Bloom's Literature

**isolation in Heart of Darkness**

Early in his narration, Marlow tries to put into the minds of his listeners aboard the *Nellie* some comprehension of the significance Kurtz has come to hold for him. He needs them to understand "how I got out there, what I saw, how I went up that river to the place where I first met the poor chap." "Do you see him? Do you see the story?" he asks his audience. His urgent questions are not simply rhetorical; this encounter, after all, was no small matter to Marlow but, rather, "the furthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience." In the silence that follows, he answers his own question: "It is impossible. We live as we dream—alone." Marlow's anxieties about isolation as the true human condition haunt Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, even as he struggles to communicate this knowledge to others.

To be sure, Marlow strikes us from the start as a solitary and isolated figure, one who, like Conrad himself, is always an outsider. In temperament and interests, he is not like other seamen whose "minds are of the stay-at-home order," the novel's unnamed narrator observes. Even on the *Nellie*, among friends, he sits "apart, indistinct, and silent in the pose of a meditating Buddha." In his own narrative, it is clear that Marlow, although a thoughtful and sensitive observer, never appears at home among other people. In Brussels, he feels as though he is in a "whited sepulcher"; the Company employees uniformly annoy or irritate him, and he feels himself an "imposter." His passage to Africa is spent in "isolation amongst all these men with whom I had no point of contact." Avoiding his fellow travelers, he only connects with the sea: "The voice of the surf heard now and then was a positive pleasure, like the speech of a brother. It was something natural, that had its reason, that had a meaning." On his arrival in the Congo, Marlow's isolation deepens as he finds himself morally outraged at the laziness, greed, cruelty, and utter indifference to human suffering displayed by his European coworkers. Yet he also fails to make any meaningful contact with native Africans, who are rarely granted human status in his narrative and variously referred to as "savages," "niggers," "cannibals," and "rudimentary souls." Rather than define himself through social interaction, Marlow attempts to create his identity individually, through technological expertise—his work. "I like what is in the work," he declares, "the chance to find yourself. Your own reality—for yourself, not for others—what no man can ever know." Upriver, as the familiar dissolves into the darkness of the unknown, a well-used book on seamanship left in an abandoned trading post represents the highest values of civilization, "an honest concern for the right way of going to work."

As Marlow progresses upriver toward Kurtz and the Inner Station, he leaves the familiar signifiers of European civilization and instead finds himself isolated in another way, at the heart of darkness, "cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings." Kurtz, the object of Marlow's quest, is himself the novel's supreme symbol of isolation and its destructive power. Cut off from all societal restraints, Kurtz is free to gratify, without limit, his lusts and passions. Ruling in "utter solitude without a policeman," he is a law unto himself, with "nothing on earth to prevent him killing whom he jolly well pleased." Yet Kurtz had been, in many ways, a representative of the best in European civilization: educated, intelligent, idealistic, artistic, and hardworking. His descent into savagery suggests to Marlow how thin the veneer of culture might be and the temptations to which he, himself, is subject in his isolation. In this sense, the quest for Kurtz is also a quest of self-discovery.

Ironically, Marlow's increased self-knowledge only furthers his sense of separation from others. On his return to Europe from Africa, the crowded streets of Brussels, the "sepulchral city," are filled with people who "trespassed upon my thoughts" and "intruders whose knowledge of life was to me an irritating pretense." In his alienation, Marlow feels much like a combat veteran reentering civilian life, isolated by his experiences of life on the edge: "[T]he 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."

Although he doubts that such knowledge can be verbally communicated, Marlow's telling his story in *Heart of Darkness* is an act of faith. Whether it is a faith in the possibility of human connection or simply a faith in truth telling as a condition of individual meaning by one who detests lies is left ambiguous in the text. Marlow's last narrative act is to tell how he chose not to tell the truth. In refusing to narrate Kurtz's story to the "Intended," he admits, "I could not tell her. It would have been too dark—too dark altogether."

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