The Ultimate Meaning of "Heart of Darkness"

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The meaning of Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness," as most critics would readily agree, is "suspected rather than seen." Marlow tells this story, and what is said of his attitude toward experience suggests his method of narration:

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 these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine.

At times we are left feeling that the glow is very misty and the moonshine very dim. Here more consistently than in his other work Conrad uses a method of communicating which both increases the significance of his comment and renders it more difficult of precise restatement. As F. R. Leavis points out, he is using the "objective correlative" defined by T. S. Eliot. The author does not explain, he communicates over a bridge of emotional response to a given object, a response which he foresees and controls. The river which fascinates Marlow as a snake does a silly little bird, the human heads which ornament Kurtz's stockade, the black figure which moves across the glow of a jungle fire, figure

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1 Leo Hamalian and Edmond L. Volpe, Ten Modern Short Novels (New York, 1958), p. 194. The "suspects" of the story's meaning are legion; see R. W. Stallman, "Conrad Criticism Today," Sewanee Review, LXVII (1949), 135-145, Kenneth A. Lohf and Eugene P. Sheehy, Joseph Conrad at Mid-Century: Editions and Studies 1895-1955 (Minneapolis, 1947). The criticism is so extensive that, rather than present a conventional survey of all the varying points of view, I shall refer only to those which by agreement or disagreement shed light upon my own interpretation of the novel.


with horns on its head; a heap of drainage pipes, all broken; the
grove of death filled with broken black men—to these and many
other objects the reader reacts and as he does so, gradually attains
comprehension of Conrad's central meaning, which in large part
he may feel before he understands. Conrad himself offered an
explanation of his method,

Fiction appeals to temperament. And . . . it must be . . . the appeal of
one temperament to all the other innumerable temperaments whose
. . . power endows passing events with their true meaning, and creates
the moral, the emotional atmosphere of the place and time. Such an
appeal to be effective must be an impression conveyed through the
senses; and, in fact, it cannot be made in any other way, because tem-
perament . . . is not amenable to persuasion. All art, therefore, appeals
primarily to the senses, and the artistic aim when expressing in written
words must also make its appeal through the senses, if its high desire
is to reach the secret spring of responsive emotions.4

In the light of this credo Leavis's statement that Conrad “is
intent on making a virtue out of not knowing what he means” (p.
180), seems a little harsh. However the elusiveness, as well as
evocativeness, of such exposition does make it essential that in
interpreting the story one take into consideration all of its parts;
for only by fitting all of them together can one reach understand-
ing of the darkness which engulfs Kurtz and threatens Marlow,
and of the peculiar relationship between the two men. Thus it
seems to me that Douglas Hewitt misinterprets the novel because
while he sees the significance of the darkness, he takes no notice
of the light. The darkness is indeed spoken of as triumphant, but
the final “inconceivable triumph” belongs to a symbol of light.
Jerome Thale disregards the sharp contrast between Marlow and
Kurtz; Frederick R. Karl overlooks Kurtz's hollowness; Thomas
Moser, Marlow's intensely felt need to protect the world of illusion
at all cost. Harold R. Collins sees clearly enough the resemblance
between Kurtz and the native helmsman, his contrast with the
cannibal crew, but fails to consider the significance of Marlow's
role. Even Albert Guerard, whom R. W. Stallman praises as having
written “the best and most comprehensive critical survey in the
whole field of Conrad criticism,” misses a fundamental point of
“Heart of Darkness” largely because he does not give due emphasis

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to the significance of each part, for instance, of the minor charac-
ters, the native crew, the native helmsman, the Russian harlequin
with his treatise on navigation, the boiler repairman who is a
connoisseur of pigeon flying, and perhaps most important, Kurtz's
women.6

There can be little doubt that in both "Heart of Darkness" and
"The Secret Sharer" Conrad is concerned with the process of
acquiring understanding of self.6 In the second of these novels he
works, as Guerard explains (Introduction, p. 11), in terms of dual
personality: Leggatt is the hidden self of the young captain, a self
which must be recognized. But "Heart of Darkness" was written
ten years earlier, and in it Conrad did not use the same tight sym-
bol of identification. The relation of Kurtz to Marlow does not
seem to be that of a mirror image, a double. He is not so much a
second, hidden self as an example from which Marlow learns.
There is sufficient kinship between the two men for this relation-
ship; there is no such complete identification as that which Conrad
embodied in "The Secret Sharer." The tie and the similarity
between them has, of course, been recognized.7 What has not, I
believe, been sufficiently stressed is their dissimilarity. Kurtz is
Marlow's opposite rather than his double.

Marlow wants to find out about himself. In work it is "the
chance to find yourself. Your own reality," which he likes, and
it is just such knowledge which Kurtz in part communicates to

Jerome Thale, "Marlowe's Quest," University of Toronto Quarterly, XXIV (July,
1955), 351-358; Frederick R. Karl, Joseph Conrad (New York, 1960), pp. 134-139;
Thomas Moser, Joseph Conrad: Achievement and Decline (Cambridge, Mass.,
1957), p. 79; Harold R. Collins, "Kurtz, the Cannibals, and the Second-Rate Helmsman,
Western Humanities Review, VIII (Autumn, 1954), 307-310. For Guerard's discussion
of this novel see "Introduction to the Signet Edition," "Heart of Darkness" and
33-44; "Psychological Explorations," Joseph Conrad (New York: New Directions,
1947), pp. 30-52.

7Guerard's reading of these two novels as representing the journey into the un-
conscious is, as Stallman says (p. 142), likely to become the classic reading. See also
V. S. Pritchett, "Review of Douglas Hewitt, Conrad: A Reassessment," New States-
man, XLIII (May 10, 1952), 561, "Leggatt is the hidden transgressor in the uncon-
scious, an embodiment of the fear 'that there are parts of himself which he has
not yet brought into the light of day'"; and Morton D. Zabel, "Editor's Introductio
The Portable Conrad (New York, 1947), p. 26, who speaks of "Conrad's con-
tribution to modern fictional method: his imposition of the processes and structures
of the moral experience (particularly the experience of recognition) on the form
of the plot."

8See for example Thale, p. 351 ff., Hewitt, pp. 108-110, Moser, p. 81.
him. Of all Kurtz's gifts the ability to talk stood out pre-eminently. He talks all night to the harlequin; at his first appearance in the novel he is addressing the natives; he is eloquence itself, "A voice! a voice! It rang deep to the very last." He is a voice which "speaks" and tells Marlow not only about himself, but about all human beings, tells him in what way the ever-threatening darkness can triumph, and what the result of such triumph can be. Yet Kurtz does not convey this knowledge directly, nor by serving as a double, but by serving as an object lesson.

Both men are subjected to a moral test; by means of their reaction the resemblance and the basic difference between them are made clear. Forced by the wilderness to recognition of his kinship with primitive man, and granted the opportunity to gratify his primitive lusts to their absolute full, Kurtz succumbs completely. Forced to the same recognition, "what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar," and granted something of the same opportunity, Marlow does precisely the opposite, does not succumb, does not "go ashore for a dance and a howl." When he finds Kurtz fled away from the boat, gone to rejoin the native orgies, he feels a "moral shock . . . as if something altogether monstrous, intolerable to thought and odious to soul, had been thrust upon me unexpectedly." The intensity of Marlow's revulsion in this scene may well be the result of recognizing the overwhelming pull of savagery—which could pull him into similar excesses—for in Kurtz's action he sees what is possible. There is, however, little to suggest that he feels as Guerard thinks, "a part of himself has vanished." Feeling the same temptation, understanding Kurtz's actions, Marlow deliberately chooses a different course, "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." In this difference, later emphasized by the two men's reaction to Kurtz's Intended, lies the heart of the novel.

Guerard takes the evil which Conrad here evokes to be primarily apathy or passivity,* but surely when Marlow drags him back to the river boat, it is from orgy not from apathy that Kurtz is saved. Indeed, throughout "Heart of Darkness" evil, for white man and

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* Conrad the Novelist, p. 41.
* Ibid., pp. 37, 47.
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for black, is lack of restraint; not apathy or passivity, and not temptation itself, but the succumbing thereto. The paralleling of Kurtz by Marlow’s native helmsman helps to make this clear. The helmsman, who brings his own death, is explicitly akin to Kurtz, “He had no restraint, no restraint—just like Kurtz—a tree swayed by the wind”; and like Kurtz, at the moment of death he seems to see into the horror of his condition, “. . . in the very last moment, as though in response to some sign we could not see, to some whisper we could not hear, he frowned heavily, and that frown gave to his black death mask an inconceivably sombre, brooding, and menacing expression.”

Collins (p. 6) finds the explanation for the helmsman’s behavior in the fact that he is a “detribalized” native, deprived of the traditional beliefs and standards of conduct of his old social order, supports as yet remaining to the native crew. This starving cannibal crew have a restraint whose source for the civilized Marlow is a mystery. Why, he wonders, don’t they

A mystery; and yet the terms of light in which he speaks of it relate this quality to the idealism and faith embodied in a figure who is herself a core of light, Kurtz’s Intended.

That lack of restraint arises from the lack of an inner core of faith emerges from Conrad’s continual linking of evil with hollowness and of goodness with devotion to or belief in something. The inhuman bookkeeper at the First Station, gently annoyed by the groans of dying men all around him is introduced in terms of his appearance alone. Marlow does not see a human being but “a high starched collar, white cuffs, a light alpaca jacket, snowy trousers, a clear necktie, and varnished boots.” The bookkeeper is merely a boiled shirtfront. The corrupt manager of the Central Station, “Perhaps [has] nothing within him,” a man without entrails; his assistant, a papier maché Mephistopholes, “if I tried I could poke my forefinger through him, and would find nothing inside but a little loose dirt, maybe.” Kurtz himself, the most magnificent façade of all, is a “hollow sham,” who succumbed
to savagery because he had nothing inside, “the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating. It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core.” Such grouping of characters is, I think, basic to the meaning of this novel. Moser (p. 80) says “. . . the African natives . . . alone are full of vitality; the whites are but hollow men.” But his classification is wrong. Significantly some of the white men, some of the black, are hollow; others are not.

In contrast to the hollow men are those who have some kind of inner strength, of faith in something: the harlequin (modeled apparently on Mungo Park, for Conrad an idealistic figure, at once adventurous and devoted), ruled by the spirit of adventure, “a modest and clear flame. It seemed to have consumed all thought of self . . . completely”; the boiler maker with his devotion to his work, his children—and his pigeons; Towson, author of the dreary “Inquiry into Some Points of Seamanship.” Conrad seems to have attached great significance to work. In The Mirror of the Sea he speaks of “something . . . embracing honesty and grace and rule in an elevated and clear sentiment . . . which may be called the honour of labour.” In “Heart of Darkness,” when the restraints of civilization are gone, work can constitute a saving grace. Towson’s book, reflecting as it does a man’s absorption in his trade, can for a moment defend Marlow from the darkness, at the first glance you could see there a singleness of intention, an honest concern for the right way of going to work, which made these humble pages . . . luminous with another than a professional light . . . The simple old sailor, with his talk of chains and purchases, made me forget the jungle and the pilgrims in a delicious sensation of having come upon something unmistakably real.

For Marlow there is his own work as well. He turns from the empty corruption of the company brickmaker to his steamship. To do so was “a great comfort . . . No influential friend would have served me better.” It is largely work which holds him steady. He does not join the native orgies. Why? “Fine sentiments you say? Fine sentiments be hanged! I had no time.” He has to mend the leaky pipes, watch the steering, circumvent the snags, somehow sail the steamboat, get it along by hook or by crook up the river.

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“There was . . . truth enough in these things to save a wiser man.”

What Conrad was primarily concerned with saying in his novel seems to be embodied in these various figures. When the external controls are removed and you must live with evil and staggering temptation,

breathe dead hippo, so to speak, and not be contaminated . . . there don’t you see? your strength comes in, the faith in your ability for the digging of unostentatious holes to bury the stuff in—your power of devotion, not to yourself, but to an obscure, backbreaking business . . . you must fall back upon your own innate strength, upon your own capacity for faithfulness.

Restraint, arising from just such faithfulness or from some deliberate belief, is of course lacking in Kurtz.

The story is built upon the balance of opposites, a core of faith versus hollowness, restraint versus its lack, civilization versus savagery, light versus darkness. Not only the antithetical nature of Kurtz’s relation to Marlow, but the central meaning of the whole is made clear by the balanced symbolism of Kurtz’s women. As is the case with the two men, the women are akin, but they are not the same (as Moser, whose interpretation is couched in terms of the battle of the sexes, would have us believe). They are in a sense opposites; one the embodiment of primitive darkness:

savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress . . . the immense wilderness . . . seemed to look at her . . . as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul. . . . Suddenly she 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 . . . gathering the steamer into a shadow embrace . . . the barbarous and superb woman . . . stretched tragically her bare arms after us over the somber and glittering river.

The other, the embodiment of light:

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 . . . her fair hair seemed to catch all the remaining light in a glimmer of gold. . . . She put out her arms . . . stretching them back and with clasped pale hands across the fading and narrow sheen of the window . . . resembling in this gesture another
one, tragic also . . . stretching bare brown arms over the glitter of the infernal stream, the stream of darkness.

Just as the fact that only self-restraint arising from devotion to some ideal can hold back the “darkness,” so the similarity—coupled with the significant difference—between these women is too important to be left to suggestion. Conrad makes it explicit.

Ford Madox Ford felt that few men had more power than Conrad “to see vividly the opposing sides of human characters.” The two women represent the opposing forces which control Kurtz. The one is savagery itself, wild and dark, magnificent and threatening; the other is faith, glowing, fair, symbol of just such “power of devotion” as in Marlow’s words, is necessary when all outer restraints have been removed. “She seemed ready to listen without mental reservation, without suspicion, without a thought for herself. . . . She had a mature capacity for fidelity, for belief.” In a darkening room, “only her forehead, smooth and white, remained illumined by the unextinguishable light of belief and love,” and Marlow bows his head, “before the faith that was in her, before that great and saving illusion that shone with an unearthly glow in the darkness.”

In this novel savagery itself is not evil, for the cannibal crewmen are depicted as dignified, admirable fellows, restrained by some code of their own, and the superb native woman has both majesty and pathos. Kurtz’s unrestrained succumbing to savagery, however, is evil. Surrendering himself completely, Kurtz turns away from the Belgian girl. Throughout she is never given a name but is always his “Intended,” symbol of all he had meant to do, one with the noble plans he carried out to Africa, his painting of a figure bearing light, his report for the Suppression of Savage Customs. But the plans were never fulfilled, the figure he painted was blindfolded, the report ends in a scrawl, “Exterminate all the brutes!” He struggles to remain at the Inner Station, orders an attack upon the ship come to take him away, crawls to get back to his native worshippers. His last words are not her name, but like the sound the native helmsman hears at his death, “a whisper at some image, at some vision,” recognition of the final end of temptation, desire and surrender without restraint.

Marlow, on the contrary, does remain faithful to the Intended,

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protects her from, rather than subjects her to, the darkness into which Kurtz would have plunged her. We have Conrad’s own testimony as to the significance for the whole novel of its concluding scene between Marlow and the Belgian girl:

in the light of the final incident, the whole story in all its descriptive detail shall fall into its place—acquire its value and its significance. . . . the last pages of Heart of Darkness where the interview of the man and the girl locks in—as it were—the whole 30,000 words of narrative description into one suggestive view of a whole phase of life, and makes of that story something quite on another plane than an anecdote of a man who went mad in the Centre of Africa.13

In Brussels as Marlow approaches her house, the threatening shadow of Kurtz accompanies him,

a shadow insatiable . . . of frightful realities; a shadow darker than the shadow of the night. . . . It was a moment of triumph for the wilderness, an invading and vengeful rush which, it seemed to me, I would have to keep back alone for the salvation of another soul.

He finds himself engulfed “in the triumphant darkness from which I could not have defended her,” and hears Kurtz’s last words, “The Dusk was repeating them in a persistent whisper all around us, in a whisper that seemed to swell menacingly.” Had she heard those same words, “the summing up whisper of his eternal condemnation,” as faith, as belief in any ideal, she could not have survived. The light embodied in her would have been extinguished. Before, the darkness has been triumphant; but when Marlow says, “The last word he pronounced was—your name,” he fends off from the girl who is significantly fair the darkness which Kurtz’s shadow has brought into the room and gives to her “inconceivable triumph.”

For Marlow a lie has the taste of death about it, makes him “miserable and sick, like biting something rotten would do.” Why then will he go to the length of lying to protect Kurtz’s Intended? There have been a number of explanations, but the one which seems to follow most plausibly from the novel as a whole is that however divorced from reality and in that sense even false our

ideals may be, they must be protected. Marlow says of the idealistic world of women,

... 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.

Even though the world of illusion is unreal, would indeed be shattered by contact with reality, it must be protected, "lest," as Marlow later says, "ours gets worse." Guerard believes that, "Only in the atonement of his lie to Kurtz's 'Intended' back in the sepulchral city does the experience come truly to an end." But the lie does not seem to be an atonement; it is rather the bulwark necessary to protect the saving illusion; and for Marlow the experience never comes to an end, "I shall see this eloquent phantom as long as I live ... the foundations of our intimacy were ... laid —to endure—to endure—even to the end—even beyond."

At the very beginning of his tale, Marlow has suggested that the "darkness" which enveloped the Roman civilizers of savage Britain is the same which threatens him, overwhelms Kurtz. If all the parts of this tale be duly considered, they produce the ultimate comment that whatever the condition of a given civilization, its proponents are constantly threatened by the temptation to forsake its code, its ideals, whatever they may be, and thus become de-civilized and in the process less than human. Only faith or devotion to something can provide the restraint necessary not to become like Kurtz. Only the preservation of her faith in Kurtz can protect the Belgian girl.

If there is irony in the fact that all Marlow has left is the Intended's faith in illusion, that "her faith remained the only light," it was for Conrad the irony of the universal human condition. We live surrounded by darkness, as Marlow says, "in the flicker ... of lightning in the clouds." Yet Conrad had elsewhere written of "the subtle but invincible conviction of ... solidarity in dreams ... in aspirations, in illusions, in hope ... which binds together all humanity ..."; and further

34 Conrad the Novelist, p. 42.
35 Karl, p. 139. Leavis (p. 181) feels that the irony implicit in the final scene lies in the association of the Intended's "innocent nobility, her purity of idealized faith, with the unspeakable corruption of Kurtz. . . ."
when the last blade of grass [shall] have died upon a dying earth, man, indomitable by his training in resistance to misery and pain, shall set this undiminished light of his eyes against the feeble glow of the sun. . . . I am inclined to think that the last utterance will formulate, strange as it may appear, some hope now to us utterly inconceivable.  

From such illusions alone comes light which can be opposed to the world’s darkness.

In view of the story’s end the little light of faith would scarcely seem to be sufficient, “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.” And Marlow had felt that he could not defend the girl, the “soul as translucently pure as a cliff of crystal,” from the triumphant darkness. Yet inconceivably he does. Which perhaps explains Conrad’s otherwise puzzling remark to William Blackwood, “The title I am thinking of is ‘The Heart of Darkness,’ but the narrative is not gloomy.”