to be worshipped.

Marlow recounts that Kurtz is drawn into the darkness that lies at the heart of the wilderness. Rather than changing Africa for the better, Kurtz allows Africa to change him for the worse. Historically, many colonial officials were reported to “go native,” taking a native mistress and immersing themselves in the culture. Yet Kurtz went beyond that. He did not just delve deep into the darkness: he took the native people with him as well.
Marlow presents an interesting insight, however, into the nature of the darkness. Rather than giving a prejudicial portrayal of an “uncivilized” Africa as the source of the darkness, he posits that it is within the human heart that darkness is found. Kurtz, in his isolation, is forced to look deep within his soul, and there he discovers that “spark of darkness” that lives within every human heart. Thus, when Marlow speaks of Kurtz’s madness of soul rather than madness of mind, he presents both his own journey and that of Kurtz as an investigation into “original sin,” the propensity of a person to do that which is self-serving and self-glorifying.

By centering his world on himself, Kurtz thus makes the choice to, in a sense, sell his soul in exchange for worldly power in the jungles of the Congo. While he was increasingly gaining influence and prestige in Europe for his excellence as a trader, Kurtz evidently found that he wanted more. By establishing himself on a smaller scale to the native peoples as a god, he reveals that his choice was to claim power by right rather than by effort.

Conrad, through Marlow’s depiction of Kurtz, presents the fatal flaw in the philosophy of mercantile colonialism that was present in the nineteenth century. It was not for money but for power that European nations established trading relations with the countries they colonized. The hubris that underlies colonialism was always very close to the surface, and Kurtz is a depiction of the dangers of hubris unrestrained. It is an open wound, allowing the disease of darkness to enter and fatally infect. With Kurtz’s dying words—“The horror! The horror!”—he at last looked deeply into, and truly understood, his own heart of darkness.

Quotes: Essential Quotes by Theme: Civilization

Essential Passage 1: Chapter 1

The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to....

Summary

A company of travelers are aboard the steamer Nellie, waiting for the tide to turn so that they can commence their voyage. As they wait, they begin to discuss various topics. One of the travelers, Marlow, ponders a time when London was uninhabited except by “savages,” before the Romans came and sparked life into the development of modern civilization. He compares the Romans to modern-day explorers, colonists, and especially commercial developers, who go to distant places to make money. He thinks about the unrefined conditions which such people must endure until civilization appears. Rather than speculate on the good that explorers might bring to these dark areas, Marlow reflects on the nature of civilization itself, especially the colonizing process, which in the nineteenth century was viewed as a means of civilizing “uncivilized” countries. Marlow states that it is only the idea of civilization sparked in a dark region that redeems the whole colonial mindset.

Essential Passage 2: Chapter 2

...The reaches opened before us and closed behind, as if the forest had stepped leisurely across the water to bar the way for our return. We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness. I was very quiet there. At night sometimes the roll of drums behind the curtain of trees would run up the river and remain sustained faintly, as if hovering in the air high over our heads, till the first break of day. Whether it meant war, peace, or prayer we could not tell.
The dawns were heralded by the descent of a chill stillness; the wood-cutters slept, their fires burned low; the snapping of a twig would make you start. We were wanderers on a pre-historic earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet. We could have fancied ourselves the first of men taking possession of an accursed inheritance, to be subdued at the cost of profound anguish and of excessive toil. But suddenly, as we struggled round a bend, there would be a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass-roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage. The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy. The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us—who could tell? We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings; we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse. We could not understand because we were too far and could not remember because we were travelling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign—and no memories.

Summary

Marlow has begun his journey to the Inner Station to find Kurtz. While sleeping on the upper deck, he is awakened by a conversation between the station manager and his uncle. The pair resent Kurtz and his success. Moreover, they despise the philosophy to which Kurtz holds—that as a trader he is not only in Africa to trade for ivory but to be a “beacon,” bringing civilization to the regions of darkness. Despite this negative opinion of Kurtz, Marlow is more intrigued than ever and is anxious to meet the legendary man. The boat travels deeper and deeper into “the heart of darkness,” until it seems to Marlow that they are not only leaving civilization behind but even the concept of civilization, travelling backward in time to the days when man was at his most primitive. The wildness and the strangeness of the native Africans they encounter along the shores only reinforce this feeling.

Essential Passage 3: Chapter 3

"His last word—to live with," she insisted. "Don't you understand I loved him—I loved him—I loved him!"

I pulled myself together and spoke slowly.

"The last word he pronounced was—your name."

I heard a light sigh, and then my heart stood still, stopped dead short by an exulting and terrible cry, by the cry of inconceivable triumph and of unspeakable pain. "I knew it—I was sure!"...She knew. She was sure. I heard her weeping; she had hidden her face in her hands. It seemed to me that the house would collapse before I could escape, that the heavens would fall upon my head. But nothing happened. The heavens do not fall for such a trifle. Would they have fallen, I wonder, if I had rendered Kurtz that justice which was his due? Hadn't he said he wanted only justice? But I couldn’t. I could not tell her. It would have been too dark—too dark altogether...

Marlow ceased, and sat apart, indistinct and silent, in the pose of a meditating Buddha. Nobody moved for a time. “We have lost the first of the ebb,” said the Director, suddenly. I raised my head. The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed somber under an overcast sky—seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness.
Summary

After Kurtz’s death and burial along the banks of the river in Africa, Marlow returns to Europe, ill for many months. It is almost a year after his journey that he meets Kurtz’s fiancée, his Intended. Still in mourning, she continues to love the man she knew. Marlow is faced with the challenge of recounting the last days of the man she loved. She holds to her memory of Kurtz—a successful and honorable trader, a representative of civilization, bearing its light to the darkness that was Africa. Believing that the last words spoken prior to death would reveal the central object of Kurtz’s heart, she asks Marlow what Kurtz had said before he died. Marlow struggles, not wanting to tell her that his last words were, “The horror! The horror!” Thus he chooses to lie, telling her instead that Kurtz spoke her name. Although the fiancée is relieved, Marlow feels that in some way he has betrayed Kurtz by not relating to this woman the struggle that Kurtz fought and lost. Marlow, however, could not bring such darkness into the light of civilization. As Marlow ends his story, his audience is spellbound. Still waiting to depart down the Thames, they have discovered that they lost the first ebbing of the tide that would hasten their journey to the sea. Marlow looks out and sees that this most civilized of rivers is itself leading into the heart of darkness.

Analysis of Essential Passages

Two locales are presented in The Heart of Darkness that reflect the nineteenth-century worldview: Europe as the region of light and goodness, and Africa as the region of dark and evil. The ostensible purpose of European colonization during the time period was to bring governmental order, cultural and religious enlightenment, and financial prosperity to the “Dark Continent.” And it is in fact this “mission mentality” that Marlow sees as the redemptive quality of colonization. For him, the conquest of a third-world country is justified only so far as the colonizing power is there for the people’s good.

Marlow’s journey is a symbolic quest into the dark heart of man. This bent toward evil, the concept of “original sin,” goes against the Enlightenment view that man in his heart is good but society corrupts him. Conrad seems to reject this notion, stating that darkness lies in each one of us. Given a certain set of circumstances and attitudes, an individual can—and will—be overcome by the darkness and the horror that was the final vision of Kurtz as he approached death.

Yet Conrad also presents civilization as an engineered concept. It rests on the surface of the individual but cannot reach into his very heart. The Nellie, the ship on which Marlow is initially voyaging when he tells his tale, floats on the Thames in the heart of London, which is symbolic of the highest level of civilization. Yet the waters of the Thames connect to the waters of Africa. Darkness can thus never be truly eradicated or prevented from influencing civilization. At the end, Marlow realizes this as he looks down the Thames and sees the darkness in London itself.

Conrad’s pessimistic view is that civilization is weaker than darkness, than evil. It will eventually be overcome, as Kurtz was in Africa. Kurtz thus becomes a cautionary tale, warning of this lurking evil, not in some foreign locale, but within the human heart of the most civilized of creatures.

Short-Answer Quizzes: Section I Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. Identify the people on the Nellie.

2. Why is it ironic that Marlow needs his aunt’s help to secure his appointment?

3. What happened to Fresleven, one of the Company’s captains?
4. How are the two women outside the secretary’s office symbolic?

5. Name two unusual procedures at Marlow’s physical exam.

6. How did the Swede die?

7. What is unique about the chief accountant’s appearance?

8. Why was the manager successful at his job?

9. Why does Marlow call some people on the boat “pilgrims”?

10. Why does Marlow need the brickmaker’s help?

**Answers**

1. A narrator, a company director, a lawyer, an accountant, and Marlow are aboard the *Nellie*.

2. It is ironic that Marlow needs his aunt’s help because she is a woman in a male-dominated world, the sea.

3. Fresleven was murdered by a native in a quarrel over black hens.

4. The women outside the secretary’s office knit black wool, the symbol of death.

5. The doctor measures Marlow’s head with calipers, and asks if there has been madness in his family.

6. The Swede hanged himself.

7. The chief accountant is neat and orderly.

8. The manager was successful because he was always healthy.

9. Marlow calls them “pilgrims” because they carry staves and their “pilgrimage” is to obtain ivory.

10. Marlow needs rivets from the brickmaker to repair the boat.

**Short-Answer Quizzes: Section II Questions and Answers**

**Study Questions**

1. When he is on the boat, who does Marlow overhear speaking about Kurtz?

2. Why does Marlow compare the jungle to prehistoric times?

3. How does the cannibals’ food affect Marlow?

4. Why does the book Marlow finds in the hut interest him?

5. Why couldn’t the men aboard the boat spend their money for food?

6. Who aboard the boat is killed during the attack?
7. How does Marlow scare the natives during the fight?
8. Why does Marlow throw his shoes overboard?
9. Why does the Russian leave a note on the woodpile?
10. Why did Kurtz write a report?

Answers

1. Marlow overhears the manager and his uncle talk of Kurtz.
2. The violence, degradation, and lack of civility in the jungle remind Marlow of prehistoric times.
3. The cannibals’ hippo-meat is rotten, smells, and makes Marlow think of his own hunger.
4. The book in the hut interests Marlow because it reflects a task planned and done well.
5. The men on the boat could not buy food because the manager did not stop, and/or the villages were destroyed.
6. The helmsman dies during the attack.
7. Marlow blows the steam whistle and the natives fear the noise.
8. Marlow throws his shoes overboard because they are soaked with blood from the helmsman’s wounds.
9. The Russian leaves a note to tell someone to hurry and prepare for the coming danger.
10. Kurtz writes a document because he was instructed to chronicle his experience with the savages.

Short-Answer Quizzes: Section III Questions and Answers

Study Questions

1. Why does the Russian nurse Kurtz through two illnesses?
2. What frightening sight does Marlow see outside Kurtz’s house?
3. Who is with Kurtz when Marlow first sees him?
4. Why does the manager disapprove of Kurtz?
5. Why does the Russian leave Kurtz’s area?
6. Why is Kurtz carried from the forest?
7. Why does Kurtz give Marlow papers before he dies?
8. Explain the irony of where they bury Kurtz.
9. Why do three people visit Marlow when he returns to Europe?
10. What lie does Marlow tell Kurtz’s Intended?

**Answers**
1. The Russian’s admiration and love for Kurtz compels him to nurse Kurtz through two illnesses.
2. Marlow sees heads stuck on poles outside Kurtz’s house.
3. Weak, Kurtz is on a stretcher carried by the natives when Marlow first sees him.
4. The manager disapproves of Kurtz because he believes Kurtz has done more harm than good for the company by his unsound methods.
5. The Russian leaves Kurtz’s area because he fears the manager wants him killed.
6. Kurtz is taken from the forest to a cabin on the boat so he can be rescued and cured.
7. Kurtz gives Marlow a packet of letters to preserve his work and memory.
8. Worshipped in life by the natives, Kurtz is buried in a “muddy hole,” a place of filth and emptiness.
9. Three people visit Marlow in Europe to get Kurtz’s writings.
10. He tells her Kurtz’s last words were her name.