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Subjective reality in Joseph Conrad's Heart of darkness

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Subjective reality in Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness"

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San Jose State University, 1992

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SUBJECTIVE REALITY IN JOSEPH CONRAD'S HEART OF DARKNESS

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English
San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

By

Regina Loureiro

December, 1992

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

SUBJECTIVE REALITY IN JOSEPH CONRAD'S HEART OF DARKNESS

by Regina Loureiro

This thesis examines subjectivity as an integral part of perception and judgment. Using the formalist approach, this discussion demonstrates that personal and social values not only taint judgment with partiality, but they also highlight the petty discriminations founded on external differences, which are exemplified in Heart of Darkness and exercised in our society. From this analysis, objectivity is found to be an illusion so long as one is unaware of the biases buried within cultural, social and familial constructs.

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PREFACE

Heart of Darkness is one of the most captivating modern novellas that I have ever read. It embodies all that I feel in its language and its dark attitude towards colonialism and racism. Because of my love for language, I admire its rich prose. Its view on colonialism brings me back to my childhood in colonial Hong Kong where I grew up. Most importantly, it addresses racial and cultural issues that I, as a child of an inter-racial marriage, have continually strived to come to terms with.

Because Heart of Darkness has touched my very essence, I have a strong urge to explore it further as a literary triumph. This work, I believe, depicts the urge of man to project and impose his own culturally defined realm of reality upon those whom he does not understand. To any one culture, its realm of reality encompasses the moral standards, environmental orientation, code of conduct, degree of scientific advancement, religious affiliation, language, and economic interests through which it judges another culture. In this light, Kurtz, having lived in and understood both the European and African realm of reality, holds the key to ultimate reality. Having broken down cultural barriers, Kurtz's horror is in discovering that

reality is relative. There is no ideal realm of reality upon which man can anchor his hopes and dreams. In the following chapters, I will demonstrate how Marlow's journey from one culture to another leads us to the heart of Kurtz's horror.

My primary method of approach will be a formal analysis of the literary devices in the novella. I will discuss the novella's narrative structure and imagery in terms of the relativity of reality. Written as a story within a story, the narrative structure conveys an overall dream-like mood, as if the reality of Marlow's story is a dream. The dark, light, minute, colossal, and animal images not only serve to contrast the European with the African realm of reality, but their gradual shift in symbolic meaning also represents the ultimate relativity of reality. I will define the European and African realms of reality through the minor characters. These minor characters, who are nameless labels, portray the "everyman" of the two cultures. Paradoxically, their function in the novella as barriers to a different culture leads us to the heart of their own culture. Stark contrasts between Kurtz's African mistress and the Intended, the cannibals and the pilgrims shed light on the moral and religious values that Europe imposes on Africa. In contrast with the minor characters, the major characters (Marlow, Kurtz and the narrator) cross cultural barriers. By

fathoming an unknown culture, these characters, whether willingly or not, become the bearers of truth. Their experience, in turn, exposes the evolution of the European culture as a costly process that loses all expression of civilized man's primordial self. I will discuss these characters with respect to dialogue and action to show how the shift in their perception of savagery in both the environment and in other characters finally exposes the relativity of reality.

From the above analysis, I will reaffirm the relativity of reality, which defies standards and norms, as the heart of Kurtz's horror. When the truth becomes the horror and what is right seems indistinguishable from what is wrong, the question of conscience arises. The concluding chapter will attempt to present conscience as the only definitive part of human nature that guides us through the chaotic labyrinth of reality. In short, the bulk of my thesis will demonstrate the relativity of reality, and my conclusion will address conscience as man's only trustworthy guide.

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not least, to my husband, Carlson A. Li, for partaking in my dream. My debt to you all is incalculable.

To the people of Tibet and the Jesuit order of the Roman
Catholic Church.

CHAPTER 1

As If In A Dream

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....
(Conrad 94-5)

Reading Heart of Darkness is like being in a dream. From beginning to end, Conrad envelops us in a mist, a haze of "brooding gloom" that falls into an all-encompassing darkness. The tale begins as light fades, just as our dreams do when we turn off the light and close our eyes.

We know what dreams are like. Dreaming brings us into a world of vivid images with no past preconceptions and no future implications. We enter them. We witness episodes. We wake up knowing full well that what we have just seen is unreal, fictitious. By presenting Heart of Darkness in a dreamy mood, Conrad suggests that we view its realm of reality as we do a dream. The dream-like mood asks us to cast out past preconceptions, and to look at each episode of the misty tale, not just the storyteller's interpretation. We should withhold our judgment till we wake up because dreams are mockingly real, and they can mislead as well as enlighten.

But it is so difficult to tread through Heart of Darkness without preconceptions, the preconceptions that

define our own realm of reality, that shape judgment. The novella's narrative structure and imagery play upon our preconceptions to keep our judgment at bay. The narrative toys with our preconceptions on two levels. The narrative fortifies the dream-like mood, which, in turn, "[breaks] down preconceptions so as to let the soul's eye see anew" (Peters 139). The tale begins with the narrator introducing us to a group of men gathered on a boat, waiting to embark on their journey. This story is probably about their pending journey, so we think, until the novella's focus shifts to Marlow's experience in the Congo. Marlow talks about the Roman conquest to civilize Britain. He rambles about his travels in the Far East and his childhood fascination for maps, staring "for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia" (70). Where is he taking us, if he is taking us at all? "[A] blank space of delightful mystery" on the map, "a place of darkness" (71). The story becomes a nexus of past and present images, of Marlow's journey and a group of men gathered round him to listen to his adventure. The tale shifts in time and space, as if it is trying to tear itself away from their boundaries.

Shuffling between past and present, the tale knocks down our preconceptions. Heart of Darkness does capture the "dream-sensation" (95). It creates its own universe, a reality beyond our limited experiences, like a science

fiction or fantasy novel. The tale itself is not contained in the absolute past or present. It obscures our preconception of time, our realm of reality, by treating past and present as a unified whole. Past and present are integral to the same tale. In obscuring our own realm of reality, Conrad enables us to better see the stark contrast between the different realms of reality in the novella, "to let the soul's eye see anew" (Peters 139).

The novella's imagery presents the most startling contrast between Europe and Africa's physical settings. It reflects the environmental orientation, degree of scientific advancement, and economic values of both the European and African realms. By examining the contrasting images pertaining to the physical aspects of both realms, we will see the subjectiveness in how we choose to perceive physical reality. Because the imagery is an expression of subjectivity, each object behind the images should be examined on its own terms. By doing so, we will understand how the imagery continually plays with our preconceptions to mislead us. Each object's transformation from one image to another demonstrates a shift in the object's symbolic meaning, ultimately defying any labels we attempt to attach to it. This defiance will reveal why there is no inherent difference between the two physical realms of reality. The shift in symbolic meaning is also a refusal to endorse any

one set of standards, implying that nothing is absolute.

The central setting of the novella, where the tale begins, is the mouth of a river gaping at the open sea. Conrad shows us that "the sea [that stretches] before us [is] like the beginning of an interminable waterway" (65); she is the source of all streams and rivers. She is fluid, indivisible. This is one enormous part of nature that man cannot split apart or build boundaries across. Man can only draw imaginary divisions on a map. Being a limb of the vast ocean, the Thames, "[stretching] out in its tranquil dignity of a waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth," has performed "ages of good service" (66). It is a "venerable stream," bearing men "of whom the nation is proud," great men of conquest, "bearers of a spark from the sacred fire" (66-7). It has upheld the "dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires" (67; emphasis added). Conrad gives us a river of "tranquil dignity," which harbors the "germs of empires," as if the Thames is a diseased limb of the sea. The Thames seems to represent the spread of colonialism. On the other hand, we see the Congo river on a map, snake-like in appearance. It had charmed Marlow when he was a boy (71). It looks "fascinating -- deadly" when he sees it again on a map hung in one of the Company's offices (73). The "yellow" Congo river is positioned "[dead] in the centre" of a colorful map with a

"purple patch" that "[shows] where the jolly pioneers of progress drink the jolly lager-beer" (73). The blandness of the river against its man-made backdrop of colorful patches deliberately contradicts what we know about Marlow, and what Miriam B. Mandel asserts in her discussion on the color imagery in the novella. Mandel notes that the color imagery tells us what Marlow focuses on (306). Despite the colorful appeal of "all the glories of exploration," it is the "most blank" space on the map that ultimately captures him, the bland snake that charms him (70-1).

The snake is a charm, as the "bit of white thread from beyond the sea" is perhaps a native's (82). Or the hippopotamus that "has a charmed life," like "all brutes in this country [Africa]" (96). Or the manager whose life is "like a charm" (102). Or Kurtz, who has "the power to charm" (124). These examples reference "charm" in deliberate randomness, defying the absolute in their symbolic meaning. In the end, all are "bedecked with powerless charms" (156). The charming snake becomes as ambiguous as the rest of the references when we attempt to relate them to the word charm, and attach a possible symbolic meaning behind the association. At best, we can associate charm with a primitive kind of savagery. The word connotes a superstitious native, an animal, or "brutes." But colonialism, as associated with the calculating manager

of the Central Station, is also a kind of savagery, a "civilized" kind. The only difference is their labels. One is "civilized," whereas the other is "primitive." Even the term "savagery" is judgmental. Cannibalism is as savage as the chains that enslave the natives. But Marlow believes cannibalism is an aspect of the African culture as much as slavery is a part of the colonial trade. Our preconceptions are again asking us to judge which realm of reality is more acceptable. We have to find the true realm of reality first (and we will find it in Kurtz).

Yet, the Congo river is one of the "overwhelming realities of this strange world" (103). You can fish in it, or die in it (112, 125). As Marlow's steamboat treads through its channels, the river transforms into a stretch of water with "a chain of shallow patches," like "a man's backbone running down the middle of his back under the skin" (115)... It "[glitters in] dazzling splendour, with a murky and overshadowed bend above and below" (134). It becomes "sombre," and soon, its "brown current" leads Marlow "swiftly out of the heart of darkness" (145). Like the Thames that seems to lead the narrator "into the heart of an immense darkness," the Congo river has also had its share of leading Marlow "deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness" (158, 105). "In the immutability of [its] surroundings," Conrad reminds us, "the sea is always the

same" (67). It is "the mistress of . . . existence and as inscrutable as Destiny" (68). The Thames and the Congo river are part of the same sea. We are the difference because we provide the labels for the images associated with the two rivers, as Mandel does for the animal images in the novella.

Mandel equates the novella's animal imagery with "the nature of 'the hidden evil,' the degradation of Kurtz, and the failure of civilization" (315). She states that the animal images represent Marlow's perception; these images, Mandel concludes, are "[connected] clearly to violence, to evil . . ." (315). Her analysis focuses on the animal images in relation to our preconceptions, not the object that the particular image represents. She cites the snake image of the Congo river as significant in "[its] rich Biblical resonances (Garden of Eden, temptation, original sin, and [its] close identification both to the Africa where Marlow is going and to Marlow himself" (312). The snake does have a dark connotation to its image, but this is precisely the type of Judaic-Christian association that Conrad attempts to divorce his readers from. We have looked at the river as it relates to the African landscape, a river that flows through the novella in a continual shift of images, which signify the subjectivity of perception. We have also viewed the river as a child or limb of the sea,

and we have arrived at a very different interpretation, one that, by contrasting different realms of reality, shows us the only difference is how we choose to perceive our environment.

The rest of the African landscape, in contrast with the British environment, serves the same function as the Congo river. The first time Marlow actually sees Africa, its coast is "almost featureless" (77). Its land is "so dark-green" that it looks "almost black" (77): a "God-forsaken wilderness" that seems to "glisten and drip with steam" (77). Marlow's vessel stops at ports "with farcical names," where "a still and earthy atmosphere" smothers him like "an overheated catacomb" (78-9). Venturing deeper and deeper into the country with Marlow, the silence of the land engulfs us. "Paths, paths over the empty land" (85). "[A] solitude, a solitude, nobody, not a hut" (85). "A great silence around and above," that "[goes] home to one's very heart--its mystery, its greatness, the amazing reality of its concealed life" (85, 93). We can sniff the "smell of mud," and listen to the "high stillness," of "a soundless life," that is "ready to sweep every little man of us out of his little existence" (93, 98). We can watch the huge, regal trees, which sit in "a great silence," become "living trees" (102, 109). Africa's silence deafens us, and its sunlight, with the morning fog, blinds us more than its

nights (109-10). In Tzvetan Todorov's words, light "is supposed to overcome darkness, but . . . [it] fails to do so" (Putnam 170). We watch the thick fog "as a cat watches a mouse," but to no avail (114). The landscape is alive, but we hardly see or hear. We are alive, but the wilderness takes away our eyes and ears, as if it has enslaved us in its bewitching kingdom.

If we choose to define the symbolism of the African environment at this point, it would seem to represent something ominously primeval. J. Hillis Miller asserts that this something symbolizes religious, or sexual experience; the "descent into the darkness of irrational emotion" (Poets 30). But Marlow's portrait of the African environment also depicts the completely isolated man who loses the "warning voice of a kind neighbour . . . whispering of public opinion" (122): the solitary cannibal who is shut out of all rules and principles of the civilized world. Religious experience can be solitary, but sexual experience is usually shared. However we see the wilderness, it is clearly not the concrete jungle that civilization built. Because we are in an unfamiliar environment, we tend to identify it with our own dark fears. In grappling with the loss of our eyes and ears, we seem to have momentarily forgotten our other sense. We can still smell the mud, the "rotten hippo-meat," to remind ourselves that we are alive, that Africa is real

(111). We can "breathe dead hippo . . . and not be contaminated" (122). We should use our senses with caution, and we should not be too hasty to judge. The hippo-meat, most of which the pilgrims throw overboard, is a substitute for the cannibals' regular diet of human flesh (111). We can't quite tell where the savagery lies.

If we leave our preconceptions behind, we will see that the African environment is not that much different from Britain's. Britain holds the "biggest, and the greatest, town on earth . . . brooding motionless" against a background of "mournful gloom" (65). Its "sepulchral city" sits in a mist of "gauzy and radiant fabric" in the "serenity of still and exquisite brilliance" (149, 66). This "monstrous town has been one of the dark places of the earth" (67). In the olden days, this land was filled with ". . . marshes, forests, savages,--precious little to eat fit for a civilized man" (69). It used to be a place of darkness like Africa, but now, it seems artificial and lifeless: a symbol of a "civilized" invasion.

A certain sense of naturalness bonds itself to the elaborate descriptions of Africa, in contrast with the unnaturalness attached to the scant images of Britain's monumental town. Although Africa's "colossal jungle" is as great as Britain's "monstrous town" (77, 65), the novella's presentation of Africa is more alive. We can label the

naturalness as the primeval, and the unnaturalness as the civilized. If we consider the effects of the civilized on the primeval environment, the "civilized" invasion becomes apparent. The African coast is littered with settlements like "overheated catacombs," that are like Britain's "sepulchral city" (79, 159): elements of the West, which are places of burial haunted by an atmosphere of gloom. The Outer Station is "a muddle" with "rubbishy" goods (83). Nearby is "a vast artificial hole" that serves no particular purpose (81). A ravine, like "a scar in the hillside," is filled with "a wanton smash-up" of pipes (81). The Central Station, with "a pretty border of smelly mud . . . and a crazy fence of rushes," looks like a place where "the flabby devil [is] running the show" (86). It looks as if civilization has conquered the land.

Compared to the other outposts, there are "rare trees [that are] . . . perfectly free from undergrowth" at the Inner Station (126). It has "no enclosure or fence of any kind" (126). "A long decaying building on the summit [is] half buried in the high grass; the large holes in the peaked roof [gape] black from afar" (126). There are "no signs of life" in the building (132). The only sign of decay is the one building, which is artificial, which is dead. If the landscape represents part of the decay of the civilized, which Mandel sees as the central theme of the novella, there

are no animal images here to reflect the type of moral decay that she speaks of (313, 315). The civilized is as much of a "fantastic invasion" on the primeval as the latter's silence is an invitation to the "flabby devil [of the civilized to run the show]" (102, 86). Britain is as much a tomb on its own land as it is on African soil. These outposts of civilization seem as horrendous as the row of skulls bordering the Inner Station, Kurtz's abode. Perhaps it is better to be a "rebel" skull at the Inner Station than to be one of the "black bones," the "bundles," the supposedly criminal laborers at the Outer Station.

The different images of the African and British environments show how one seems to invade the other. Yet, an ambiguity persists when we try to judge which is more invasive. Our preconceptions are once again skewing our judgment. The African and British environments are part of the same earth that seems "unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there--there you [can] look at a thing monstrous and free" (105). Although this is how Marlow feels about the wilderness, it is as if the entire earth is in bondage, and yet, is monstrously free. To understand this paradox, we must turn to Kurtz, who embodies ultimate reality, in a later chapter.

Thus far, we can see how the novella's treatment of the

two contrasting environments resists our attempt to label them. The novella's treatment of the degree of scientific advancement in the European and African realms also resists our attempt to label them. The steamboat and rifles reflect technological superiority of the European realm over the paddled boat and crude arrows of the African realm. The steamboat is supposed to be a more efficient mode of transport than the natives' paddle boat. In practice, the imagery tells us a very different story. The natives' boat gives Marlow "one momentary contact with reality" (78). Despite its perceived technological inferiority, it makes him think that he is in "a world of straightforward facts," the world of science (78). The natives paddle their boat with ease through the waters. In contrast, the steamer looks like a dead animal (93). It is an "influential," but hollow friend; slow, "sluggish," "grimy" (96, 104). Its primary function of efficiency diminishes in the African environment. It becomes a "fierce river-demon beating the water with its terrible tail . . ." (144). The steamer seems to be a terrible force of destruction wreaking havoc in a foreign land. But, in watching its assault on the African landscape, we have overlooked the demon's screeching whistle, and how its warning voice continually saves the natives from its gun-toting passengers. Depending on how we choose to perceive the steamboat, it can be either destroyer

or savior. Like the natives' boat, the steamer is in itself harmless.

We cannot say the same for the lethal arsenal of the European and African realms. Weapons, even in the act of self-defense, aim to kill. Yet, the novella seems to belittle the supposed superiority of European weaponry. The pilgrims sometimes spend entire nights shooting at an old hippo, and failing miserably (96). Rifles merely cause a lot of smoke (125). Aiming from the hip, and with eyes shut, the pilgrims render the shots harmless. Like the arrows, which look "as though they wouldn't kill a cat," bullets do not take a single life in the novella (117). Instead, an unsophisticated spear kills Marlow's helmsman (118-9). We don't know who hurled the fatal blow, or why one spear is used among so many small sticks. We do know that weapons have no eyes. They are slaves to the men who use them. Weaponry, in both realms of reality, is in itself as harmless as the modes of transport. We can use gunpowder for fireworks or for landmines, depending on whether we see our reality as a threat or a cause for celebration. Technological tools are products of our reaction to our perceived reality.

The African and European systems of economic values are based on the same principle. Each system is the product of man's reaction to his own realm of reality. In the African

realm, its people create a survival-based economic system. Ivory is but an adornment (136). Meat is valuable. It is sustenance. It gives them strength. Poverty means hunger. Starvation leads to death. Marlow's cannibals have no use for the brass wire with which the Company pays them. The best that they can do is to fish with the wires. After the pilgrims throw the hippo-meat overboard, the cannibals eat those horrid-looking, lavender-colored lumps in small quantities, as if to preserve the precious little food they have left (112). Meat satisfies a physiological need.

The European economic system is quite the opposite of its African counterpart. Wealth is measured in terms of ivory, beads, cotton, and exploitation of cheap labor; none of which is edible. There is something vaporous about these commodities, as if they have no substance. Ivory is in the air, whispered from many lips (89). Beads and cotton prints can fill storehouses as quickly as they can burn in a burst of fire (96, 90). These items are in abundance in Africa, and they are invaluable to the health of colonial trade. They are the meat that colonial trade thrives on. If colonial trade symbolizes exploitation of the natives and the rich resources of their land, then the stench of its meat is as repulsive as that of the cannibals' hippo-meat, and their affinity for human flesh.

In both the African and European realms, the meat is in

itself harmless. It is man who sets up a hierarchical chart and fills in the items: a set of labels with a value attached to each. Hippo-meat may be malodorous to one, but ambrosial to another. Ivory can be a symbol of the beauty of nature, or man's greed. In the end, nothing has an intrinsic value other than as food for a hungry stomach or a greedy heart. And all value systems begin with the way we perceive our reality, with 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. . . ." (69-70): an idea that creates a new system of standards and norms, economic, scientific, environmental, or otherwise.

CHAPTER 2

The Power of Silence

That truth should be silent I had almost forgot.
(Shakespeare 2.2.111)

Heart of Darkness has no names for its minor characters. Most are generic labels of profession, gender, race, or kinship. Some of these characters are as disturbingly silent as the others are verbose. Silent pauses are disturbing because they expose us to the truth of reality. We fill in each gap of silence with our own interpretation, an interpretation of our version of truth that is as subjective as our reality. In turn, the silent characters beguile our sense of their perception of the world. In the end, there is no way the reader can surmise these characters' sphere of reality. Yet, the verbosity of some of the minor characters is even more disturbing because it shows us how distant these characters are from the truth, from other aspects of reality beyond their own. Because these vocal characters can only relate through their own realm of reality, they cannot accommodate other realms. In abiding by their own codes of conduct, and religious beliefs, these characters demonstrate how subjective their perceptions of reality are, and, when placed in another realm, how unfitting they become.

The first minor characters whom we encounter are the

Lawyer, the Accountant, and the Director (65-6), nameless men whose labels describe their respective professions. These are silent characters whose presence we forget as the tale unfolds. None of them speaks until we are well into the story, when a single, unidentified voice barks, "Try to be civil, Marlow" (103). When Marlow discusses the possibility that Kurtz may be dead, we hear a "beastly sigh," as if echoing our own disappointment, and our impatience to hear the rest of the tale (120). But, as if tantalizing our impatience, in "a pause of profound stillness," Marlow begins to smoke (120). And at the end of the tale, we hear the Director breaking the silence with a casual note that they have "lost the first ebb of the tide" (157). Marlow's auditors punctuate the story's silent pauses. They are men whom Marlow directly addresses in between "a long silence," "a pause of profound stillness," and in between Marlow's frustrated attempts to put his truth into words (70, 120). These frustrated attempts to tell the truth, which is "not very clear," like "a dream," dissipate into silence (70, 95). The auditors of the tale are not what Richard Ruppel terms the "occasionally hostile check on the narrative" that prevents Conrad from "[showing] too profound [an] understanding of [his] subjects" (13). Rather, these characters focus our attention on silence as the mirror of truth.

The knitting women exemplify the relationship between silence and truth. One has the "uncanny and fateful" look of "unconcerned wisdom" (74). Both seem like guardians of "the door of Darkness" (74). They intrude upon Marlow's most "imbecile thoughts," but no words are spoken (141). Their silent knitting warns us of the blinding comfort of routine, or the unwavering devotion to an absolute set of standards, which can sow the seed of apathy. Apathy itself, as a condition in which emotions are numbed and deadened, is a kind of death much like Roland E. Bush's impression of these women as "guardians of the . . . passage to the world of death" (90). These women are not quite the "symbolic characters of traditional epic . . . transformed into Fates" (Yarrison 309). In fate, we have no choice. We do have a choice when we take up routine to shield us from the ravages of reality.

The "black wool" of routine can blind us with the same "unconcerned wisdom" of apathy that the Central Station's "miracle" Chief Accountant manifests (73, 74, 83). His appearance is impeccably clean, his books "in apple-pie order" (83). Yet, he seems so out of place in the African environment. The Chief Accountant pays no heed to his laundry woman's "distaste for the work," the "[strings] of dusty niggers," and resents the "groans of [the] sick person" in his office, who robs him of his "attention" (83-

4). His only concern is to avoid "clerical errors," to "[make] correct entries of perfectly correct transactions" (84, 85). Routine is a safe haven that shelters the Chief Accountant from "the grove of death" outside his office (85). But routine has also hardened the man against the sufferings of his fellow men. He can only function within his own safe realm of reality, and is unable to see other aspects. Whether he has ever attempted to understand the African realm is beside the point. He has now chosen to refuse to see beyond his own sphere. His code of conduct centers on routine, on "[keeping] up his appearance" (83). We wonder about the worth of his strict adherence to such a code of conduct when we gaze at "the grove of death" outside, and listen to the "groans of [the] sick person" crying within (85). The mute attendance to work exposes the element of indifference. The Chief Accountant's code of conduct is not merely the "strategy of survival," which J.P. Geise and L.A. Lange claim it to be (201). Adopting a routine or code of conduct, in this case, has fostered apathy. The Chief Accountant manages to shut out the African environment at the expense of his sensibility. He selfishly chooses routine as a barrier against Africa's realm of reality. And it is the mute image of the suffering natives that makes the barrier so obvious. In this case, rather than "[making] men human," deliberate belief in

routine dehumanizes the Chief Accountant (Geise 203).

The minor characters of the European realm of reality are blinded by the limits of their own subjective reality. The Chief Accountant is apathetic in a vicious way because he is in the middle of the horror, but we cannot say the same for Marlow's aunt. She has not witnessed any of the savage conditions in Africa, and what she knows is that colonialism has been defined as "[the] weaning [of] those ignorant millions from their horrid ways" (76). As Valerie F. Sedlak demonstrates, Marlow's aunt is "a woman who cares, a woman who loves" (446), stating that the aunt's blindness to the African plight is not of her own choosing¹. We must refrain from judging her until we can place ourselves within her realm of reality. The aunt is a victim of a limited breadth of knowledge, not a cold and unfeeling matriarch of colonialism. She is a trusting woman who believes in the "rot let loose in print" (76). Her trust can only stem from faith in the integrity of the press; she is an easy prey for media propaganda. From this perspective, she, like the Chief Accountant, basks in the comfort of a belief without considering its validity. But, compared to the Chief Accountant, her belief seems unselfish. Her belief in the

¹Sedlak's article also implies that reality is subjective, but she attributes the subjectivity to men's perception of women's reality.

beauty of colonial ideals is born out of the selflessness of man, in the hope of improving the conditions of those less fortunate. Yet on the most basic level, she, like the Chief Accountant, is merely responding to her realm of reality. Both of these characters "bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to" social constructs that civilization has set up (70). When we consider blind role-playing as the aunt's primary reaction to her realm of reality, we will see that she is not that much different from the Chief Accountant.

When Marlow pays his farewell visit to his aunt, we note how "uncomfortable" her colonial rhetoric makes him, but she continues "brightly" without noticing her nephew's discomfort (76). She calls her nephew at "every blamed port" (77). After Marlow's harrowing trip, she nurses him without realizing that her efforts are "beside the mark" (150). Marlow's unspoken thoughts emphasize how much the aunt doesn't know. She is as insensitive to her nephew's realm of reality as the Chief Accountant is to Africa's. Neither can reach beyond his or her own realm of reality. This shows that Heart of Darkness is not merely critical of what Sedlak asserts as men's "preconceived ideas about women which do not coincide with the situations in which these women live" (465). The novella also shows that its European female minor characters have no choice. Because there is no evidence that Marlow has given his aunt the opportunity to

share his experience, we can only assume that her lack of understanding is not of her own choosing. Marlow only "[ventures] to hint that the Company [is] run for profit," but he does not state it (76). He knows that it is his "imagination that [needs] soothing," but he does not tell her (150). Her limited reality bothers him. Yet, he chooses to help her maintain that world. In the European realm, men, by their unwillingness to voice their version of the truth, shut women in "a world of their own," a world that is "too beautiful altogether" (76). Silence bars understanding.

The Intended, in contrast with the African woman, shows us why women of the European realm are shut "in a world of their own," which is "too beautiful altogether" (76). The Intended is described as a fragile creature with "delicate" features, "pale," "floating" (152-3). Considering how Marlow perceives her "mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering," it is her perceived fragility that accounts for the Lie (153). Because her love and respect for Kurtz is so obvious, almost to the point of idolatry, Marlow can see that, to her, Kurtz has become an ideal, an "indistinguishable light of belief and love" (154). The Intended calls Kurtz's eloquence "the gift of the great" (155). To her, there is no better man in the world. She has Kurtz's "noble confidence" (154). She now has "nothing

but a memory [of Kurtz]," a beautiful memory of his greatness, his love for her, which already gives her the strength, that "something--to--to live with" (156). Marlow's lie merely reaffirms her idealistic perception of Kurtz. "I knew it--I was sure!" she cries in "inconceivable triumph" (157).

But we are relying on Marlow's perception of the Intended. Without the lie, Marlow feels that "[the Intended's world] would have been too dark--too dark altogether" (157). He feels that she is too fragile to take the truth; it would destroy her. His lie is the "sunlight [that] can be made to lie" (151-2). On the most fundamental level, the lie reaffirms the falseness of the Intended's ideal, and maintains the beauty of the Intended's world (464). Despite Sedlak's assumption that the Intended "has struggled to live with her own form of horror [in losing Kurtz]," which makes the Intended's world not "too beautiful," Sedlak overlooks the fact that Kurtz is the Intended's world (464). Kurtz is everything that she has ever lived for. Before Kurtz's death, she had lived for him. After his death, she lives for his "memory" (156). By maintaining the idealistic beauty of Kurtz, the lie helps her stay in, according to Marlow, that "too beautiful" world. In fact, the lie does not "[enable the Intended] to face the finality of Kurtz's death" (Sedlak 464). Rather,

the lie immortalizes the Intended's idealistic perception of Kurtz, and his love for her. It upholds her image of Kurtz.

Despite having the opportunity to fully understand the limits of the Intended's realm of reality, Marlow chooses not to take the risk. Marlow assumes that the Intended is a delicate creature living in "a world of her own," that is "too beautiful altogether" (76). We forget that it takes strength to stand up to the disapproval of her family when the Intended chooses to be engaged to Kurtz (155). Clearly, her decisiveness in following her heart shows that she, like Kurtz perhaps, may not be a conformist. Her defiance against familial expectations is, in a sense, as bold as the specter of the African woman, whose fearless glare challenges the colonists.

Like us, Walter J. Ong lets Marlow's perception of the Intended's "fragility" overshadow other facts about her and the limits of her reality. He claims that the lie "is not a lie at all" because she symbolizes the maintenance of the falsity of an ideal, and the lie does just that (248). Ong asserts that "[H]er narcissism . . . gives strong indication that she could not have taken the direct answer," but in what way is she narcissistic when her world centers on Kurtz (253)? Because we have made specific assumptions about her personality (despite the fact that we hardly know her), we will never know if she is strong enough to step outside of

that beautiful world to hear Marlow's truth. Like the aunt, the Intended is allowed to stay in a world of her own, to continue to believe in the beauty of some ideal.

In contrast with the frail image of the Intended, as presented by Marlow, the African woman is "wild and gorgeous," "savage and superb," "wild-eyed and magnificent," "ominous and stately" (136-7). She gazes defiantly at the white men with "unswerving steadiness" (137). The Harlequin seems to be afraid of this woman who seems to fear nothing. He would shoot her if she tried to board the steamer (137). The African woman can talk "like a fury with Kurtz for an hour" (137). She is the only one who "[does] not so much as flinch" when the pilgrims begin shooting indiscriminately from their boat (145). She seems as tragic a figure as the Intended, both a "fragile and familiar Shade" (156). Again, despite the African woman's consistent mettle and apparent strength, the concept of weakness is coupled with a woman. But she is a respected leader among her people. She can instigate a shout, which her people would repeat "in a roaring chorus" (145). She does not act like a typical woman of the European realm. Yet, she is still perceived as "fragile" and "tragic" (156). Because we can neither see her realm of reality nor hear her voice, not only does she become "mysterious" to the European men in the novella, but she also becomes a mystery to us (137). Her silence marks

the barrier of understanding between her and us. Without understanding her scope of reality, and despite contradictory indications, she is still perceived as an inferior warrior (156). Without being given a voice to break down the barrier between her realm and ours, she will always remain a mystery.

To Sedlak's one-sided statement that Marlow is "out of touch with her [the African woman's] truth," we can add that the African woman is also out of touch with his truth (453). Sedlak asserts that the African woman's "world is alien to him [Therefore] she is a mystery to him" (456). On the other hand, J. H. Miller claims that the African woman is a "presentation of the darkness . . . ultimately as a woman who unmans all those male questors who try to dominate her" (Heart 221). But when we see only her skin color and Marlow's subjective equating of her to the jungle, in what way is her "darkness" menacing (Heart 221)? Because there is no interaction between Marlow and the African woman, Marlow's world is as alien to her as hers is to him. And we, like Marlow, have only been able to observe her from a distance, looking at externals. Words that describe what she means in the novella remain unreliable, subjective. Her strength and the Intended's fragility convey an identical message. Despite the lack of understanding, we still tend to judge, and sometimes, judge grossly.

Skewed judgment, which stems from lack of understanding, is not just pronounced by men upon women, as Sedlak claims (465). It is also pronounced by men upon other men. In fact, the novella seems more critical of the European male minor characters, many of whom are in their own unique sphere of reality. Because they refuse to see beyond their own realm, these characters choose to live in "a world of their own" (76).

There are many examples of a subjectively chosen reality in the minor characters of the European realm. We see the man with the moustache at the Outer Station always preoccupied with "behaving splendidly, splendidly" (90). In attempting to put out a fire, he uses a pail with a hole in its bottom, all the while concentrating on proper behavior (90). He must assume a "[pitiless], pitiless" attitude towards the "brute," who is blamed for causing the fire (93). Like the Chief Accountant, this "stout man with moustaches" chooses apathy in the disguise of civil behavior (90). He has adopted the French doctor's advice to "keep calm," and to stay within his own realm of reality (76). As long as he thinks he is "[weaning] those ignorant millions from their horrid ways," he is behaving "splendidly" (76, 90). "Serve him [the beaten native] right! Transgression--punishment--bang! . . . That's the only way," he explains to Marlow (93). The accused native is chosen as a scapegoat

by virtue of being a savage. Apathy is both the Chief Accountant's and the moustached man's barrier against the African realm. But in both cases, a voiceless native magnifies the barrier.

Thus far, we have seen minor characters of the European realm who are representative of their given roles. The Chief Accountant takes care of the accounts. The aunt, in her own limited way, does her best to attend to her nephew's needs. The Intended remains faithful to her fiancé. The moustached man plays the seemingly stoic role of a colonist. The knitting women knit their black wool, undaunted by numerous interruptions. Despite their impatience with Marlow's numerous meanders, the Lawyer, the Accountant, and the Director, like any respectable audience, listen to Marlow's tale with as much civility as they can muster up. Yet, the minor characters in the novella give a sense of inappropriateness in their presence or action within the context of their environment. The knitting women are out of place in a business-like environment of the Company office. They belong more to the comfort of a cozy home in front of a fireplace. The Chief Accountant's preoccupation with his job is at odds with the chaotic environment outside his office. The Intended's faithfulness is, in a way, shrouded in a sham. Marlow's audience is almost transparent, almost nonexistent. Marlow's aunt, in attending to her nephew's

needs, keeps on missing the mark. These characters play a distinctly assigned role, but each role is at odds with its environment. These characters play a typical role that becomes untypical within the context of their environment.

The minor characters of the African realm are in striking contrast to those of the European realm. Most of the natives are given no formal label associated with the civilized. They are brutes. The African woman is not even characterized in any sense, just described in stunning terms. The natives are in tune with their environment, but because most of them have no voice, we cannot even begin to fathom their realm of reality. A character's label makes his role unmistakably distinct until we begin to look at other minor characters in the novella. Not all natives are without a label. There are the cannibals, the helmsman, and the fireman, who are not stereotypical characters. We will see that other characters, like the pilgrims and the Harlequin of the European realm, also do not play their given roles. Finally, we will see that the portrayal of minor characters in Heart of Darkness deliberately confounds our judgment because the novella itself denies the absoluteness or "rightness" of any set of standards. We cannot stereotype Conrad's minor characters.

In the European realm, the pilgrims stand out most as minor characters who are completely the opposite of what

their label represents. They constantly "[beguile] the time by backbiting and intriguing each other" (91). They are as full of "philanthropic pretence . . . , as their talk, as their government, as their show of work" (91). Their only "real" desire is to reap the ivory harvest (91). They never do anything substantial. Instead, they would rather spend their time shooting at an old hippo or some rowdy natives, or quarreling amongst themselves (96, 145, 113). They are not what we think they should be because pilgrims are supposed to be morally sound, selfless, and caring. They are not any more hypocritical than the inefficient manager of the Central Station, who "[inspires] uneasiness," who has "no genius for organizing," "no intelligence," whose only concern is to be "free from unfair competition" in the ivory trade (87-8, 101). Because "pilgrims" connotes the ideals of Christianity, ivory and guns should have no place in their hearts. Because the manager connotes the ideals of colonialism, incompetence and greed should be absent. But the pilgrims never really kill anything. Their rifles only cause "a glorious lot of smoke" (125). Although they are cowardly, they, at least, attempt to fight back during an attack (117). And the manager treats his native helper well. No other minor character gives such a free rein to a native. The "overfed negro boy" can keep his stomach full, and his insolent tongue loose (88). We condemn the pilgrims

and the manager because they are not what they ought to represent. At the same time, we overlook subtle indications that tell us they are not as horrid as they seem to be. We begin to see how meaningless labels are. Although the pilgrims can only see the economic aspect of their world, they are not the "evil" doers that critics claim they are². These characters are all mouth, and no substance. They merely talk about what they want, "but as to effectually lifting a little finger--oh no" (91). We never actually see the pilgrims act upon their greed. And when a minor character, like the manager's uncle, acts upon his greed, death finds him (102).

The deaths of minor characters in the novella are not consistently associated with greed. We hear the Swede captain tell Marlow that another Swede "hanged himself" because "[the] sun [had been] too much for him, or the country perhaps" (79). Natives, because of overwork, are dying (82). The helmsman, who has shown himself to be a faithful crew member, dies at the toss of a spear (119). Death is indiscriminate, as is life.

But we are not indiscriminate, and the Harlequin also catches us off guard. In the European realm, the Harlequin

²Geise and Lange call them "'flabby devils'" (204). Ruppel describes them as Conrad's display of "anti-missionary bias" (7).

is also not what his label suggests. He dresses in bold colors, but he is a timid soul. The African woman frightens him (137). When Marlow tells him that the manager of the Outer Station "thinks [he] ought to be hanged," the Harlequin replies "earnestly," "I had better get out of the way quietly" (139). The Harlequin tells us how Kurtz makes him "see things," even though the Harlequin thinks of himself as "a simple man" with "no great thoughts" (130, 134). With his admittedly simplistic mind, what does he see? After all, he doesn't understand Kurtz's dilemma in deciding whether to leave Africa (139). Yet, like the Intended, the Harlequin's world centers on Kurtz. As the man who has spent so much time with Kurtz, he seems to be the key to the mystery of Kurtz. He talks incessantly about Kurtz, but reveals little about the man except that Kurtz can "be terrible," and Kurtz writes great poetry (131, 140). We begin to wonder how much the Harlequin really knows Kurtz. In thinking that perhaps this harlequin clad figure is a fool to idolize a man whom he does not really know, we have overlooked a fact about ourselves. Not only do we not know what Kurtz is like at this point, we also have little insight into the Harlequin's internal workings. If we hear the foreman's actual words, perhaps his incessant talk about pigeons would be as silly as the Harlequin's is about Kurtz (97). In both cases, we have no idea why these characters

adore the subject of their talk so much because we cannot put ourselves into their sphere of reality. We don't know how they think. From this perspective, the Harlequin is not that much different from the natives at the Inner Station, whose internal workings are never disclosed. On the surface, like the Harlequin, they are also "simple people," who "adore" Kurtz (127, 130). But we can't say whether the Harlequin and the natives are fools, savages, or both.

We can now see how labels fail to hold meaning for us. We have to brush past them to look at the few facts that we have, and we have even fewer facts when we look at the rest of the minor characters in the African realm. As we walk into Africa with Marlow, we see some in chains (80-1). We see the naturalness with which some paddle their boat across the water (78). We pity those dying from exhaustion (82). We wonder about those who have run away from Marlow's caravan (86). Then we see the Inner Station manager's overweight and insolent "boy," the one who, with "scathing contempt," announces Kurtz's death (88, 148). He strikes us as being different from other natives because he is not in chains. He is also well fed, thus far from exhaustion or starvation. Because he is overweight, we associate him with gluttony, thus excessiveness. He is, above all else, rude. Because he does not seem to fear the white colonists, there must be something wrong. If we consider his insolence in

light of the black overseer and the brickmaker at the Central Station, we will withhold our judgment. The black overseer, while escorting his chained gang, grins politely at Marlow (81). The brickmaker, who secretly reads the "Company's confidential correspondence," is extremely cordial to Marlow (92). Manners do not necessarily reflect character. Rather, the boy's mannerism is a refusal to adopt a servile attitude towards the white men, who have come to "tame" his country. We cannot simply call this overweight native what Ian Watt describes as "[an example] of the corruption created in the blacks by the white colonists" (11). The boy has more "backbone" than the subservient black overseer, whom Marlow meets at the outskirts of the Outer Station (83, 81). A native who has a weight problem, a loose tongue, and who works for a white colonist may be a native who has been corrupted, or a native who has refused to "bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to" colonialism (70). We cannot understand the native's heaviness and insolence any more than Marlow can understand those "big powerful" cannibals' apparent "restraint" (112, 113).

Fear cowers under the interactions between the colonists and natives. We, as well as Marlow, are alarmed when we encounter the boldness of the African woman and the manager's "overfed" boy (88). The pilgrims are frightened

by the screams of invisible "savages" (110). Marlow's fireman, an "improved specimen," is "hard at work" for fear of offending the "evil spirit" in the boiler (106-7). After all the elaborate reasons that Marlow gives to show his admiration for the cannibals' "restraint," he decides to throw the helmsman's corpse into the river so it won't "become a first-class temptation" (111-3, 125). Despite the cannibals' show of restraint, we cannot forget the headman's casual "Catch 'im," and "Eat 'im" (111).

Each minor character tells us the same story:

. . . my speech or my silence, indeed any action of mine, would be a mere futility. What [does] it matter what any one [knows] or [ignores]? One gets sometimes such a flash of insight. The essentials . . . lay deep under the surface, beyond my reach, and beyond my power of meddling. (Conrad 109)

This is what bothers us about each of the minor characters. Nothing else matters except one's own subjective realm of reality. Each character, whether willingly or not, only sees his or her own realm as larger than life. Through his minor characters, Conrad has shown us the sometimes "impenetrable," sometimes vague, and sometimes distinct realms of reality, each one custom-made to pander to personal demons or ideals (158). We all live in a world of our very own.

CHAPTER 3

Conrad's Illusive Vision

"Then you should say what you mean," the March Hare went on.

"I do," Alice hastily replied; "at least I mean what I say--that's the same thing, you know."

"Not the same thing a bit!" said the Hatter. "You might just as well say that 'I see what I eat' is the same thing as 'I eat what I see'!"

"You might just as well say," added the March Hare, "that 'I like what I get' is the same thing as 'I get what I like'!"

"You might just as well say," added the Dormouse, who seemed to be talking in his sleep, "that 'I breathe when I sleep' is the same thing as 'I sleep when I breathe'!"

"It is the same thing with you," said the Hatter (Carroll 62)

The narrator, Marlow, and Kurtz are the three major characters in Heart of Darkness, but many critics tend to overlook the narrator and his vital function as our guide to the meaning of Conrad's design¹. This narrator is a warning voice against Marlow's bursts of judgment, which are so tainted with subjectiveness that Marlow's opinions become untrustworthy. As Mark Kinkead-Weekes points out, we need to differentiate between what Marlow sees and how he interprets the situation (40). We cannot let Marlow judge

¹To date, Seymour L. Gross provides perhaps the most detailed analysis, devoting an entire article to the narrator. J. Hillis Miller also makes a brief mention of the narrator's significance (Poets 35). Unlike my analysis, both articles liken the primary narrator to the reader (and, in Gross's, to Marlow also).

for us².

The narrator is a nameless, faceless voice, very much like Marlow's story "that [seems] to shape itself without human lips" (95). The narrator does not judge. He merely describes what he sees and hears, offering varied images to emphasize the subjectivity of human perception. He shows us the Thames can carry "the dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires" (67). Each man ventures out to sea with a unique quest, seeking to fill one's mind, soul, or wallet. But, to the narrator, "the sea is always the same," "its bond" having "the effect of making us tolerant of each others' yarns--and even convictions" (67, 65). The narrator, in being able to see the subjectiveness of reality mirrored by the sea, understands the limits of each man's sphere of reality. This insight is what makes us all more "tolerant of . . . others' yarns--and even convictions," and less willing to pronounce judgment (65). If there is any judgment, it is Conrad's implied condemnation of an unyielding belief in the absoluteness of the set of value systems within one's realm of reality. Because the narrator does not judge, he denies the absoluteness of his own values. He is our trustworthy guide because he refuses to shape our judgment.

²Barry Stampfl's article condenses the most pertinent articles on Marlow's narrative reliability.

Besides depicting the physical setting where the tale unfolds, the narrator also points out Marlow's significant features. These features are signposts, alerting us to the multifarious realms of reality, including Marlow's, lurking within Heart of Darkness. The meaning of Marlow's tale is "not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which [brings] it out only as a glow brings out a haze" (68). Marlow's interpretation does not hold the meaning to the novella. We must look for its message as we would in a dream, free from the constraints of both Marlow's and our own realms of reality. The essence of the tale lies in our awareness of judgment as an inadequate measurement against the value system within one's subjectively defined realm of reality. Marlow's harsh judgment is a stark manifestation of his subjectiveness, shaped in accordance with the value system within his own realm.

From the very beginning of the tale when the narrator introduces us to Marlow, he cautions us. Marlow sits on deck "with his arms dropped, the palms of hands outwards" in a passive posture of openness, yet he "resemble[s] an idol" (66). We must not fall for his rhetoric and high-flown morality, lest we begin to "bow down before" Marlow's philosophical stance (70). Marlow assumes "the pose of a Buddha," but he "preach[es] in European clothes and without a lotus flower" (69). There is something lacking in Marlow.

In his narrow vision, his belief in the absoluteness of his values, and his eagerness to impose these values on others. Marlow is not as open-minded as his pose suggests.

Marlow delivers his sermon on the *Nellie*, vehemently denouncing colonialism (68-9). He praises man's "devotion to efficiency" as the saving factor from colonial atrocities (69). Having practiced what he is preaching, he describes his preoccupation with rivets in the Central Station (95-8). Work, Marlow explains, is "the chance to find yourself. Your own reality" (97). But work, he continues, is also the "chance" to cast oneself into a "mere show," by which others "can never tell what it really means" (97). Work also fosters apathy, the "kind of folly . . . more limited than [one] would suppose," as exemplified by the Chief Accountant at the Outer Station (99). This is the charismatic appeal of Marlow's rhetoric. It gives us the illusion of profound insight.

Marlow's actions, despite his experiences in the Congo, expose his shallowness. The use of the present tense in his narrative also reveals his current attitudes, which have remained unaltered after his emergence from the Congo. Although he is aware of other realms, he continues to "bow down before" his own values, his own preconceptions about women (69). To him, all women are "in a world of their own . . . too beautiful altogether" (76). He tells the

auditors that "[t]hey--the women I mean--are out of it-- should be out of it. We must help them stay in that beautiful world of their own . . ." (emphasis added; 121). He is proud that he can shield them from the truth, which he thinks he knows. Even at the end of the tale, he remarks in the present tense, "I shall see her [the Intended], too, a tragic and familiar Shade, resembling in this gesture another one [the African woman], tragic also, and bedecked with powerless charms . . ." (156). Despite his lack of understanding of these women, Marlow still pronounces judgment. He admits that he hates to lie (94). Yet he caresses his lie to the Intended as a redemptive idea, his own "sacrifice" for preserving that feminine world (70).

Marlow must justify his lie to his audience because he values his moral superiority. He is visibly shaken and stops to smoke when he hears one of the auditors mutter "absurd" (120). He lashes out at their "normal" temperatures, "excellent appetites," their untainted bond with civilization (120). He is angry not merely because he thinks his auditors "will mistake their cultural values for objective values; will see their sustaining *mythos* as something ontologically true in the inherent structure of

reality" (Bradshaw 167)³. He is also defending his moral stance. He has lived through hell and is "proud of [his] fortitude" (120). He places himself above other men for he is certain "they [can]not possibly know the things [he knows]" (149). To Marlow, his journey to Africa has made him better than those "commonplace individuals" (150). Because he thinks his experiences have enlarged his realm of reality, he claims he can be a fair judge of men. While he unravels his tale on the *Nellie*, he guards his moral values and judgment with pompous ferocity. "You can't understand. How could you?" he accuses the auditors (122). A man who has attained nirvana would not have been so easily provoked to anger.

Believing in the absoluteness of his own judgment, Marlow is intolerant of others who do not share his views. His aunt is insensitive to his needs, and ignorant of the harsh realities of colonialism (150, 76). He despises the lack of morality in the "unwholesome" pilgrims, the "papier-mâché Mephistopheles," and the "idiot[ic]" manager of the Central Station (112, 93, 89). He abhors the Eldorado Expedition's greed for ivory, describing these men as "less valuable animals [than their donkeys]" (102). He gets angry

³In Graham Bradshaw's article, he defines *mythos* as "the collection of notions a people has of how reality is at base put together" (167).

with the auditors of the tale, who cannot possibly understand his story because they lack the insight that he has gained from his journey (120). "Fine sentiments, you say? Fine sentiments, be hanged," Marlow bursts out (106). Marlow is no more tolerant of others in Africa than on the *Nellie*. These comments are made under Marlow's own assumption that he is morally superior, part of the "gang of virtue" (92). Marlow reaffirms the tendency to project one's own realm of reality onto others. His anger flares with bigotry. He lacks the open-mindedness that his Buddha-like pose suggests.

It is impossible for Marlow to hear himself preach his views with "stupid importance" (150). He can see that "[we] live, as we dream--alone" (95). He sees other realms of reality, but he fails to understand them. He has been to Africa. He has seen and worked with the natives. Yet, despite his lack of understanding of the African realities, Marlow still judges these men. He cannot understand why the black overseer would help the colonists escort a chained group of natives, so he places the overseer in the general class of "the product[s] of the new forces at work" (80). Without understanding the context in which the overseer made his choice (or in which he had no choice), Marlow makes an assumption about the man. Marlow also dislikes the manager's "boy" because of the lad's insolence, but more

importantly, because of this native's association with the manager (88). Marlow thinks he admires his cannibals for their inexplicable "restraint," but opts to throw his helmsman's body overboard for fear of "some startling trouble" that this corpse of a "first-class temptation" may cause (113, 125). Marlow wonders, "Why in the name of all the gnawing devils of hunger they didn't go for us . . . amazes me now when I think of it" (112). Marlow's reaction is based on his perception of cannibalism, as deep-rooted as his attitude towards "the ceremonies used when approaching Mr. Kurtz," rather than on a profound understanding of cannibalistic practice (125, 133). This man who has seen the world can offer us little insight into the African realm. He can only offer us his moral creed.

But Marlow's creed also offers us some significant insight into the European realm. He knows the exploitative aspect of colonialism, "the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, [which] is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much" (69). He also recognizes the colonial rhetoric of "unselfish belief" in the enterprise, which justifies the deed (70). Marlow is persuasive because he speaks some truth. But if we look at him more closely, his actions contradict his philosophical observations. If colonialism is deliberate deprivation in the guise of an "unselfish

belief," then Marlow's lie to the Intended is also "not a pretty thing when you look into it too much" (70). Excused by Marlow's "unselfish belief" in preserving her beautiful world, the lie deprives the Intended of Marlow's version of the truth. The idea behind colonialism and Marlow's lie is to play god over others' well-being.

When we look into what Marlow says with respect to his actions, his sermon rings of hypocrisy. "We live, as we dream--alone," he lectures (95). He knows each person lives in his own unique realm of reality, but he still judges them by his own subjective values. Marlow's actions contradict his own version of the truth because his truth is a half-truth. He fails to see the whole truth in Kurtz.

Kurtz is a man of many faces. He means different things to different people. The Chief Accountant finds Kurtz a competent arm of colonialism, a man "who will go far, very far" (85). The young agent, wary of Kurtz's "influential acquaintances," calls Kurtz "a prodigy," part of "the new gang--the gang of virtue" (92). After all, Kurtz's presence can affect the young agent's plan to be "assistant-manager" (93). On the other hand, the manager of the Central Station and his uncle see Kurtz as a hindrance to their economic venture in the ivory trade. Achievement invites envy. To them, Kurtz represents "unfair competition" (101). Even after death, a Company official

probes the private documents in Marlow's possession (150). Hoping to find the ivory source documented, the Company official, "with an air of great contempt," stifles his disappointment when he discovers that the paper is Kurtz's report on the "Suppression of Savage Customs" (150). To each man, his self-interest is reflected in his perception of Kurtz. Those who are economically motivated can only see Kurtz's uncanny ability to uncover ivory.

But, according to his cousin, Kurtz is "a universal genius" (151). A journalist claims that Kurtz can "electrif[y] large meetings," and he can be "a splendid leader" of any political party (151). Kurtz has the gift of reaching into other men's hearts, speaking and feeling on their level. The Intended finds it "impossible not to-- . . . [l]ove him" (154). Kurtz can communicate with his Intended, can touch her soul. He understands her. The Harlequin repeatedly remarks how Kurtz has "enlarged [his] mind" (128, 140).

Kurtz not only symbolizes these characters' subjective realms of reality, but his eloquence also reaches their hearts. Kurtz's immense influence on these people stems from his understanding of their frame of mind. "You show them you have in you something that is really profitable, and then there will be no limits to the recognition of your ability," Kurtz advises Marlow (146). This man is a

"chameleon," and, with the "right motives--always," is able to cater to any man's needs (Geise 197, 146). He recognizes the needs and desires of others.

Each character's realm of reality is reflected in his or her opinion of Kurtz, and their comments are, per Marlow's recollection, hearsay. The most problematic account of Kurtz is Marlow's because his judgment about Kurtz is based on the absoluteness of his own values. He likens Kurtz to "an enchanted princess sleeping in a fabulous castle" (114). He sees Kurtz "as a voice" of "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" (119-20). He tells us that Kurtz is bald, like "an ivory ball" (121). Kurtz is the wilderness's "spoiled and pampered favourite" (121). Kurtz owns everything: his Intended, his ivory, his station (121). He is one claimed by "many powers of darkness," and has "taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land" (121-2). Kurtz is "hollow at the core" (133). After painting a dark picture of Kurtz, Marlow, with a tinge of admiration, describes the dying man's last words as "an affirmation, a moral victory" with "the echo of his [Kurtz's] magnificent eloquence thrown to [Marlow] as translucently pure as a cliff of crystal" (149). We see Marlow at the end of the tale, in the posture of a

"meditating Buddha," still struggling to attain nirvana (157). He cannot decide whether Kurtz is a "hollow sham" or "pure as a cliff of crystal" because Kurtz blurs the distinction between what is right and what is wrong, between what is acceptable and what is unacceptable (146, 149).

Marlow's reluctance to question what he sees accounts for his inability to come to terms with the truth of subjective reality in Kurtz. He thinks Kurtz is devilishly unrestrained, but does not question why Kurtz refuses to leave his post (121-3). If Kurtz represented greed, no doubt the man would return to Europe where ivory has value. Instead, Kurtz opts to stay in Africa where ivory is but an adornment. Marlow is stunned to find "'Exterminate all the brutes'" at the end of Kurtz's report on the "Suppression of Savage Customs," but does not question to whom the word "brutes" refers (123). The word can easily be applied to the colonists, whose savage treatment of the natives is brutal.

Marlow simply cannot associate "civilized" with "savage." This attitude is most pronounced when Marlow shouts at the Harlequin, "I don't want to know anything of the ceremonies used when approaching Mr. Kurtz" (133, Kinkead-Weekes 41). To Marlow, African rituals are "midnight dances, ending with unspeakable rites" (123). He recalls, with disgust, sacrifices "were offered up to"

Kurtz, whose "nerves . . . went wrong" (123). "I tell you, it [Kurtz's soul] had gone mad," he exclaims to the auditors (144). Marlow can see that the natives treat Kurtz with deference, accepting him into their way of life, and sharing their rituals with him (140-1). He sees this merging of a white man with an African culture as an atrocious act of regression to savagery on the white man's part. Just the thought of Kurtz participating in a ritual electrifies Marlow with "moral shock," "as if something altogether monstrous, intolerable to thought and odious to the soul, ha[s] been thrust upon" him (141). As Frances Singh points out, "'Kurtz's tribalization' must 'be seen as a rejection of the materialism of the West in favor of a simpler and more honest way of life'" (qtd. in Watt 10). Marlow cannot see beyond the rows of skulls to take the road to mutual understanding between two cultures. As expressed to the auditors, Marlow states, "I tell you, it [Kurtz's soul] had gone mad" (144). Marlow's journey to Africa has not freed him from cultural parochialism.

Much criticism of Kurtz is based on Marlow's narrative reliability. To Geise and Lange, Kurtz "is the most banal of men and the most unrestrained and ferocious of savages" (197). Miller also sees Kurtz as "an example of civilized man at his highest point of development," who has made his "return to savagery" (Poets 30). Richard Ruppel considers

Kurtz's "too profound understanding of his exotic world" as "a peculiar kind of degeneration" (10). Kinkead-Weekes further suggests that, despite Kurtz's "spiritual degeneracy," "the story of Kurtz will end (at least for Marlow) with a cry of truth, while Marlow's story ends with a lie" (47, 42). At the opposite end of critical opinions, we have seen how positively Singh views Kurtz's "'tribalization'" (qtd. in Watt 10). Brook Thomas also casts him in a positive light, noting that "Kurtz, who embodies Europe's most noble ideals, recognize[s] the horror at the heart of darkness" (240). Kurtz is demon, god, civilization's ideals. Kurtz has to be "hollow," and "pure" because he represents the relativity of all values (133, 149). Because Kurtz can relate to the subjectiveness of judgment, he has indeed "kicked himself loose of the earth" (143). This is what frightens Marlow. The thought of life without ideals, a truth that betrays all values, is too monstrous for Marlow to perceive (143). He needs to see the world in black and white. The grey areas of life baffle him. Like the puzzle of restraint in the cannibals, Kurtz's assimilation into tribal life bothers Marlow. He tells the manager that Kurtz uses "no method at all" (138). Marlow cannot decide whether "no method" is "hollow" or "pure" (138, 133, 149). The journey to darkness has changed Marlow's life, but not his attitudes.

At the end of the tale, we finally understand the narrator's words. Marlow is the false prophet who can "lead [us] into the heart of an immense darkness" (158). Kurtz has "made that last stride . . . , [has] stepped over the edge," while Marlow has been allowed "to draw back [his] hesitating foot" (149). Indeed, Marlow's refusal to take that last step "is the whole difference" (149). We must not forget Marlow's last words: "The heavens do not fall for such a trifle [as telling a lie]. Would they have fallen, I wonder, if I had rendered Kurtz that justice which was his due" (emphasis added; 157)? At the end of the tale, Marlow is still obsessed with judging Kurtz, a man whom he hardly knows. If Marlow truly understood the relativity of reality, he would be more willing to reserve judgment. He should be more "tolerant of . . . others' . . . convictions" (65). His anger tells us enough of a different story.

CHAPTER 4

Form and Essence

Something of his sad freedom
As he rode the tumbril
Should come to me, driving,
Saying the names

Tollund, Grabaulle, Nebelgard,
Watching the pointing hands
Of country people,
Not knowing their tongue.

Out there in Jutland
In the old man-killing parishes
I will feel lost,
Unhappy and at home. (Heaney 3.1-12)

Heart of Darkness chronicles the constant struggle between ideals and reality. In the face of subjective reality, which is each individual's interpretation of his perception, ideals offer a safe haven of constancy for our hopes and dreams. On a deeper level, however, ideals germinate from cultural, social, and familial constructs. Ideals also define self-image. They reflect who we are. They are an integral part of our identity. Whether they mature to bear the fruit of our hopes and dreams, or wither and die, their outcome depends on the amount of nourishment extended by social contact. The mirror of self-image is the collective eyes of the people around us. It may well be that we learn what is right and what is wrong, what is black and what is white from others. From this perspective, ideals, which calibrate our own personal value system of

excellence governing choice and judgment, are as relative as reality. Nothing is absolute. This is the tormenting paradox that Conrad sees in Heart of Darkness, and shares with his readers.

The novella's title nucleates Conrad's enigma. In his tale lies a universal truth. Yet its truth, instead of leading us to understanding, questions the validity of the human enterprise. Enlightenment should be the culminating point of clarity and illumination. Instead, it is the heart of uncertainty. Every other aspect of the novella evolves from its title. With the increasing dominance of form over essence, and of obscurity over distinctions, the novella's structure and narrative mode overturn traditional literary conventions. Light and darkness shift in symbolic meaning. Moving away from age-old shades of good and evil to indeterminacy, light and dark images reverse the strides of Creation. Contrasting landscapes unite and return to the same grand scheme of nature. Instead of giving us one omniscient narrator, Conrad blends two into the narrative: the primary narrator with a fleeting presence, and Marlow with a limited scope and a gift for eloquent sermons.

Conrad questions any differences that mankind projects onto the environment, and devalues Europe's economic and scientific gold mines while magnifying these dissimilarities in Marlow's narrative. Conrad's message is two-fold.

Despite the triviality of these "surface" discrepancies, they remain the major barrier to the "idea" behind their insignificance (103, 69): the "idea" of coexistence, which gives due respect to all value systems. But man and his culture are characteristically resistant to such a concept. To preserve their own sense of identity, each of the minor characters clings on to his or her own value system as a buoy, which keeps "the mere incidents of the surface, the reality" in perspective (103). We need solid ground for our journey through life. Our own value system offers our lives direction and purpose. We "[keep] up [our] appearance" not only to preserve our identity, but also to affirm our given role in society (83). These values also form the framework in which we build our sense of belonging, which is often maintained by conformity.

With the idea of enforcing the ideal value system upon another culture, colonialism is another form of resistance to coexistence. It assumes that our way of life is better than that of another culture and that the forced adoption of our cultural creed would be beneficial to those who are different from us. Culture itself is a tribal clique, unifying, but exclusive to, a people. It shapes a collective identity with standards and norms for its people to abide by. Though tribalism unifies a people, it is uncompromising to differing "yarns . . . and even

convictions" (65). In order to "bow down before" its set of values, we must believe in its definitiveness, which paves a common path for its people, but leaves no room for other creeds (70).

This polar effect extends to all value systems, and, in particular, to colonialism. It can be described as "a kind of magic bullet, which targets the important issues and does the job of" reforming a primitive culture for civilization (Menand 44). Similarly, cultural constructs can mold individuals like the Chief Accountant and the native overseer into cardboard characters. In unfitting roles, the European minor characters in Heart of Darkness illustrate the limitations of cultural forms, which are often played out as "a mechanics of mere labels and externalities" without substance (Leavis 32). At the same time, we grapple with the manifestations of the African culture because the narrative does not look past its own preconceived cultural forms to examine African values.

Because of the absoluteness we often attach to our value systems, they lend a false impression of fairness to judgment, especially when an "outsider" is the accused. Choice and judgment cannot be exercised without a value system, but we often fail to look beyond our personal creed when we judge others; a fault that even Marlow is guilty of. To comprehend the reason(s) behind another person's choice

of action, we need to understand his or her own values, "the very essence of [the other's] dreams" (95). This is precisely why Conrad chooses not to present us with an omniscient narrator. Not only does the novella's narrative mode reflect our reluctance to look beyond our own creed, it also acknowledges the near impossible task of understanding others' realm of reality because of the potential risks involved.

To step into someone else's "dreams" and relate to "any given epoch of [his or her] existence," we need to leave our preconceptions behind and enter those dreams with an open mind (95). We must spit out our own essence in order to fully taste that of another on its own terms, and this requires courage because we are asking ourselves to put aside our own value system, our self-identity. We must not merely be witnesses to, but be participants in the other's realm of reality by learning to use his language, practicing his customs, and living his way of life: the role that only Kurtz plays in the novella.

In doing so, we may get "utterly lost" because the experience of living in another's dreams would threaten the validity of one's own value system on all accounts (143). At one extreme, without an anchor on our own set of values, we may adopt a new way of life at the expense of our own identity. Like "a tree swayed by the wind," we would either

yield to "the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts" or kowtow to "the evil spirit inside the boiler" (124, 143, 107). Conversely, the experience of participating in another sphere of reality may broaden our horizon to such an extent that we may see too many shortcomings in our own value system, which "is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much" (69). Unable to abide by a flawed creed, we may find that we can no longer subject ourselves to its terms. Where would this lead us but to the path of self-ostracism? There is no turning back to a place where its values no longer hold true. "There's no initiation either into such mysteries [I]magine the growing regrets, the longing to escape, the powerless disgust, the surrender, the hate" (69). We would either wish to change its structure or reject it altogether; we would be forced to become either reformers or rebels and outcasts. In either case, a new value system replaces the old, resulting in a radical transmutation of the sense of self.

The spectrum of possibilities is practically infinite when we enter someone else's realm of reality without carrying our preconceptions with us. In any case, being conversant with a new value system allows us to see the world from a new angle. Such fresh insight gives us the opportunity to compare the old with the new, which poses the threat of shaking our very own value system to the core.

The self is at risk when one finally recognizes the subjective quality of reality as well as of values. Trapped in "[t]he horror" of a moral and philosophical twilight zone, our only guide is our conscience crying out, "Live rightly," and "take care of the motives--right motives--always" (147, 146).

Arguably, since I have established that nothing in Heart of Darkness is absolute, in what way would conscience be our definitive guide? I believe that Conrad views conscience as the essence of human nature, as instinctual. Like "this suspicion of their [the Africans] not being inhuman," the innate feeling "would come slowly," decrying superficial differences (105). Conscience is our innate moral compass, as timeless and constant as the ancient books of philosophy, theology, and literature on human nature, and as intangible as the essence of Conrad's tale. It is the whistle blower on the flaws of man-made constructs, an internal warning voice that whispers "humanity" to all (105).

But not everyone listens. There are those, like the moustached man, who maintain the validity of surface differences and zealously applaud brutality as the proper measure against dissent. Conscience is overshadowed by our urge, like the Chief Accountant's treatment of a native woman, to impose our own realm of reality and standards upon

others. Colonialism itself is a formalized method of imposition, "the taking it [Africa's existing culture] away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves" (69). But Marlow is misled in thinking that this "robbery" can be redeemed by the "idea" behind it (69). Nothing can redeem the attempted obliteration of an entire culture for the sake of imposing one's own.

Thus far, with the exception of Kurtz, the characters in Heart of Darkness have failed to "[l]ive rightly," and to "take care of the motives--right motives--always" (Conrad 147, 146). Conrad suggests that we need someone like Kurtz who can discard external differences. Instead of wiping out other value systems entirely to make room for our own, we need to learn to "absorb lots and lots of different things and make them ours" (Greenblatt 29). Instead of imposing his cultural values on the natives, Kurtz has learned to speak their language, to participate in their tribal life. Kurtz has taken the step towards understanding the natives' realm of reality without imposing his own upon them. Surely, this is a sign of a strong voice from Kurtz's conscience. Some of us may consider the rows of skulls ample proof of the evil in Kurtz, but these skulls may be the natives' way of maintaining order within their tribe. For a dying man whom many believe to be evil, he is

dedicated to his "duty," to "[living] rightly," and heeding his conscience (Conrad 147). If Kurtz has indeed walked into the natives' realm of reality and reached an understanding with them, he has to have stepped in as a "hollow" man, emptied of his preconceptions, and open to the natives' way of life (146). If he has "absorb[ed] lots and lots of different things and [made] them [his]," he has adopted "no method at all" (Greenblatt 29, Conrad 138). Perhaps Kurtz has freed himself of conventional forms to peer into the essence of human nature in the African setting. By being a nonconformist, Kurtz becomes an outcast in the eyes of Europe, the price that Kurtz pays for following "[n]o method at all" (138).

None of the other characters in the novella is able to achieve what Kurtz has accomplished. There are the colonists whose lust for ivory and power rob conscience of its voice. Beneath it all is the refusal to extend their conscience in the form of friendship, understanding, and compassion beyond cultural borders. Even Marlow (though he is troubled by what he witnesses), chooses to be a passive spectator at the scene of the crime. The ubiquity of injustice can numb as much as it can burn helplessness into an audience, like the masses of city dwellers who learn to avoid eye contact with the rushing throng and hurry on with their daily lives. Apathy is a much easier route to follow

than participation.

Even though Marlow proves the existence of conscience that prods him to eventually tell his tale, we must remember that it is the primary narrator who tells us the tale, not Marlow. Marlow's role in Africa also shows that he lacks the courage to heed his inner voice, to take action against the violence that he witnesses. Talking about the problem is just the first step that also offers the opportunity to share this experience with those who are unaware of the situation. But this first step can also stalemate in the ostensible progress of "endless bickering" without a chance to understand or resolve the underlying issues. We can criticize till our voices crack, but resolve nothing. The manner in which Marlow judges Kurtz epitomizes this impasse. He ends his tale with the thought of "render[ing] Kurtz that justice which [is] his due" (157). Marlow condemns Kurtz on the basis of circumstantial evidence. Yet, his condemnation is inconsistent. Marlow's ambivalence arises from the firsthand knowledge of Kurtz's assimilation into tribal life, which conflicts with the colonial method of replacing the native culture with the colonists'. Marlow's firsthand knowledge is also in conflict with hearsay information on Kurtz. Because Marlow is enraged by rumors of the possible wrongness of Kurtz's conduct, he cannot explore the possible benefits of Kurtz's tribalism as the alternative to

colonialism.

Marlow shares a common trait with most of the other characters in Heart of Darkness; each of these characters sees the world through a different but essential lens of personal and social values, which taints his or her interpretation with subjectivity. On the other hand, the subtle ambiguities in personality, which render judgment of character highly problematic, highlight the petty discriminations founded on external differences, which are exemplified in the novella and exercised in our society. The novella also implies that, because of our lens' subjective nature, whatever solution we may devise to resolve social or moral issues will also be personally biased. Objectivity is an illusion, but this truth is only part of the novella's darkness. The core of the darkness is that, in learning this truth, we may no longer strive for objectivity. But Conrad's flame of shining brilliance burns before us in the novella. Heart of Darkness has achieved a level of impartiality in its writing through the characters' subjective eyes. Not all is dark.

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