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Surveying Africa: Conrad's Ambiguous Guide to Colonialism

Throughout *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad juxtaposes seemingly contradictory terms: light and dark, Europe and Africa, centrality and exteriority, morality and the immorality. In contrasting these various finite images, the author appears to mirror the "direct simplicity" in his word choice which he claims also punctuates the tales of seamen. However, by describing colonial endeavors using words laden with double and sometimes conflicting meanings, infusing the novel with repetition, and presenting characters alongside their doppelgangers, Conrad prompts readers to reconsider concrete standards of good and evil in regards to imperialism. Consequently, the text, refusing to elucidate Marlow's journey to the Congo, actually acts much like the haze of the moon, both illuminating and blurring the meaning of the tale[1]. Arguably, the narrative structure also performs a similar function. Conrad deconstructs boundaries between the past and present and removes the distinction between missions of conquest and colonialism. Furthermore, the susceptibility of both the narrator and Marlow to human fallacy and the telling of lies make the structure of *Heart of Darkness* misleading. Thus, the author refuses to provide a consistent and reliable lens through which readers can interpret the plot. As the narrator states, following his description of the supposed simplicity within the tale, Marlow is not a typical representative of his profession. Here, by qualifying this simplicity with an exception, the narrator suggests

[1] Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness.* New York, 1990*:* pp 8.

the very essence of imperialism: complexity. By utilizing a seemingly simplistic narrative structure and turning it on itself, Conrad challenges the reader to look beyond obvious standards of black and white.

As the narrator introduces the genre of Marlow's work, a sailor's tale, he states that "the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut". However, because Marlow is not typical, the narrator reveals that in Marlow's tale "the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale…"[2]. In examining these contrasting statements, one sees the importance of context, both time and setting, to the interpretation of the tale which he relays. Nevertheless, the reader must question the credibility of such seaman's tales by focusing on the phrase 'lies within'. This phrase challenges the meaning of the passage by presenting two interpretations. In one reading, the meaning simply resides within the tale and can be evoked by examining the surrounding events, yet one could also read the excerpt to say that there are lies, or untruths, within. Thus, in Marlow's narrative, unlike the typical seamen's tales which may present lies in the center of the nut, metaphorically the center of the tale, lies may actually envelop Marlow's tale, calling into question its credibility. In addition, one could debate why the nut is cracked. One possibility is that these story tellers serve as enablers of sorts who facilitate their audiences in wading through a deterring exterior to reach the edible and previously unknowable interior. More cynically, in keeping with the theme of dishonesty, one could also argue that the narrator ruins an image of nature and perfection, the rounded nut or the exotic Congo, with a shattering lie. Consequently, the above quotation questions the stability and honesty of the frame of the tale. By presenting ambiguities in the language, Conrad begs readers to

[2] Conrad, Joseph: pp 8.

reexamine the perspective through which they view Marlow's journey and, in essence, imperialism.

This sort of confusion surrounding truth versus lies remains constant throughout the text. Though undoubtedly Marlow lies to Kurtz's Intended concerning her lover's last words, perhaps in doing so, he also maintains a degree of truth and morality. Following Kurtz's death, Marlow remarks that at the time, he "did not know how truly he spoke" when he said "Mr. Kurtz's reputation is safe with me"[3]. Ironically in conveying a lie to the Intended, Marlow in actuality upholds a promise that he previously made to the Russian. In this double bind, Marlow chooses to remain faithful to his 'choice of nightmares'[4]. Here, lies retain a sort of sustaining power. Not only is Kurtz's image preserved, but also, the Intended's perception of truth is left in tact: that she was Kurtz's final thought and priority. According to Marlow, this lie avoids that which is 'too dark altogether'[5]. In reading such a novel in which truth is dark and lies restorative, one must reconsider the polarities of good and evil. The utility of this lie destabilizes the European context of morality and leads one to ask if even truth can be relative, how imperialism can be categorized as either functional or destructive. This negates the idea of direct simplicity.

Marlow's propensity to lie raises further questions of his qualification to recount the tale as a trusted authority. From the beginning, the narrator denies Marlow's dexterity as a story teller by saying that "we knew we were fated to hear about one of Marlow's inconclusive experiences" and describing Marlow as similar to "tellers of tales

[3] Conrad, Joseph: pp 90.
[4] Conrad, Joseph: pp 89.
[5] Conrad, Joseph: pp 110.

who seem so often unaware of what their audience would best like to hear"[6]. Yet if Marlow is so out of touch with his audience and perhaps human nature, one must wonder how he can be expected to truly understand those whom he encounters in the Congo. Furthermore, the term 'tale' raises questions of the accuracy of the story. Tale could mean either a farcical account, like a fairy tale, or simply a recounting of an event. However, the reader must also question the judgments of the narrator in this passage. Though the narrator scorns Marlow for practically victimizing his audience, he repeats and frames the story which he disdains. Thus the reader must also contemplate the insight of the narrator who clearly has no appreciation for or understanding of Marlow's story.

However, Marlow does not need the aid of the narrator to point out his limitations as a story teller, as his shortcomings prove self-evident. In describing his youth, Marlow states that "other places were scattered about the equator, and in every sort of latitude all over the two hemispheres. I haven't been in some of them and… well, we won't talk about that"[7]. Here, Marlow speaks with a tongue of uncertainty. He mentions no places specifically by name or location; instead, Marlow's generality and claim that he has not been to some of the places described debase his status as an expert on the Congo. In addition, Marlow's narrative style also discredits him. The ellipsis at the end of the quotation and Marlow's sudden change of mind concerning the subject of his speech cause him to appear unsure of himself, perhaps due to his lack of knowledge surrounding his subject or his mental limitations. Furthermore, the form of Marlow's tale does not follow its function. For instance, Marlow claims to prize efficiency, proclaiming it as a

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[6] Conrad, Joseph: pp 10.
[7] Conrad, Joseph: pp 11.

sort of savior, yet his tale is markedly inefficient[8]. Though Marlow begins his story as a means of passing time before the next ebb, he actually runs over the naturally allotted segment of time and causes the Nellie to lose "the first of the ebb"[9]. Thus, uncertainty lies in whether Marlow is the "cause or the result of the delay"[10]. In effect, the story is quite inefficient and contrary to the purpose for which it is intended. Here, the tale exceeds the context in which it is meant to be contained, reinforcing the notion that text cannot be constrained by the context of time or purpose, hence cracking the metaphorical nut.

Just as Marlow fails to restrain his tale within the context of measured time, so too does he refuse to remain within the frame of historic time. Thus, Marlow's narrative style often blurs the conventional distinction between past and present. The following quotation by Michael Levenson illustrates the conundrum of time.

> "… to witness civilization at its most finely wrought and to confront its rude origins, to contemplate the refinements of social convention and to watch such conventions dissolve…"[11]

In stating, "Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world", Marlow attempts to frame and make sense of the foreign places he encounters by comparing them to historical moments with which he is more familiar, perhaps even the Garden of Eden, the beginning of Christian time[12]. Thus, Marlow can connect the sort of fragmented pieces, as described in Levenson's quotation, by applying his own structure. However, history proves incapable of providing any true comfort. In looking at historic

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[8] Conrad, Joseph: pp 11.
[9] Conrad, Joseph: pp 111.
[10] Reid, Stephen. "Unspeakable Rights in Heart of Darkness." *Conrad.* New Jersey, 1966: pp 95.
[11] Levenson, Michael. *Modernism and the Fate of Individuality*. Cambridge, 1991: pp 1.
[12] Conrad, Joseph: pp 48.

figures of Europe, for example Francis Drake and John Franklin, Marlow says that they are "titled the greatest knight-errant of the sea", but also discredits them as "hunters for gold", "pursuers of fame", and "bound on other conquests". Marlow goes on to proclaim "What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river…"[13]. This statement is quite ambiguous; one is unsure if it is a rhetorical statement proclaiming the talents of early conquerors or if it challenges the perception of their accomplishments by stating that greatness 'had not floated'. These conflicting images reveal society at both its finest and most destructive moments. Not only do allusions to the past refuse to provide a structure for understanding the present, they also denounce Europe as an image of light and civility to compare against the darkness of Africa. Here Conrad's intentionally unclear narration challenges readers to consider how much solace can be felt by reconnecting with a tainted past.

Not only is Marlow incapable of invoking Europe's past to understand Africa's present, he also fails to provide a consistent vantage point from which to view his Congo adventure. As a European traveling to distant Africa, one might expect Marlow to view Europe as the center of civilization and high culture. Instead, Marlow commonly confuses images of centrality with those of exteriority. At the beginning of the text, the Thames appears central to the world, characterized as running through the "biggest and greatest town on earth"[14]. Structurally, this initial image is also meant to be perceived as central within the text. In stating "between us there was, as I have already said somewhere, a bond of the sea" the narrator contributes to the feeling centrarilty, as

[13] Conrad, Joseph: pp 7.
[14] Conrad, Joseph: pp 5.

opposed to feeling oneself to be at the start of the story, a more external vantage point[15]. Ironically, the narrator had not previously mentioned this and thus implies a false sense of interiority to the reader as he/she experiences London. In addition, the word 'between' implies a sense of central connection amongst the characters and likewise with the reader. However, Marlow contradicts this image of England's centrality by stating that the Thames led to the "uttermost ends of the earth"[16]. Here, Marlow struggles to provide an appropriate place from which his listeners should view Africa. The conflict of centrality, as described by Levenson presents a "radical disorientation that obliterates any stable relationship between the self and the world"[17]. In essence this reemphasizes Conrad's unwillingness to provide his readers with a frame to understand imperialism in Africa through setting.

Not surprisingly, Marlow's conflicting descriptions of proximity continue in his description of Africa. On one hand, Marlow presents the culture of Africa as exterior to European norms; however, he also describes the exotic land as a sort of magnetic force field both central to his desires for adventure and at the center of the earth. Perhaps this craving for centrality impacts Marlow's rejection of the North Pole in his boyhood for a more interior destination. Nevertheless, Marlow is not satisfied with the Central Station, which due to its images of bureaucracy, appears much like Europe. Ironically, as Marlow travels to the extremities of the earth, in relation to Europe, he confronts an image much like the one he left. This description which creates Europe and Africa as ironic doubles blurs one's understanding of centrality. Thus, Marlow feels compelled to continue further until he reaches the Inner Station of Kurtz. However, his experience here proves

[15] Conrad, Joseph: pp 5.
[16] Conrad, Joseph: pp 6.
[17] Levenson, Michael: pp 7.

somewhat confusing. In describing Africa, Marlow claims that it was "the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience. It seemed somehow to throw a light on everything about me- and into my thoughts"[18]. Hence, as Marlow travels to what he describes as an extreme point, he achieves the climax and central point of his experience. In this depiction, the externalities of the earth penetrate into the core of Marlow's being. Marlow here presents a confusing scene in which he travels to the perceived ends of the earth in order to learn about his European inner thoughts.

In the above quotation, Conrad also reconstructs the context in which to view light and dark. Here, the supposed darkness of Africa possesses the light of knowledge for Marlow. Though Europe in its modernity is cast as an image of light or Enlightenment, the reader is reminded the Romans brought light to Europe which "was dark yesterday"[19]. This creates another image of duality in which Europe is cast much in the same way as Africa, with both countries needing light and civilizing at some point in their existence. In stating that "we live in the flicker", Marlow underscores this uncertainty of light in Europe. A flicker, though illuminating, threatens to extinguish at any point. Africa is also presented as a sort of gray area between dark and light. Marlow claims that Africa used to be a white, blank space but it became dark following the naming of its rivers and streams[20]. Although whiteness initially appears as purity which is later tainted, one must ask how desirable whiteness really is. In this connotation, the whiteness equates to a blankness or hollowness, devoid of meaning. Thus, the light may not be such a desirable quality. Nevertheless, this image is more complex, shown by the statement that Africa became dark. Here Africa maintains a sort of sinful and fallen

[18] Conrad, Joseph: pp 11.
[19] Conrad, Joseph: pp 8.
[20] Conrad, Joseph: pp 11.

nature, yet this darkness actually results from the induction of names by the Europeans. This conflict reemphasize the point that Europe and Africa cannot be characterized as good and bad respectively; instead, more complex symbolism is at play. Ironically, the author takes an objective tool such as a map, marked by white and darkness and invokes the uncertainty and subjectivity of shade.

In crafting *Heart of Darkness,* Conrad presents a context that actual destabilizes the text. Through the lies and fallacy of the storytellers, the complexities of time and place, and converging images of Africa and Europe, Conrad establishes a structure which fails to reinforce the meaning of his text. Instead, the meaning resides not within the story itself but is distorted by the words and the implications of images which they describe. Thus, Conrad empowers language not as a facilitator but a distorter of the meaning of the story. Hence, context opposes meaning. However, this is not a failure on the part of the author. On the contrary, Conrad provides these ambiguities to allow the reader to reevaluate meaning systems surrounding such a dense topic as imperialism. Writing on an issue plagued by grey and ambiguity, Conrad refuses to confine imperialism to merely black and white.

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