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Narratives of Deception: Confronting Disorder in *Heart of Darkness*

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Abstract

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The layered narrative structure of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* cannot be overlooked, as it often is, when attempting to make any consummate judgment regarding the work's worth or meaning. Acknowledgment of Marlow's exposition within a story being told by an omniscient narrator reveals Marlow as a man suffering primarily from a fractured identity who wants to condemn his society, but is tragically unwilling to do so, for recognition of the duplicity of the imperial endeavors that his society implicitly supports would undermine his own identity as a civilized and virtuous man and expose him to a condition that is to be feared far more than hypocrisy or injustice: disorder. The rationalizations that Marlow must entertain in order to maintain this civilized conception of himself exposes his society's primary function as an established structure through which its citizens can ascribe meaning to an inherently formless world, and depicts identity, which is often derived from civilization's ideology, as nothing more than a personally constructed narrative that we tell ourselves.

Understanding *Heart of Darkness* through this context spares the work the relegation to the enigmatic status of an immanent contradiction afforded to it by countless Conradian exegetes, and focuses Conrad's boldest assertions toward the impact ideology has on the individual's perception of his surroundings and the process by which he defines himself. Though Conrad's pessimistic vision is often interpreted as nihilistic, I believe it can be more aptly described as frustration regarding the self-sustaining nature of ideology. That is to say, the fundamental assumptions of human social orders are precluded from examination, even when the application of their core ideals produces evident brutality and hypocrisy, as they are necessary for people to assign meaning to an inherently formless world. In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad does not seek to undermine any political or ideological field, he aspires to explore the fundamental human conditions that support the creation and continued human reliance upon such fields.

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Introduction

Considering the veritable depth of the existing critical discourse regarding Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness*, it is difficult to fathom this work employing a radically different, or even original, approach to the text. That being said, the text's layered narrative structure cannot be overlooked, as it often is, when attempting to make any consummate judgment regarding its worth or meaning. Marlow, the novella's primary narrator, exists outside of the story's characters and plotline, while the perspective of an omniscient narrator, whose statements bookend and intermittently disrupt Marlow's tale, exists even further outside that of Marlow. As obvious as it may seem, Marlow's outlook is inextricably woven into all aspects of the exposition of his experience, as he is the sole source of information regarding its content. Recognizing this reveals Marlow as a man suffering primarily from a fractured identity who wants to condemn his society and its contradictions, but is tragically unwilling to do so. Acknowledgment of the duplicitous application of imperialism's justifying ideals would undermine his society's professions of its own virtue and greatness, ideals by which Marlow defines himself, exposing him to a condition that is to be feared far more than hypocrisy or injustice: disorder—and the accompanying relegation to the "midst of the incomprehensible."[1]

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[1] Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 7. All citations from *Heart of Darkness* are from Penguin Classics' 2007 edition edited by J.H. Stape. Future citations will appear parenthetically in the text.

Central to understanding Marlow's retrospective delineation are the conclusions, if any, that he can be seen to have drawn from his experience. Though Gary Adelman[2], among a litany of Conrad's exegetes, claims Marlow is in possession of some inner truth, and that the telling of his tale represents the cathartic release, or public exploration, of these truths, Marlow's reaction to Kurtz's 'horror' reveals him as devoid of resolution upon his departure from the Congo. Interpreting Kurtz's final cry as "a moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats, by abominable terrors, by abominable satisfactions" (88), Marlow has forgiven Kurtz's deplorable actions—the "abominable terrors" imposed upon the native population, the "abominable satisfactions" he indulged in—by attributing his moral devolution to a lack of restraint, a mere shortcoming that precluded him from maintaining fidelity to the high and noble ideals that initially justified his colonial mission in the Congo. From Marlow's perspective, Kurtz's final judgment, which he believes possessed "candour" and "conviction" (88), absolves him of responsibility for his deplorable actions, and affirms his existence as the embodiment of those righteous ideals. Marlow remained devoted to his conception of Kurtz upon his return to the sepulchral city, and not wanting to repeat the mistake that he believed had led Kurtz astray, he protected the innocence of Kurtz's Intended—and his society—by concealing the true nature of his experience.

Marlow's eventual devotion to Kurtz must be seen as the final act in his quest to reconcile his conception of himself as a righteous, civilized man, driven by a strict sense of moral duty, with the hypocritical application of his sacrosanct ideals he witnessed in the

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[2] Adelman, *Heart of Darkness: Search for the Unconscious*, 104

Congo. It is, in essence, his search for an "idea…something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to…" (7), which he describes as the source of colonialism's redemption in his preamble. Analysis of the descriptions of the five men that Marlow encounters on his way to the Inner Station—the Chief Accountant, a Company operative looking after the upkeep of a road, the General Manager of the Central Station, the brickmaker at the Central Station, and a Russian trader—are often overlooked in critical evaluations of Marlow's defining moment, his reaction to Kurtz's 'horror.' It is only after observing that the capacity of each of these men to maintain his sanity surrounded by senseless destruction is predicated upon detachment from the blatant suffering that surrounds him that Marlow affirms "Kurtz was a remarkable man," largely because "He had something to say" and "He said it" (88). Isolated in Africa, Marlow is stripped of his belief in the ideals he defined himself by in Europe, leading him to find "with humiliation that probably I would have nothing to say" (87), and to return to Europe with his quest unresolved.

Marlow's admission that he returned to Europe with an "imagination that wanted soothing" (89) exposes the illusory manner by which he is able to reach resolution, thereby undermining his story's significance. His lie to Kurtz's intended soothes his imagination, as it allows him to conceive himself as the protector of his society's righteous ideals, the role he had wanted to fulfill throughout his time in Africa. The similarity between the omniscient narrator's prelude to Marlow's tale and his remarks following its conclusion, as

noted by Tom Henthorne[3], demonstrates that, from the perspective of the omniscient narrator, nothing has changed. This subverts the moral force of Marlow's account of what he had seen, no matter how brutally honest and divergent from the normative contemporary discussion of imperialism it may have appeared. Marlow has not extolled any truth, nor has he left his audience, comprised of the Director of Companies, a lawyer, and an accountant, a literal representation of the mercantile interests that supported the colonial endeavor, an imperative, whether it be of moral or any other origin, to change their ways. Marlow is an idealist who nonetheless is complicit with imperialism. His exposition is entirely without practical consequence.

At this point, Marlow, more so than the content of his tale, becomes the focus of the critique performed by the omniscient narrator—and Conrad. Just as Marlow has deemed the "ideas" of the five men he describes before encountering Kurtz —their respective capacities to define themselves by decided interactions with their new environment—as escapist, his own conception of himself is revealed to be similarly illusory and self-deluding. The extent to which Marlow has become consumed by his impulse to arbitrarily define himself—and impose cognitive order—extends the implications of his tale beyond his existence in the Congo, focusing Conrad's critique on the deleterious centrality of individual perception to the construction of a purportedly shared and objective reality. It is for this reason that expedient and narrow interpretations of the text as racist or sexist, or of being entirely consumed by and limited to its imperialist subject matter, hold no

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[3] Henthorne, *Conrad's Trojan Horses*, 128

credence, as each ignores Marlow's position at the center of the work's most vital and bold assertion.

Fed up with the insularity of Western civilization's professions of its own greatness, a posture, ironically enough, featured prominently within Conrad's own critique in *Heart of Darkness*, albeit in a far different, immeasurably subtler manner, Chinua Achebe recklessly compares Conrad, and his depiction of the African population, to Nazis who lent their various talents to the service of virulent, state-sponsored racism.[4] Branding Conrad a "purveyor of comforting myths,"[5] Achebe interprets literally Conrad's depiction of the indigenous population that communicates in incoherent grunts and is often depicted in an irrational state of frenzy, and perceives Conrad's description of the African environment, replete with shadowy adjectives like 'inscrutable' and 'unspeakable,' as the inducement of a "hypnotic stupor" in his readers through the employment of "emotive words and other forms of trickery."[6]

It is important to remember that it is Marlow, not Conrad, who bestows his audience with these seemingly intentionally vague descriptions. Marlow's recollections of his surroundings remain hazy despite his ability to look past the natives' "grotesque masks" to see their "bone, muscle, a wild vitality, [and] an intense energy of movement," which he describes as equally "natural and true as the surf along their coast" (16). Marlow can see

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[4] Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'", 9

[5] Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'", 4

[6] Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'", 4

that the Africans possess a human likeness that is "natural and true," and that they do not conform to the learned stereotypes—the "comforting myths"—that defined their portrayal in Europe, but he still must qualify their vitality as "wild," and he is largely unable to acknowledge the challenge that his unfiltered perception, without any conscious effort on his part, poses to these stereotypes. He often refers to the physical surroundings as inscrutable for similar reasons, as he can only understand the world, and his observations of that world, through learned convention, and no pertinent stereotype is readily available to him. Marlow's inability to comprehend independent of convention—he notably appeals to stereotypes of the passive, hapless woman in addition to that of the African as savage—is a vital component of the larger critique of Marlow's need for an "idea," a similarly arbitrary construct, to comprehend the disorder and unfamiliarity he faces in the Congo. That Marlow remains unaware of the deconstruction of the prevalent European stereotypes of the Africans as savage and wild enacted by his own perceptions only further exacerbates this point. The Africans' humanity is not marginalized, nor do they exist within the work solely to serve as a foil illuminating the moral deterioration of the Europeans when removed from their own society; in fact, considering Marlow's viewpoint is revealed to be self-deluding, it can even be argued that their humanity is implicitly asserted.

Similarly errant interpretations of the text fail to account for Marlow's ignorance of the sweeping hypocrisy he embodies. Within this stylized reading, Nina Pelikan Straus construes the artistic conventions of *Heart of Darkness* and the world portrayed by Marlow, which, during his recollection of his encounters with his aunt and Kurtz's Intended, appears

to be split into distinctly male and female realms, as brutally sexist.[7] Straus argues that a sexist mode of thinking has been incorporated into the thought process of the novella's characters, primarily Marlow and Kurtz. She, however, fails to consider that this thought process is exposed as illusory, and that the fraudulence of Marlow's need to develop his own "idea" detaches him not just from an objective reality, but even from the reality of his own observations. By lying to the Intended, Marlow does not spare her from the darkness—his realization of an incongruent reality aimed toward preserving his own internal order; he includes her in it. He needs an ideology to provide him with a coherence of purpose necessary, first, to act toward while within the anarchic conditions present in Africa, and second, to re-imagine ideals, following his return, to subscribe to after the collapse of those under which he was previously able to live. He is only able to reconcile his moral code with the actions supported by Western society by differentiating himself through ostensible condemnation of its hypocritical practices, which makes his circular logic self-sustaining; the necessity of this "idea," which provides the framework for his own ideology, places it beyond examination or reproach. The lie, an appeal to the prevailing contemporary gender convention, maintains Marlow's internal chicanery, and can only be construed as sexist in the sense that it does not afford the Intended a choice to examine those tenuous fundamental assumptions before being exposed to and encompassed by Marlow's elaborate rationalizations of their merit. However, no character is offered such choice, and even Marlow remains ignorant of its existence.

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[7] Straus, "The Exclusion of the Intended from Secret Sharing in 'Heart of Darkness'"

For analogous reasons, analysis of the text's seminal issues cannot be limited to consideration of the consequences, intended or not, of imperialism, as it is employed primarily as a vehicle by Conrad to broach more fundamentally human concerns. Benita Parry argues the text offers "a militant denunciation and a reluctant affirmation of imperialist civilization, as [it is] a fiction that exposes and colludes in imperialism's mystifications."[8] Kurtz does embody Conrad's unequivocal denunciation of imperialism in its current state. In fact, Marlow's brutally honest accounts of his moral devolution and the corruption of his noble philanthropic pretense—the "militant denunciation"—are unapologetic. Marlow, however, offers vindication of this pretense and of the endeavor's justifying ideals when he maintains that Kurtz is a remarkable man. That Marlow, a solemn adherent of a strict code of service, and Kurtz, the ostentatious practitioner of imperialism's most romantic aspirations, are products of the same social order and servants of the same official social ends does not produce an unacceptable reality that the text intimates and does not confront, as Parry suggests. The omniscient narrator's repetitive description conflates the moral positions of Marlow and Kurtz. Marlow is just as responsible for the moral degeneration of the colonial enterprise as Kurtz, due to his subconscious need to define himself by an ideology that precludes examination of its sustaining principles. His lie to the Intended upholds the status quo and perpetuates its deceitful existence.

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[8] Parry, *Conrad and Imperialism*, 21

Imperialism and the Congo, though superficially vital to the novella's content and narrative form, are not subjects of Conrad's critique, as many critics have suggested, nor does the atavistic environment encountered by the Europeans in the Congo serve as a backdrop of primitive darkness against which the colonizers' own moral fortitude, and that of their civilization, is to be measured. In fact, the extant anarchic environment fulfills a role that is nearly entirely contrary to the intense emotions appropriate for an active purveyor of darkness, it provides a firm and resolute neutrality, a blank template onto which the Europeans project themselves. Understood from this perspective, one which pits man only against himself, *Heart of Darkness*, fueled by Conrad's alleged incongruent political unconscious, is not relegated to the enigmatic status of an "immanent contradiction"[9] suggested by Parry and countless others.

Marlow's cognitive contortions elucidate the tale's seemingly impossible complexity and purportedly irreconcilable inconsistencies, revealing identity to be nothing more than an arbitrary—and ironically essential—construct, a personally crafted narrative that we tell ourselves. Physically removed from their society, the colonizers experience the breakdown of its ideology and are essentially faced with resignation to the illusory construct that takes its place, the quest for ivory and material gain, or surrender to the unintelligible chaos inherent to the natural world. Edward Said describes character as the trait that "enables the individual to make his way through the world, the faculty of rational

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[9] Parry, *Conrad and Imperialism*, 39

self-possession that regulates the exchange between the world and the self."[10] This vital exchange is manifested in Marlow as he attempts to mediate these extremes presented to the colonizer by creating his own coherent character, which must reconcile his strict moral code of service with the gross excess and exploitation he has seen. His exposition of this journey does not suggest "Western civilization is driven by an unconscious need to dominate others and to destroy itself," as Gary Adelman, and many others limited to the work's imperialist content, argues[11]; it exposes a far more pervasive and ominous darkness: the extent to which Marlow will detach himself from the reality of his own perception in order to attain the cogent identity he covets.

Accentuating the magnitude of this struggle for the attainment of a coherent self, John Lester argues that the world at the dawn of the twentieth century in which Conrad lived further complicated the individual's relationship with the external world. Advances in industry and technology had radically altered the prevailing belief in materialistic determinism to one of change, stressing "the urgent and pained necessity of a 'transvaluation of values' to keep man's imaginative life alive under conditions which seemed unliveable."[12] Stripped of the assurance of a benevolent afterlife, man's imagination sought new outlets to assuage the world's uncertainty, one being the unwavering belief in the progress of civilization. Prompted by the technological innovations that had

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[10] Said, *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography*, 12

[11] Adelman, *Heart of Darkness: Search for the Unconscious*, 6

[12] Lester, *Journey Through Despair, 1880-1914: Transformation in British Literary Culture*

transformed the dominant outlook on existence within the world, devotion to this ideal provided implicit assurance of the worth and importance of their society—and of themselves. W.M. Wallace Bancroft describes Conrad's story material as "the canvas upon which the picture is painted," providing "the necessary support for the symbolization of the artist's dream."[13] Imperialism, and the horrifying moral devolution that accompanied it, provided Conrad with a vehicle through which to explore the active detachment on a personal level required to support the continued existence of such a transparently hypocritical state of affairs.

At the core of this capacity for self-delusion is Conrad's shared belief with Arthur Schopenhauer, as argued by Nic Panagopoulos, in the fundamental assumption that the external world is absent substance or meaning aside from that which the individual projects onto it in the act of perception.[14] In this world devoid of inherent structure, man must internally derive any meaning, including sense of purpose, and the fleeting affirmation of his own importance, which supports his continued existence. Marlow is addressing the lengths he traveled seeking the arbitrary imposition of meaning and order when he cryptically inserts into his description of Kurtz's 'horror' the exasperated insight, "Droll thing life is—that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose. The most you can hope from it is some knowledge of yourself—that comes too late—a crop of unextinguishable regrets" (87). The narrative that works for each individual, forming his or

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[13] Bancroft, *Joseph Conrad: His Philosophy*, 2

[14] Panagopoulos, *The Fiction of Joseph Conrad*, 19

her character, is the "knowledge of yourself" he believes Kurtz had attained in his final moments. Yet Marlow had not been able to replicate that achievement until the lie to Kurtz's Intended cemented his own viewpoint through which he could reconcile his own perception of his surroundings with his observed reality. This success provides for Marlow the reconciliation of "that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose"—the ability to understand the reality of a blank world devoid of inherent structure or meaning. Marlow does not attain any truth, he merely quits his honest attempt to reconcile his idealized account of himself with his observations. Marlow is deprived of the knowledge that narratives, formed by individual modes of perception, inherently cannot conform to an objective reality, yet, paradoxically, significance cannot be ascribed to reality without them. That Marlow's resignation to self-delusion can be interpreted as a successful resolution to his quest is the 'horror' extolled by Conrad.

I. An Ominous Preamble

In the preamble to his story, Marlow raises many of the text's seminal issues regarding savagery, the community's role in curbing the disorder inherent to the natural world, and the arbitrary nature of Western civilization's progress. Attempting to put the English colonial endeavor in perspective, Marlow alludes to the Roman conquest of the land that was to become England during a time when "darkness was here" (6). He imagines the Roman colonizer who would have constituted the invading force, and the

circumstances that could have brought him there, concluding that no matter where he came from or why he came to be there, he would:

> feel the savagery, the utter savagery, had closed around him—all that mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs in the forests, in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men. There's no initiation either into such mysteries. He has to live in the midst of the incomprehensible, which is also detestable. And it has a fascination, too, that goes to work upon him. The fascination of the abomination—you know. Imagine the growing regrets, the longing to escape, the powerless disgust, the surrender, the hate. (7)

Marlow's description of the course of events that would inevitably befall a Roman serving in the dark, foreign land suggests the existence, from his perspective, of an inextricable relationship between savagery and mystery. This idea defies the popular imperialist presupposition that savagery is derived exclusively from a primitive existence or from actions, and a society, grounded in visceral, primal impulses that a civilized person has learned to restrain or suppress. The savagery that "had closed around him" is derived from "that mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs in the forests, in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men," and when living amongst this mystery—in the "midst of the incomprehensible"—there exists a "fascination" that "goes to work upon him." Devoid of his society's social institutions—a complex of positions, roles, norms, and values—which exist, primarily, to impose order—and meaning—upon a naturally formless world, the colonizer cannot ascribe significance to his surroundings. Unable to define himself within the context of a familiar—and intelligible—community, the colonizer is deprived of the source from which he derives his identity. He eventually succumbs to his "fascination of the abomination," stripping him of all the appearances of his former civilized conception of himself; thus, he becomes incapable of resisting a fate of "growing regrets, the longing to

escape, the powerless disgust, the surrender, the hate." Despite the colonizer's alleged moral superiority, he eventually conforms to his surroundings, exposing the progress his national community believes it has made as illusory. His civilization has amassed wealth and power, but it has failed to instill within its citizens any enduring qualities strong enough to prevent the colonizer's embrace of his carnal impulses, which, as defined by his society, connotes a reversion to savagery.

Central to Marlow's ability to cope with Europe's inheritance of the imperial enterprise is the distinction he draws between the modern colonial efforts and the "robbery with violence [and] aggravated murder on a great scale" (7) that defined the Roman iterations. In the passage immediately preceding his explicit intention to recall his past encounter with colonialism in the Congo, suggesting its pertinence to his summation of his experience, Marlow explains, "Mind, none of us would feel exactly like this. What saves us is efficiency—the devotion to efficiency" (7). Elaborating on the Romans' failure to achieve colonialism's justifying objectives, Marlow clarifies:

> But these chaps were not much account, really. They were no colonists; their administration was merely a squeeze, and nothing more, I suspect. They were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force—nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others. They grabbed what they could get and for the sake of what was to be got…The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to. (7)

Marlow does not even attempt to pretend that colonialism, even when run by an administration that is more than "merely a squeeze," is justified by any sentimental

pretense, as he describes it plainly as "the conquest of earth." While Avrom Fleishman argues, "the 'idea' that distinguishes the colonist from the conqueror is the commitment to the role, to the place, and to the men among whom he lives,"[15] Marlow's account suggests it possesses infinite flexibility. The "idea that redeems it" is not philanthropic in nature, nor is the idea's content, something seemingly essential to any valuation of its potential importance, relevant to its necessity. What is required is an "unselfish belief in the idea," and that the idea be "something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer sacrifice to."

The adulatory devotion to an arbitrary idea merely fosters an artificial imposition of order. Incessant belief—an efficient form of devotion—in an idea creates communal goals from which individual identity and purpose can be derived. Fleishman supports this notion, arguing the devotion "constitutes an act of allegiance equivalent to the service of a state."[16] The resultant makeshift community saves the colonizers from the "midst of the incomprehensible" by affording them a perspective, similar to that provided by their former society, through which they are able to assign meaning to their surroundings. However, devotion to an "unselfish belief in the idea" does not, in actuality, redeem the colonial effort. It simply allows the colonizer's perception of it to be altered, transforming its unfortunate brutality into something justifiable, and even noble, by marginalizing each

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[15] Fleishman, *Conrad's Politics*, 98

[16] Fleishman, *Conrad's Politics,* 98

individual as a part of a collective aimed solely at the creation of the illusion of order. All that is necessary is some idea, any idea, that can be worshipped.

Marlow delivers his ironic summation of colonialism in posterity, causing it to appear, to both the reader and his audience, as an allegorical account of his experience in the Congo revealing the knowledge he has gleaned from it. Just before Marlow begins to speak, the narrator portrays him in one of the traditional poses of the Buddha, sitting "with his arms dropped, the palms of [his] hands outwards, resembling an idol" (4), an implicit assertion of the enlightenment Marlow is understood to have attained from his harrowing experience. This pose is immediately undermined by his preamble's evident contradictions. He describes the conquest of the earth as "taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves," a tacit recognition of any assertion of racial superiority as dubious, while maintaining that, in the end, the colonial endeavor is redeemable. Marlow not only acknowledges the existence of the need for an "idea" that the colonizers can "bow down to," he is aware of its fundamental importance as an illusory construct that serves to artificially impose order by its creation of a communal purpose. He extols it as a virtue, a discovery of the contemporary European colonizer, despite his acknowledgement of its insignificance with regard to the physical reality of colonialism. Once Marlow broaches the details of his experience, his tale is revealed to embody the very contradictions contained within his preamble, suggesting his awareness, on some level, of the hypocrisy his exposition will illustrate him to exemplify.

II. Divergent Reactions to Hypocrisy

Marlow's recount of his initial exposure to social disorder in the Congo is essential to understanding his conception of his own identity as a pure and righteous colonizer and civilized man. He is shocked by his peers' duplicity, as they manipulate the imperialist rhetoric's promises of moral superiority to justify the brutal subjugation of the indigenous population, prompting him to tacitly acknowledge the racist assumptions and material desires that sustain the imperial ideology. His account of his time in the unnamed European city and his journey to and subsequent arrival in the Congo reveals a man who is aware, though reluctant to explicitly admit, that his society's cherished values hold no efficacy beyond its physical boundaries largely because it is not actually in possession of those very ideals that it professes. Suresh Raval astutely notes, "there is no such thing as the 'self' beyond culture."[17] Illuminating this point, Marlow's response to the chaotic void left by his departure from his community, and his detection of this void even within his community in the unnamed European city, exposes the arbitrary process by which he will seek to regain a coherent notion of himself.

The Congo

When Marlow journeys to the Congo, he leaves a familiar environment—and a learned frame of reference—for a foreign world where he is surrounded by his fellow

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[17] Raval, *The Art of Failure*, 43

Europeans' equivocal actions and an alien physical landscape. Almost immediately upon beginning his voyage to Africa on a French steamer, he describes Marlow becoming disoriented and unable to understand the world he is venturing into. The ship stops to drop off clerks, and soldiers to protect them, at a customs house "to levy a toll in what looked like a God-forsaken wilderness, with a tin shed and a flag-pole lost in it" (15). Compounding the absurdity of collecting a toll in what looks to be thick, uninhabited forest, some of the clerks and soldiers are rumored to have drowned in the surf, though "whether they did or not, nobody seemed particularly to care" (15). Marlow is familiar with a world where life is precious and death is dignified by ceremony and almost always accompanied by protracted mourning. For death to be treated so casually comes as an unwelcomed shock. Saved by his isolation as a passenger on the ship among men he did not know, and the immutable landscape of uniform sea and coastline, Marlow is kept "away from the truth of things" sheltered "within the toils of a mournful and senseless delusion" (15-16). He is only able to cope with the banal irrationality surrounding him—"the truth of things"—by detaching himself from the physical world of his observation. Bernard Paris argues Marlow's "world cracks and tumbles as he encounters realities for which he is unprepared; and his conceptions of civilization, of human and physical nature, and of himself are overthrown."[18] Marlow responds to the destruction of his reality—the dissolution of fundamental components of his society's social structure—by choosing to toil within a senseless delusion. Forced to confront the absence of the familiar community by which he defined

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[18] Paris, *Conrad's Charlie Marlow*, 19

himself, Marlow envisions a new reality to believe in, one which is detached from his observations.

The transitory comforts that Marlow finds in the few aspects of his surroundings that are familiar to him signal the disconcerting impact that the unknown has on him and his fellow Europeans. The surf, "a positive pleasure, like the speech of a brother," and the natives in their paddle boats, who "gave one a momentary contact with reality" (16), temporarily restore to Marlow a semblance of normalcy—and sanity. Though the natives shouted and were savage in appearance with faces "like grotesque masks," they possessed "bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast," providing Marlow with a feeling that he "belonged to a world of straightforward facts," a feeling that "would not last long" (16). The "world of straightforward facts" that Marlow longs for is predicated upon his perception of reality as he knew it in Europe. He is able to find refuge only in the few things that are familiar to him: the ocean, and aspects of the human body and spirit common to all people.

Marlow's comfort with his recognition of a common vitality of spirit and energy of movement in the natives undermines their description as savage, setting the world of his own perception against that of his society's learned stereotypes. The natives belong within the "world of straightforward facts" because they, like him, are human. Marlow is compelled, however, to qualify the natives' vitality as "wild" in order to conform his perception of them to the stereotype of the natives that is promulgated throughout his own society in Europe. Complicating these conscious qualifications is the fact that Marlow

describes confronting with the natives' physical appearance, their "grotesque masks," before he recognizes their innate attributes. He literally sees through the superficial denomination of the natives in order to discover the likeness he shares with them. Bernard Paris asserts that Marlow's deepest desires, like those of all people, are for familiarity and clarity, noting Marlow has been deprived of such comforts in his new environment.[19] Whether Marlow is consciously aware of the implications of his description or not, he reduces the familiar stereotype of savage indigenous populations to a hollow platitude, at least in the sense that it does not conform to his observed reality. He is unwilling to explicitly acknowledge this, for to do so would destroy the comfortable world provided by the imperial ideal, an extension of the confines of familiarity and clarity offered by his society.

The response of Marlow's peers to the disorder magnifies the discomfort he describes, and further deconstructs the noble version of imperialism celebrated by his society. Still aboard the steamer, Marlow recalls seeing a French man-o-war anchored off the coast indiscriminately shelling the continent. Despite the absence of any apparent reason for hostility, the ship sat "in the immensity of earth, sky, water…incomprehensible, firing into the continent" (16). The juxtaposition of the vast natural landscape and the relatively diminutive ship accentuates the futility of the senseless aggression, which is not abated by its literal inconsequence. Devoid of destruction, the scene lacks even any affirmation of its own significance, as "a small flame would dart and vanish, a little white

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[19] Paris, *Conrad's Charlie Marlow*, 19

smoke would disappear, a tiny projectile would give a feeble screech—and nothing would happen. Nothing could happen" (16). It remains unclear what an eight-inch gun fired from a warship anchored off the coast can achieve, not to mention what it was intended to achieve. The "touch of insanity" is not lost on Marlow, who describes being further alarmed by the presence of "somebody on board assuring me earnestly there was a camp of natives—he called them enemies!—hidden out of sight somewhere" (16). Despite never having seen the natives, who have been branded as enemies and must be "hidden out of sight somewhere," the Europeans dutifully act out their imperialist imperative by attempting to subdue the savage native population with indiscriminant shelling of the continent. This perverted application of the imperial ideology appeared utterly insane to Marlow, causing him to want to distance himself from the actions of those around him.

Finally dropped off at the Company's station, Marlow, seeking to find a world restored of its order, is instead confronted with more of the same. Recounting his exploration of the terrain surrounding the station, Marlow immediately recalls,

> a heavy and dull detonation shook the ground, a puff of smoke came out of the cliff, and that was all. No change appeared on the face of the rock. They were building a railway. The cliff was not in the way of anything; but this objectless blasting was all the work going on. (18)

Mirroring the futility of shooting a relatively diminutive shell into a vast landscape, the scene reminds Marlow of "that ship of war [he] had seen firing into a continent" (18), as the "heavy and dull detonation" does not even change the appearance of the face of the rock. Similar to the absence of any hostility that would have necessitated the warship's aggression, the cliff was "not even in the way of anything." The building of a railroad, even

among the human pain and suffering that Marlow is witnessing, can be condoned due to its potential economic utility, but this explosion, Marlow notes, is not even contributing to the realization of that justifiable goal—it is entirely without practical utility. In the foreign land the Europeans define their parameters for acceptable action within a perverted context of their imperial mission, just as the men on the French steamer did. Their ineffectual explosions are an assertion of dominance, an impulse upon which the imperial vision is predicated. Though that vision has fallen apart in the chaotic environment, the Europeans continue to derive their purpose from it.

Aware of the incongruence between the imperial ideal and its application, Marlow describes becoming skeptical of the merit of their cause. Following another explosion on the cliff, he asserts, "by no stretch of the imagination [could they] be called enemies. They were called criminals, and the outraged law, like the bursting shells, had come to them, an insoluble mystery from over the sea" (18). There is no basis for the common European valuation of the natives as criminal. The context within which the natives are considered criminal—"the outraged law"—is distinctly European, and as foreign to the African population as the "bursting shells" the Europeans brought with them. The natives are deemed criminals by the Europeans due to their appearance as unfamiliar and savage, yet, from their perspective, the Europeans are shrouded in similar mystery. With their guns, the Europeans have asserted their dominance. There is no reason for them to consider the natives as anything other than different, as no discernable effort is made to understand them or to engage them in dialogue. Choosing instead to perceive the natives through the learned stereotypes of their culture, the Europeans brutally subjugate them. Witnessing

this lack of regard for the indigenous populations' humanity, Marlow is unashamed to convey the bleak reality he is faced with, stating "[the natives] were dying slowly—it was very clear" (20). He doesn't harbor any illusions of justification, be it on philanthropic grounds or any other, and sardonically notes, "after all, I was also a part of the great cause of these high and just proceedings" (19). His impulse is to distance himself from the distorted application of imperialist ideals that surrounds him, an implicit acknowledgment that the setting no longer represented those sacrosanct ideals by which he defines himself.

The Unnamed European City

Though Marlow observes similar discordant actions during his earlier visit to the Company's headquarters in an unnamed European city, he is able to acknowledge his unease without completely rejecting his surroundings. Ludwig Schnauder, along with many other critics, observes that Marlow believes the city is holding a "dark, horrifying secret."[20] Arriving in the city, Marlow asserts, "it always makes me think of a whited sepulchre" (11), a reference to Matthew 23:27, in which the same phrase, "whited sepulchre," is used to describe people who "appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness."[21] Central to this dichotomy is the pride the people in the city associate with wealth, especially that which has been derived from the colonial effort.

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[20] Schnauder, *Free Will and Determinism in Conrad's Major Novels*, 109

[21] Stape, ed., *Heart of Darkness*, Part I, Note 27

Marlow explains he had no trouble finding the Company's offices, for "it was the biggest thing in town, and everybody I met was full of it. They were going to run an over-sea empire, and make no end of coin by trade" (11). At the heart of the city's pride is the "no end of coin" it stands to make from trade in Africa, though a lesser, subordinate objective to "[wean] those ignorant millions from their horrid ways" (14) has also inspired its colonial mission. Despite the headquarters being surrounded by "high houses, innumerable windows with venetian blinds…[and] imposing carriage archways right and left," it is located on a "narrow and deserted street in deep shadow" submerged in "a dead silence" (11). The city is a bustling hub of commerce, and the Company, with its headquarters surrounded by visible examples of affluence, has been incorporated into its culture of wealth. Everybody Marlow meets on the way to the headquarters is consumed by the wealth of the Company—and the city—and presumably the ideals that sanction its success, but the immediate area surrounding the headquarters is eerily silent and without accessible evidence of vibrant life. After Marlow had entered the headquarters and was waiting to be examined by a doctor, he notes that the building is "as still as a house in a city of the dead" (12). This despondent atmosphere in the Company's physical space conjures the hollow portion of the dichotomy expressed by the notion of the "whited sepulchre." Marlow notes his discomfort with the fact that the Company and its mission was held in the highest regard, yet nobody wanted to be near it, let alone participate in it.

The employees working at the headquarters tacitly acknowledge the Company's veneer, exacerbating the gross fraudulence Marlow has already begun to detect. Recalling the signing of his consent forms, Marlow recalls seeing the secretary who gave him the

forms as “full of desolation and sympathy,” which causes him to begin to “feel slightly uneasy” (12). Marlow elaborates, “There was something ominous in the atmosphere. It was just as though I had been let into some conspiracy—I don’t know—something not quite right; and I was glad to get out” (12). He recalls detecting similar dishonesty in the two women who greeted people entering and exiting the building. The younger woman welcomed the people entering the room, introducing them to one another, while the older woman, who “wore a starched white affair on her head” (13), glanced at Marlow with a “swift and indifferent placidity” that “troubled [him]” (12), suggesting she knew more than she let on. Accentuating his revelatory experience in the headquarters, Marlow recalls meeting with a clerk, who “glorified the Company’s business” (13). However, when Marlow expressed casual surprise at him not going out there, the clerk “became very cool and collected all at once,” stating, “I am not such a fool as I look” (13). Marlow’s acknowledgment of the employees’ disingenuous support for the Company is an implicit recognition that its illusion is upheld precisely because these employees, and many others like them throughout the city, choose to not say anything.

Though it can be argued that much of Marlow’s criticism of the unnamed European city may have been projected in hindsight, his recollection of his encounter with his aunt before departing the city, however, serves as an explicit acknowledgment of the duplicitous nature of the Company—and those who support it—as he was experiencing it. Marlow’s aunt describes him as “one of the Workers, with a capital” (14), an allusion to the writings of the historian and political philosopher Thomas Carlyle, whose ideas were used by H.M. Stanley in his 1898 defense of King Leopold II as a divine instrument in the redemption of

the Congo from its condition as a "vast slave park."[22] She bombastically suggests that his mission is to "'[wean] those ignorant millions from their horrid ways'" (14). Expressing that the rhetoric "made [him] quite uncomfortable," Marlow "ventured to hint that the Company was run for profit" (14), an explicit acknowledgment that he was attentive, or at least recalls being attentive, to the hypocrisy evident in the unnamed city before he ever even left for Africa. He is aware that the Company's professed philanthropic pretense is merely a hollow rationalization, and that the feelings of pride and support for the Company expressed by the citizens of the city is derived from a desire for wealth maintained by a ready inclination to avoid examining the Company's rhetoric.

Attempting to assuage Marlow's concern, Marlow's aunt "brightly" imparts to him that he, the laborer, "is worthy of his hire" (14). Relaying the significance of the conversation to his audience, Marlow boldly asserts:

> It's queer how out of truth women are! They live in a world of their own, and there had never been anything like it, and never can be. It is too beautiful altogether, and if they were to set it up it would go to pieces before the first sunset. Some confounding fact we men have been living contentedly with ever since the day of creation would start up and knock the whole thing over. (14)

During his brief time in the unnamed city, Marlow describes personally witnessing countless examples of individuals living a fanciful reality in "a world of their own…[that] can never be." Though these experiences elicited within him an "eerie feeling" (12), it was his aunt, merely a consumer of the rhetoric propagated by those intimately associated with the Company's business, who he recalls evoking his stern ire. Marlow avoids recognizing

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[22] Stape, ed., *Heart of Darkness*, Part I, Note 36

the society he encountered in the unnamed city, one of two brief glimpses of Europe the reader is afforded, as the world that is "too beautiful altogether" by conveniently confining it within the world inhabited by the stereotypical hapless, capricious woman. To address what he repeatedly hints at with benign admissions of uneasiness would require recognition of his "confounding fact" that would knock his whole world over. Marlow's exceptional capacity to dissociate himself from those around him by offering his own moral judgment of their actions allows him to feel uncomfortable without completely rejecting his surroundings as he does in the Congo.

III. Blind Attempts at Coping with Disorder

Analysis of the descriptions of the five men that Marlow encounters on his way to the Inner Station—the chief accountant, a Company operative looking after the upkeep of a road, the General Manager of the Central Station, the brickmaker at the Central Station, and a Russian trader—are often overlooked in critical evaluations of Marlow's defining moment, his reaction to Kurtz's 'horror.' Though Edward Said, along with many other critics, disregards Marlow's encounters with the Russian trader and the white-suited clerk professing to be looking after the upkeep of the road as "several digressive paragraphs,"[23] Marlow's description of his initial fascination with each of these five men is vital to understanding the nature of the journey that eventually leads to his idolization of Kurtz. He

[23] Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 23

does not, however, describe himself as immediately fixated by Kurtz upon first hearing his name. In fact, he recalls wanting to "Hang Kurtz" (27) when he is mentioned by the General Manager of the Central Station. Taken literally, Marlow's descriptions of the five men can be interpreted as denunciations of the various actions undertaken by his peers that undermine his own conception of the imperialist ideal. While Marlow does eventually criticize each man's outlook as an escapist attempt to avoid confronting the hypocrisy of the brutally violent application of imperialism's noble ideals, he is intrigued by their respective abilities to overcome the senseless destruction to define themselves by a decided interaction with their new environment. As he becomes further insulated from the remnants of society, Marlow describes the men becoming increasingly deranged. He acknowledges the comforting delusion offered by each of their coping mechanism, and, accordingly, is unwilling to emulate any of their examples.

The Chief Accountant

Finally escaping the disarray surrounding the station, Marlow stumbles upon the Company's chief accountant, who is dressed in "such an unexpected elegance" that Marlow "took him for sort of a vision" (21). Utterly shocked by his refined appearance, Marlow "shook hands with this miracle," who claims to have stepped outside for a moment to "'get a breath of fresh air,'" an expression sounding "wonderfully odd" (21) due to its dissonance from the irrational suffering Marlow had witnessed in the immediate proximity. Elaborating on his fascination, Marlow explains,

> I respected the fellow. Yes; I respected his collars, his vast cuffs, his brushed head. His appearance was certainly that of a hairdresser's dummy; but in the great demoralization of the land he kept up his appearance. That's backbone! His starched collars and got-up shirt-fronts were achievements of character. He had been out there nearly three years. (21)

Just as Marlow was able to find transitory comfort during his time on the French steamer in the few aspects of his surroundings that were similar to him, he describes the accountant as able to remain connected to his former world, a world that made sense to him, by maintaining a professional appearance. He appears as a miracle to Marlow because he was able to maintain this connection—and some semblance of order—within the "great demoralization of the land."

Though Marlow initially equates the accountant's ability to maintain his sanity with backbone, he quickly ascertains the fastidious attention to detail as a hollow method meant to distract him from the blatant suffering that surrounded him. Faced with waiting at the station for ten days, Marlow visits the accountant's office "to be out of the chaos" (21). The accountant's books were in "apple-pie order" despite "everything else in the station [being] in a middle—heads, things, buildings" (21). This diligent maintenance of appearances, standing in direct contrast to the clutter surrounding him, keeps the accountant focused, and his mind distracted from the desultory situation apparent immediately outside his door. When an agent who had fallen ill is brought on a truckle-bed to stay in his office, the accountant exhibits a "gentle annoyance," explaining, "the groans of this sick person…distract my attention" (22). As the noise subsides and Marlow prepares to leave the office for the final time, he stops at the door to observe "In the steady buzz of flies the homeward-bound agent was lying flushed and insensible," while the accountant, "bent over

his books, was making correct entries of perfectly correct transactions; and fifty feet below I could see the still tree-tops of the grove of death" (22). The accountant substituted devotion to his appearance and his routine tasks for any attempt to rationalize the blatant human suffering—"the grove of death"—that he was presented with on a daily basis. Presenting the absurd image of the utterly detached accountant to his audience, Marlow is keenly aware that the accountant's sanity is predicated upon his escapist immersion in menial tasks and the superficial upkeep of his appearance.

Clerk Looking after Upkeep of Road

Embarking on a two-hundred-mile trek with a caravan of sixty men to the Central Station, Marlow recalls becoming desensitized to the human desolation that defined the environment, and noticing that his disposition had begun to change. Though he downplays the significance of the march, informing his audience that there was "no use in telling [them] much about that," Marlow coveys that the caravan would intermittently come across "a carrier dead in harness, at rest in the long grass near the path, with an empty water-gourd and his long staff lying by his side" (23). Marlow is appalled earlier in his travels when he is confronted with senseless suffering and indifference toward death. Though he describes being shocked by the casual mention by the men on the French steamer of clerks and soldiers drowning in the surf, he does not note that the African porters' deaths may have been prevented had they not had empty water jugs, nor does he express discontent with their being left to rot on the side of the path. Desensitized to the

violence that surrounded him, he describes adopting an indifference he previously could not understand, as he flippantly mentions sporadic sightings of porters lying dead on the side of the path. Marlow had begun the inevitable process of conforming to his surroundings that he illustrates in his preamble.

Though he has become numb to the utter disregard for human life surrounding him, Marlow describes being aware of what was happening to him, and consciously restraining from himself from embracing the hopeless desolation. The one episode during the two-week march that Marlow does mention involves a white man "in an unbuttoned uniform," who professed to be "looking after the upkeep of the road" (23-24). His unkempt appearance stands in direct contrast to the immaculately dressed Chief accountant, though the two appear equally blissfully unaware, and, confirmed by his scornful declaration that he had initially come to the Congo to "'make money, of course" (24), the man has abandoned all pretense, resigning himself to imperialism's base material impulses. Marlow recalls realizing the extent of his desensitized state after the man, who had come down with a fever and, on Marlow's orders, is being carried in a hammock by natives at the front of the party, is found "wrecked in a bush—man, hammock, groans, blankets, horrors. The [hammock's] heavy pole had skinned his poor nose" (24). Marlow describes sympathizing with the man, who made it very clear that he "was very anxious for [Marlow] to kill somebody." Marlow, consumed by the numb brutality of the environment, notes, "there wasn't the shadow of a carrier near" (24), implying he otherwise would have obliged the barbaric request. Aware of the stark change in his outlook, Marlow "remembered the old doctor—'It would be interesting for science to watch the mental changes of individuals, on

the spot,'" remarking that he "felt that [he] was becoming scientifically interesting" (24). This recognition is an explicit acknowledgment that he had changed. Unwilling to abandon the colonial endeavor's justifying ideals as utterly lost, Marlow recalls refusing the deranged comfort afforded by conforming to the environment.

The Central Station

Consciously attempting to resist succumbing to the senseless brutality that defined his surroundings, Marlow arrives at the Central Station, where two additional examples of an ability to cope with the environment's disorder await him in the form of the station's General Manager and a first-class agent entrusted with the making of the station's bricks. Of arriving at the Central Station Marlow immediately notes, "A neglected gap was all the gate it had, and the first glance at the place was enough to let you see the flabby devil was running that show" (24). Marlow describes the General Manager, who was of "middle size and ordinary build," as:

> a common trader, from his youth up employed in these parts–nothing more. He was obeyed, yet he inspired neither love nor fear, nor even respect. He inspired uneasiness…He had no genius for organizing, for initiative, or for order even. That was evident in such things as the deplorable state of the station. He had no learning, and no intelligence. His position had come to him—why? Perhaps because he was never ill … He had served three terms of three years out there … He originated nothing, he could keep the routine going—that's all. But he was great. He was great by this little thing that it was impossible to tell what could control such a man. He never gave that secret away. Perhaps there was nothing within him. Such a suspicion made one pause—for out there there were no external checks. (25-26)

By Marlow's account, the General Manager was an ordinary man—he possessed middle size, an ordinary build, was a common trader, had no genius for organizing, initiative, or order, and had no learning or intelligence. Yet Marlow concludes he was great. Despite possessing no genius for order, to the extent that the station had fallen into disrepair, he had lasted out there because he was able to maintain his own personal order, his mental sanity. His genius existed in his lack of any attempt at genius; it resided in his utter indifference, the tangible consequence of which was his ability to keep the routine going. He remains ignorant of the surrounding suffering through a myopic devotion to ascending the Company hierarchy—a pursuit mirroring his general apathy in its emptiness, as he is fixated on advancing his title, not on producing tangible work that would warrant promotion. This capacity for cognitive detachment is common to each of the men he has encountered who are able to find internal stability. Marlow acknowledges as much by including in his description the fact that the General Manager was freed from his imposed indifference when on vacation from his assignment, where "he rioted on a large scale—pompously" (26). Marlow is aware of the importance of this ability to the General Manager's success, as it allows him to devote himself exclusively—and efficiently—to his ruthless pursuit of advancement.

The Central Station's brickmaker, who appears to be driven by similar ambitions, introduces himself to Marlow when he casually summons him to his office for a veiled sycophantic attempt at social generosity aimed toward his and the manager's shared goal of career advancement. A "first-class agent" who appeared to be "stand-offish with the other agents" (28), he had attached his own advancement to that of the General Manager,

and had been planning to serve under him as assistant manager of the entire enterprise upon his promotion. The brickmaker did not make any bricks, nor did he, at least to the extent that Marlow could see, do much of anything. He had been in the station for more than a year, but Marlow notes, "there wasn't a fragment of brick anywhere in the station" (28-29). To Marlow, "it did not appear clear … what he was waiting for. An act of special creation perhaps" (29). Conspicuously absent from the brickmaker's desire for advancement is tangible achievement commensurate with his desired promotion. The prospect of advancement, hollow due to its tangential connection with the physical world, serves as the vehicle through which he was able to idealize his own world independent of the chaos surrounding him.

Implicitly asserting the advantages offered by toiling in ignorant delusion in his new environment, Marlow recounts an allegorical allusion made by the brickmaker involving a hippo that used to roam the station grounds at night. The brickmaker had interpreted Marlow's stolid indifference to his social advances as an affront, and chose to respond confrontationally. Presumably attempting to impart to Marlow the reality of the land, and to convince him of the merit of joining his empty crusade for promotion, the brickmaker explained that when the hippo would appear, the pilgrims would "turn out in a body and empty any rifle they could lay hands on at him" (34). The "energy was wasted, though" (34), as the hippo would always withstand the barrage of bullets and return to where he came from. The brickmaker explained, "That animal has a charmed life … but you can say this only of the brutes in this country. No man—you apprehend me?—no man here bears a charmed life" (Conrad 34). In his recollection, Marlow did not interpret the brickmaker's

statement that "no man here bears a charmed life" as an acknowledgment of his devotion to advancement as a coping mechanism for life in the unintelligible wilderness, as he describes him walking away "disturbed and considerably puzzled" (34) following his lecture. The brickmaker wants more than anything to reap the benefits of welcoming Marlow into his good graces, and he is confused as to why Marlow refuses to oblige him. His story is no more than a plea for Marlow to abandon whatever it is that guides his actions in favor of a partnership aimed at mutual self-interest. That Marlow includes it in his story, though, and in such stark terms, again imparts his awareness to his audience of the advantages offered by detachment from the world of his observations.

The Russian Trader: "Kurtz's Last Disciple"

Following the arduous journey up river, the Russian trader appears to Marlow as an impossibly serene figure. Despite the cacophonous torrent of firepower unleashed by the pilgrims within what must have been earshot less than a mile downriver, he did not appear to be alarmed by the proximity of the natives who had just attacked the steamship. Reassuring Marlow that they were "simple people" (65), he explained that one good screech of the steamship's horn was all that was needed to quiet an assault, and that it would do far more good than the entirety of the party's rifles. Able to consider the perspective through which the natives viewed him and the Europeans' foreign technology, he saw them as a different, "simple people," but as people nonetheless, driven by the same emotions as he and his peers. Though the trader understood the natives in different, far

more rational terms than other agents he had encountered, Marlow recalls immediately detecting something odd about the trader, noting, "His aspect reminded me of something I had seen—something funny I had seen somewhere" (64). Dressed in brown fabric covered with bright, multicolored patches, the trader appeared to Marlow as a harlequin.

Underlying the trader's strange appearance was the perplexing equivocation with which he referred to Kurtz. Possessing a "boyish face, very fair, no features to speak of, nose peeling, little blue eyes, [and] smiles and frowns chasing each other over that open countenance like sunshine and shadow on a wind-swept plain" (65), the trader is repeatedly described by Marlow as intensely ambivalent. Smiles and frowns intermittently dominate his naturally genial countenance, and when Marlow asks what has become of Kurtz, his face "was like the autumn sky, overcast one moment and bright the next" (65). He is enthralled with Kurtz, imploring to Marlow with severe exaltation, "You don't talk with that man—you listen to him" (65). Removed from Kurtz's presence, the trader remained transfixed by him, becoming impetuous upon even the mention of his name. His disposition did not oscillate within the full extremes of human emotion, though; the parameters are narrowed and shifted toward the cheerful, bound by a moderate, "overcast" sorrow on its lower extreme and countered by a boundless radiance as its uppermost limit. The trader appeared to be simultaneously aware of Kurtz's exploitative and savagely violent potential, while concurrently possessed by the ideals of his rhetoric and his normative vision.

Keenly aware of the spell that had consumed the trader, Marlow notes seeing him simultaneously as the most grounded and disillusioned man he had encountered in the Congo. Suresh Raval describes the trader as "the product of a society which shelters its

youth by idealizing its brutal adventures in primitive societies."[24] Marlow comments on this fixation with adventure, noting that the trader, who had traveled alone deep into the African continent, was:

> gallantly, thoughtlessly alive, to all appearance indestructible solely by the virtue of his few years and of his unreflecting audacity… His need was to exist, and to move onwards at the greatest possible risk, and with maximum privation. If the absolutely pure, uncalculating, impractical spirit of adventure had ever ruled a human being, it ruled this be-patched youth. (68)

Though Marlow coveted the assurance of the "modest and clear flame" (68) the trader had attained by devoting himself to Kurtz, he describes himself as unwilling to aspire to Kurtz's example in a similar manner, explaining, "I did not envy him his devotion to Kurtz, though. He had not mediated over it. It came to him, and he accepted it with a sort of eager fatalism. I must say that to me it appeared about the most dangerous thing in every way he had come upon so far" (69). The trader readily submitted himself to worship of Kurtz, but Marlow notes he was not able to mindlessly adopt any viewpoint or ideology in order to attain comfort. He describes this resignation as the most dangerous thing the trader had come upon so far, even more dangerous than trekking ill-equipped and alone into the wilderness, because he had become possessed by it, deceived by illusory feelings elicited by Kurtz's eloquence. Marlow was not satisfied with deluding himself; on the contrary, he laments being a part of the Europeans' disingenuous high and just proceeding. Attempting to cope with the threat this hypocritical reality posed to his civilized identity, he hoped to reconcile, in some way, the gruesome surroundings with his strict moral sense of duty.

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[24] Raval, *The Art of Failure*, 32

IV. An Arbitrary Notion of Human Civilization

Though the analysis of most critics relegates the natural environment to ancillary importance within Marlow's tale as the backdrop against which he observes his peers' actions devolve into irrational and indiscriminant violence, the questions that Marlow poses to his audience regarding the wilderness exposes his awareness of the arbitrary concept of human civilization, and more generally, his understanding of the indelible impact perception has on man's consideration of his surroundings. Marlow portrays the wilderness as an active participant in the deconstruction of social order; embodying pure, uncomplicated primordial passions, nature is incessantly exuding these impulses, and thereby corrupting the colonizer. Though work provides him temporary relief from the forces that threaten to deface his concept of himself, Marlow acknowledges that "one must look about sometimes" (27), subtly reinforcing to his audience the dubious nature of the certitude offered by civilization.

A Menacing, Denuding Force

Marlow portrays the wilderness as a brooding force that opposes the European colonizers and threatens their survival. Of the evening setting he encountered at the Central Station, he describes, "Beyond the fence the forest stood up spectrally in the moonlight, and through the dim stir, through the faint sounds of that lamentable courtyard,

the silence of the land went home to one's very heart—its mystery, its greatness, the amazing reality of its concealed life" (31). Marlow is afraid of what he is describing, but he does not know why. The forest, standing "spectrally in the moonlight," is a nebulous source of terror, a mysterious apparition. The existence of its "concealed life" amazes Marlow because it simultaneously pervades his daily life, and those of his peers, yet remains unexplored, and thus not understood. The Europeans have departed their urban familiarity to become enveloped by nature, yet they are only able to understand it as primordial—and savage. The immensity of the forest opposes the "pilgrims" (31) who inhabit it. Marlow describes the silence, the forest's still, empty sound, as piercing directly to "one's very heart." It eclipses the sounds coming from that lamentable courtyard, making them faint, and diminishing their significance.

Accentuating this antagonistic arrangement, Marlow's recollection of a feeble moan from the "hurt nigger … somewhere near by" (31), disrupts his rumination, returning him to his discussion of the story's plot. The Europeans' attempt to tame the environment by subjugating the natives, who are portrayed by Marlow as possessing the wilderness' unadulterated atavism, and are viewed by Marlow and the other Company operatives as sub-human extensions of their environment. The silence, affecting the Europeans in more than just a discordant aural capacity, is, Marlow believes, the weapon with which the forest subtly assaults the pilgrims. Whereas European society—its ideals, its morality, its conventions—promotes to its citizens correct behavior and the areas to apply one's time and effort, the silence is the response the Europeans receive from their surroundings in the Congo. Perceived by the Europeans as a lack of any external prompt, this incessant offering

denudes the pilgrims of their learned purpose. It erodes the Europeans until they posses only the memory of their former motivations and are left with only their present surroundings to define themselves. And the only cue they receive to measure themselves by and to conform their actions to is the forest's "mystery, its greatness, the amazing reality of its concealed life."

Whereas Marlow portrays his peers as lethargic and consumed by hollow, material pursuits, he respects the wilderness' boundless power. Countering the evident human irrationality at the Central Station—"the faint sounds of that lamentable courtyard"—Marlow discerns, "outside, the silent wilderness surrounding this cleared speck on the earth struck me as something great and invincible, like evil or truth, waiting patiently for the passing away of this fantastic invasion" (27). Humanity had invaded the "silent wilderness," creating within it a "cleared speck" that did not appear naturally. Immense in scope, both in its sheer size and its impact on the creatures living within it, the wilderness was waiting not only for the passing of humanity's physical invasion—its desire to change the natural surroundings to fit its needs—but for the disappearance of the human arrogance that inspired it. The aggressive human invasion of the passive and "silent" wilderness that is "waiting patiently" has reversed a dynamic that has existed as long as man has lived on the earth. For much, if not all, of that time, nature has been the dominant partner in the relationship. Humanity has had to react to its environment in order to survive, though the advent of extant contemporary technology had ostensibly changed this. From Marlow's perspective, the Company agents' imbecile rapacity is not only unreal because of its inability to produce tangible results, but because it is futile in the face of

something as incalculably comprehensive as the physical landscape, which he describes as "great and invincible, like evil or truth."

The unfamiliarity of the bare landscape exacerbates the discomforting impact of the latent force Marlow observes in the surrounding environment. Describing his travels to the Inner Station, Marlow notes, "We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet" (43). Marlow is aware that the environment in the Congo more closely resembles a "prehistoric earth" spared of humanity's marked impact. This "unknown planet," in its natural state, is foreign to him. He does not know how to aptly describe it to his audience, nor is he able to rationalize its seemingly boundless force; it possesses power that could destroy the men that have invaded its sovereign space, yet Marlow explains it does not act, and exercises restraint. Continuing his recount of his journey down river, Marlow describes the earth as "unearthly," explaining we are "accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there—there you could look at the thing monstrous and free" (44). Conscious of his paradoxical description of the earth as "unearthly," Marlow is attentive to the impact human perception has on their understanding of their surroundings. He is scared by the raw wilderness of his observations, and describes the earth as a "conquered monster." He is aware that the physical world had not changed since primordial times; humanity's cosmetic modifications—including the advent of technology that had allowed it successfully subdue foreign populations and travel to far off lands to extract ivory—had only "shackled" the monster. The chance to "look at the thing monstrous and free" was, to Marlow, a terrifying prospect.

Given the inconsequential nature of the humanity in the face of a vast, powerful wilderness, Marlow implicitly questions the merit of his society's professions of progress. Describing the threat that the wilderness posed to the Company agents and to humanity's own conception of itself, Marlow explains,

> The great wall of vegetation, an exuberant and entangled mass of trunks, branches, leaves, boughs, festoons, motionless in the moonlight, was like a rioting invasion of soundless life, a rolling wave of plants, piled up, crested, ready to topple over the creek, to sweep away every little man of us out of existence. And it moved. A deadened burst of mighty splashes and snorts reached us from afar, as though an ichthyosaurus had been taking a bath of glitter in the great river. (36)

Marlow's ruminations on the latent force possessed by the natural surroundings serve as a constant reminder to his audience that the Company agents have not mastered their environment. The description of the invasion as having been undertaken by the Company agents is paradoxical, as the agents have physically entered territory, while the silence of the wilderness pervades their thoughts, severing their connections to any learned notion of social order. The "rolling wave of plants" is "oiled up" and "crested" and is ready "to sweep away every little man of us out of existence." The forest remains passive, yet Marlow acknowledges the potential it posses to overwhelm the agents, himself among them, when it does act; he expresses being humbled by their relative insignificance. When the landscape does move, it produces a "deadened burst," as if it is still restraining an exhibition of its unbridled force. Marlow equates these "mighty splashes and snorts" to those that would have been produced by an ichthyosaurus, an allusion to en extinct marine reptile that presumably might have frequented the same river in prehistoric times. Marlow could have imagined any marine reptile, but he chooses an animal that has been extinct for

millions of years, and thereby opens his examination of the relationship between man and nature to the entirety of history.

Though Bernard Paris argues the Europeans' insignificance compared to their threatening surroundings exposes Marlow to the fragility of his civilization,[25] his belief in his society's inherent greatness is more significantly undermined by his awareness of his false conception that the fundamental dynamic between man and nature had ever been altered. The allusion to the ichthyosaurus challenges the contemporary analysis of that dynamic and the progress that humanity believes it has made through the advent of civilization. Humanity remains at the mercy of nature, even with the advent of ships, and tents, and fences, and tools it has created to clear within the dense forest a "speck on the earth." Marlow suggests that man had merely created the impression that it had fundamentally altered the relationship. The appearance of the great wall of vegetation as an "exuberant and entangled mass," one to which disorder is inherent, only accentuates the implicit likening between the two epochs made by Marlow. Though humanity had attempted to subdue the natural environment and impose order upon it, Marlow is aware that this might not be possible. That he is privy to this complication leaves him, and the reader, uncertain whether humanity's accomplishments have tangibly altered its orientation to nature, or if this fundamental relationship has endured, remaining static.

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[25] Paris, *Conrad's Charlie Marlow*, 27

Work as a Comforting Certitude

In devotion to work, Marlow finds a temporary means for avoiding the tactile world. Addressing the unease evoked by the brickmaker's devotion to becoming an efficient sycophant, Marlow states, "What I really wanted was rivets, by heaven! Rivets. To get on with the work—to stop the hole. Rivets I wanted" (33). By indulging the brickmaker's bumptious social inquiries, Marlow felt he had become "as much of a pretence as the rest of the bewitched pilgrims" (32). He was not a pretense in the same way that the rest of them were. He did not mindlessly pursue greed or influence, but he acknowledges that he was devoted to nothing. In his moment of uncertainty during which he felt compelled to find something to define his existence in the Congo, anything to substantiate his days and provide him with purpose, he turned to the work that was the initial reason for his being there. Work, Marlow's outlet for comprehending the blank template projected by the foreign environment, is the direct opposite of that of the rest of the agents at the Central station. While they were "strolling aimlessly about in the yard" (27), Marlow just wanted rivets in order to "get on with the work." Having morally condemned their brutal exploitation of the indigenous population, he sought to distance himself from their actions even in the idealized construct that he appealed to in order to escape the stark reality they had created.

Marlow, however, does not describe appealing to work to create for himself a palatable, deluding reality, as the other agents in his tale had done; he is aware that work does not change his relationship with his incomprehensible surroundings, that it merely provides for him a transient mental outlook through which the world appears intelligible. Extolling the limits of applying himself to work as a means of escape, Marlow explains, "one must look about sometimes" (27). Elaborating on the importance of his work, Marlow asserts,

> No, I don't like work. I had rather laze about and think of all the fine things that can be done. I don't like work—no man does—but I like what is in the work—the chance to find yourself. Your own reality—for yourself, not for others—what no man can ever know. They can only see the mere show, and never can tell what it really means. (35)

In devoting himself to work, Marlow aspired to an abstract Victorian ideal. He does not possess an affinity for physically exerting himself. In fact, he "[does not] like work" and would rather "laze about and think of all the fine things that can be done." He is normal in this regard; work is difficult and is not inherently appealing. He is attracted to labor by "what is in the work." Feeling that he can derive his "own reality" from devotion to work, Marlow values the tactile benefits he reaps from concentrating on the repair of his steamer. Removed from the familiar European society that endorses the ideals and moral code by which he knows himself, Marlow was struggling to hold onto his former identity. His conception of work, devoid of appreciation for the actual labor, allowed him to continue to define himself by his society's ideals of efficiency and industry. The steamboat, his "influential friend" (34), provided him the chance to apply these ideals toward the greater

colonial effort, though he remains conscious that his affinity for work is derived primarily from its means as an escape.

V. Imagining Kurtz

The immediate inclination to describe Kurtz's tale as one of swift and violent moral devolution serves as a pertinent illustration of the implicit complications produced by Marlow's role as the novella's primary narrator. Marlow meets Kurtz only after he is conspicuously engrossed by his selfish desires. He did not know him before he came to the Congo, which precludes him from knowledge of his initial moral position upon his arrival in Africa. He knows of Kurtz's former existence through his Intended, who unconditionally professes, "It was impossible not to—Love him" (93), and a former journalist colleague of his who speaks of his "universal genius" and his possession of an incredible capacity to "get himself to believe anything" (90). To Marlow's audience, the importance of this fantastic, possibly infernal, capacity remains uncertain. Its centrality to Kurtz's former colleague's description of him forces one to wonder whether Kurtz actually believed in the philanthropic ideal he would eventually diminish to platitudes, or if he had conveniently adopted them in an effort to save face while incurring the magnificent fortune he needed in order to marry his Intended. The existence of these questions regarding Kurtz's unfiltered and honest moral position is not nearly as significant as Marlow's lack of interest in them. Marlow's indifference toward these seemingly evident contradictions in Kurtz's character elucidates the extent to which he is overcome by Kurtz's grand rhetoric, despite his

awareness and constant acknowledgment of the deleterious effect such devotion had on countless others.

Questioning his conception of himself and his society in his foreign environment, Marlow describes being fascinated with the rumors of Kurtz he had been hearing ever since his encounter with the accountant. Suresh Raval notes Marlow's interest in Kurtz "derives from his desperation: surrounded by barbarism on all sides, he clutches at the only hope presented in the remote figure of Kurtz, being powerless, in himself, to grasp the meaning of experience."[26] Though clearly unable to grasp the meaning of the gruesome reality he has experienced, Marlow has a clear conception of what he wants his experience to mean. In Kurtz, Marlow sees the final destination in his quest to reconcile himself with the ghastly suffering and violence he has witnessed on the continent, his last hope for discovering a manner through which he can genuinely engage the high and just cause entrusted to him in his new surroundings.

Kurtz as Projected by Marlow

Marlow admits initially feeling contempt for Kurtz, but his opinion changes as the rumors he hears of him become associated with the very philanthropic ideals that comprise his own view of imperialism. He first hears Kurtz's name at the company's outermost station on the continent in a discussion with the chief accountant, who casually remarks,

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[26] Raval, *Art of Failure*, 30

"In the interior you will no doubt meet Mr Kurtz" (22), adding that he is a first-class agent. Noticing Marlow's disappointment to learn that Kurtz is an agent, Marlow recalls the accountant insisting that Kurtz "is a very remarkable person" (22), the words that Marlow, ironically, will eventually describe him by to his audience. Marlow remained indifferent, as he had witnessed firsthand the lack of causality and senseless violence that defined the agents' actions. To be told of a supreme agent, a man who had reached or neared the apex of this hierarchy built upon ruthless exploitation and stolid indifference to humanity and moral action, left Marlow understandably uninspired. Hearing again of Kurtz from the General Manager of the Central Station, Marlow notes, the mention of Kurtz made him feel "weary and irritable," causing him to harbor thoughts of a desire to "Hang Kurtz" (27). The manager assures Marlow that "Mr Kurtz was the best agent he had, an exceptional man, of the greatest importance to the company" (27), though he still recalls believing Kurtz to be nothing remarkable, merely the best of a detestable lot. His conception of Kurtz begins to change when the brickmaker at the Central Station alludes to him as "a prodigy…an emissary of pity, and science, and progress, and devil knows what else" (30). The brickmaker continues, "We want…for the guidance of the cause entrusted to us by Europe, so to speak, higher intelligence, wide sympathies, a singleness of purpose…and so *he* comes here, a special being, as you ought to know" (30). Dumbfounded, Marlow queries:

> Why ought I to know," to which the brickmaker, indirectly addressing Marlow's question, adds, "Yes. To-day he is chief of the best station, next year he will be assistant-manager, two years more and … but I daresay you know what he will be in two years' time. You are the new gang—the gang of virtue. The same people who sent him specially also recommended you. (30)

The brickmaker referred to Kurtz sardonically as a "special being," resenting his successful rise up the Company ranks. Marlow, however, is enthralled by the brickmaker's caricature of Kurtz not only because it establishes him in direct contrast the brickmaker and the other immoral agents he has encountered, but also because he is paired with him as a part of the "gang of virtue." He had envisioned himself as virtuous ever since arriving in the Congo, but, until this moment in his exposition, he had never described being aware of any others like him. The brickmaker's version of Kurtz offers to Marlow not only the example of someone who possessed a similar moral outlook grounded in pity, science, progress, higher intelligence, and wide sympathies, a viewpoint that certainly ascribes to the European values that justify the colonial endeavor, it affirmed the existence of a contemporary who had managed to retain this noble purpose while overcoming the vapid sense of morality Marlow has encountered there.

Never having seen Kurtz, Marlow envisions him as the brickmaker describes him, so as to preserve the possibility of his own reconciliation of his noble values with his observed surroundings. With only rumors to substantiate his vision, Marlow describes his journey upriver in the repaired steamer as headed "towards Kurtz" (45). Upon hearing a story of how Kurtz, in charge of a fleet of canoes heading down river in possession of a substantial haul of ivory, had turned back to his station after traveling three hundred miles, apparently without any stated motivation, Marlow claims, "I seemed to see Kurtz for the first time" (39). He explains,

> It was a distinct glimpse: the dug-out, four paddling savages, and the lone white man turning his back suddenly on the headquarters, on relief, on thoughts of home—

> perhaps; setting his face towards the depth of the wilderness, towards his empty and desolate station. I did not know the motive. Perhaps he was just simply a fine fellow who stuck to his work for its own sake. (39)

Marlow chooses to romanticize his image of Kurtz. Despite describing hearing the manager clearly state that Kurtz had an English half-caste clerk with him, Marlow envisions Kurtz as the "lone white man turning his back suddenly on the headquarters, on relief, on thoughts of home." He refuses to consider greed, the impulse that had violently stricken every agent he had observed at the Central Station, as a potential motive for his irrational return to the wilderness. Marlow's Kurtz did not lust for status or material wealth in the form of the hoarding of ivory, even though he claims to have heard the manager describe Kurtz's pack of canoes as possessing "lots of [ivory]—prime sort—lots" (38); his Kurtz "was just simply a fine fellow" who, like himself, "stuck to work for its own sake." Conveniently, this first time he had 'seen' him, Marlow's Kurtz conformed to everything Marlow needed to preserve the hope that he could continue to define himself in this land as he had in Europe. The example of Kurtz proved that the colonial endeavor was not characterized by senseless brutality and unchecked greed. It confirmed that the colonial effort was virtuous, and that Marlow could view himself as diligently working toward the furthering of a righteous cause.

Justifying his stated obsession with Kurtz to his audience despite his previous allusions to him as a "flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly" (19), Marlow attempts to explain to his audience that until he met him, Kurtz appeared to him as no more than a shadowy myth that had swept him up in all of its possibility. Marlow asserts:

> He was just a word for me. I did not see the man in the name any more than you do. Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream—making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is of the very essence of dreams …. No, it was impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence—that which makes its truth, its meaning—its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream—alone…. (32-33)

Marlow acknowledges that Kurtz appeared to him as just a word, a myth possessing only the qualities that had been passionately ascribed to him by others who have come in contact with him. Kurtz was a blank template upon which Marlow projected romantic notions of duty and purpose, sentiments that are essential to his own conception of himself. He saw Kurtz as someone devoted to work for its own purpose, failing to consider that he had become entranced by his prodigious haul, as he believes any of the other agents he had encountered would. Kurtz needs to stand in direct contrast to the rest of the vile Company agents Marlow has met in order for Marlow to continue to define himself by the same ideals of work, morality, and progress in his new surroundings as he did within European society. The example of Kurtz, the one that is "just a word," represents this possibility. Marlow understands that to try to explain this to his audience would entail him "making a vain attempt" because this conception of Kurtz, and its central function within Marlow's own reality, is unique to him. It would be impossible for him to "convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence—that which makes its truth, its meaning" because his experience was his own, and can never mean the same thing to anyone else as it does to him.

Unbeknownst to Marlow, his idealization of Kurtz can be seen as serving a similar function to the various "ideas" employed by the other agents to stave of the ubiquitous disorder they all had experienced. Of the obsession with ivory that he observes at the Central Station, Marlow states, "The word 'ivory' rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed. You would think they were praying to it. A taint of imbecile rapacity blew through it all, like a whiff from some corpse. By Jove! I've never seen anything so unreal in my life" (27). Ivory, like Marlow's conception of Kurtz, is just a word. Just as Marlow has devoted himself to the possibility that Kurtz represents, the agents idolize ivory as an outlet for their overwhelming desires for greed. They adore all that ivory represents, and embrace the "imbecile rapacity" that defines their purpose in their new surroundings. Marlow's fascination with his own conception of Kurtz is just as "unreal." He professes to not be "very interested" in Kurtz, but remains curious as to "whether this man, who had come out equipped with moral ideas of some sort, would climb to the top after all, and how he would set about his work when there" (37). Marlow believes that he also "had come out equipped with moral ideas of some sort." His desire to meet Kurtz, supported by the vision of him he has nurtured, is rooted in the similarities he believes he shares and wants to share with Kurtz. Marlow sees Kurtz as a model for his own work in Africa. In projecting his own fears and desires onto Kurtz in pursuit of his own definition of purpose in this new, unfamiliar land, Marlow unwittingly becomes, in the eyes of his audience, the object of the critique he believes he had been performing on the figures within his story.

Incongruent Realities

There is little, if any, dissension within the critical discussion of *Heart of Darkness* regarding the appalling nature of the baseless exploitation wrought by Kurtz. Benita Parry sees his character as a ravenous man intent on engorging the universe, a conqueror so consumed by his greed that he despoils the very territory he craves to possess.[27] While Avrom Fleishman, citing the constant emphasis on Kurtz's industriousness and indefatigability, takes the criticism of Kurtz as a perverted conqueror even further, arguing he is designed to show the total bankruptcy of work ethic.[28] That he represents the hypocrisy of the European colonial ideal when it is put into practice is beyond contention.

The Kurtz that Marlow presents at the Inner Station is conspicuously incompatible with Marlow's vision of him. Manipulating the inhabitants of various villages within proximity of his station, to whom he appeared as a demigod, Kurtz presided over war parties that raided the countryside. Despite his penchant for eloquent articulation, which had dominated the admiration of his imperialist peers, Kurtz is never described as using his refined capacity for communication to engage the natives in discourse. Instead, he impaled the heads of natives, perhaps at whom he aimed his roving band of plunderers, upon poles surrounding his residence, presumably for purposes of intimidation. Presiding as a revered warlord over his awe-struck subjects, he used his special standing to satisfy his own greed and lust for power. His grand rhetoric—the desire to exercise his will to exert a "power for

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[27] Parry, *Conrad and Imperialism*, p. 32

[28] Fleishman, *Conrad's Politics*, p. 106

good practically unbounded" (61)—is eroded as he begins to put it into practice. Rationalizing his own "idea," on which he readily devoted himself to with an unselfish belief, he had become the quintessential conqueror.

Marlow, however, is unable to separate the Kurtz he observes from his exceptional capacity for oratory, the ostensible source of his undisputed genius. Following the attack on his steamer, which ironically was ordered by Kurtz, Marlow recalls intense dismay, believing the attack has made it less likely that Kurtz had survived the mysterious calamity that had befallen him. Rationally, he is aware of the demonic deeds wrought by Kurtz, prompting him to admit, "I couldn't be more disgusted if I had travelled all this way for the sole purpose of talking with Mr Kurtz," yet he still affirms, "that was exactly what I had been looking forward to—a talk with Kurtz" (57-58). Marlow had been "told in all the tones of jealousy and admiration that [Kurtz] had collected, bartered, swindled, or stolen more ivory than all the other agents together," though he insists, "that was not the point" (58). The point, he maintains,

> was in his being a gifted creature, and that of all his gifts the one that stood out pre-eminently, that carried with it a sense of real presence, was his ability to talk, his words—the gift of expression, the bewildering, the illuminating, the most exalted and the most contemptible… (58)

Ironically, Marlow believes Kurtz's words carry a "real presence" greater than even that of his actions, which he repeatedly acknowledges to his audience as deplorable. Marlow sees this to be true, as he has detached himself from the real world of objective perception, choosing instead to immerse himself in the creation of his identity in the Congo—his own narrative. Though Marlow had become engrossed in the myth of Kurtz in a subtly different

way than the trader—the grand rhetoric allows Marlow to convince himself of something, while the trader believes Kurtz showed him things—the incantation cast over Marlow provides the same outcome of self-delusion. He describes Kurtz's words as "the most exalted and the most contemptible," mirroring the trader's entranced ambivalence. Despite recognizing the trader as disillusioned, Marlow repeats his mistake: he is intimately aware of Kurtz's savagely violent potential, yet he remains bound by the impossible allure of his idealistic rhetoric and normative vision.

The myth of Kurtz, Marlow's projection of his own fears and desires onto him, had become so central to Marlow's own conception of himself by the time his steamer had been attacked near Kurtz's station that he recalls thinking, "By Jove! it's all over. We are too late; he has vanished—the gift has vanished" (58). The gift is that which his projection of Kurtz provides him: certainty of self. The aural voice, which must be differentiated from the rumored voice that Marlow had incorporated into his conception of Kurtz, is essential only for the credence it will lend to Marlow's vision. Frantically noting, "I will never hear that chap speak after all," Marlow confesses, "I couldn't have felt more of lonely desolation somehow, had I been robbed of a belief or had missed my destiny in life…" (58). Hopelessly beyond differentiating between the Kurtz he had conceived and the Kurtz of his tactile perception, Marlow is not able to discern the former version's importance. He notes that he could not have "felt more of lonely desolation" had he "been robbed of a belief or had missed [his] entire destiny in life" because had he not been able to meet Kurtz, he would have been deprived of the destiny he had envisioned for himself, and thus would have been robbed of a belief.

Marlow's projection of Kurtz overrides the ambivalence he describes feeling toward him. While lamenting his presumed lost opportunity to speak with Kurtz, Marlow alludes to Kurtz's gift of expression as "the pulsating stream of light, or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness" (58). Marlow perceives Kurtz's oratory as capable of both boundless good and ominous gloom; the good, presumably, being the idealistic rhetoric taken literally, and the evil being Kurtz's exploitative deeds. He describes the portentous interpretation as "deceitful," implicitly suggesting the benevolent version as being a more accurate representation of Kurtz's genuine, default state.

Even more significant, however, is his attribution of "the heart of an impenetrable darkness" as the source from which Kurtz's evil flows. In addition to refraining from ascribing "the heart" directly to Kurtz, Marlow frequently refers to the "powers of darkness [that] claimed [Kurtz] for their own" (60). He believed "a heavy, mute spell of the wilderness" had overcome Kurtz, which "seemed to draw him to its pitiless breast by the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts, by the memory of gratified and monstrous passions" (82). The wilderness, embodying, from Marlow's perspective, the pure, uncomplicated savagery inherent to a world absent of human thought and reason, worked as an active force that had made Kurtz its victim. It had "taken him, loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own … He was its spoiled and pampered favorite" (59). Kurtz is responsible for his moral devolution only in the sense that he possessed latent "brutal instincts" and "monstrous passions," the memory of which were evoked by the wilderness. It was "this alone," Marlow was convinced, that "had driven [Kurtz] out to the edge of the forest, to the bush, towards the gleam of fires, the

throb of drums, the drone of weird incantations; this alone had beguiled his unlawful soul beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations" (82). Kurtz, from Marlow's perspective, is beyond culpability for the perverted application of noble and mighty rhetoric. Marlow does not hold him responsible for the awakening of suppressed desires that existed somewhere within him; on the contrary, the spell cast by the wilderness coerced Kurtz into remembering those forgotten instincts. The "fascination of the abomination" referenced by Marlow in his preamble had overcome Kurtz, rendering him hapless in resisting the inevitable path of the colonizer toward "the growing regrets, the longing to escape, the powerless disgust, the surrender, the hate" (7).

Kurtz's salient flaw, in Marlow's eyes, is his inability to remain faithful to the noble ideals he espoused. Though Marlow understands Kurtz had "no conception" of the dormant selfish impulses existing inside him "till he took counsel with this great solitude," he claims the whisper of the wilderness "echoed loud within him because he was hollow at the core" (72). Kurtz did not possess the "inborn strength" (51) that Marlow deems necessary to confront this solitude—he "lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts" (72). Fatally, "there was something wanting in [Kurtz]—some small matter which, when pressing need arose, could not be found under his magnificent eloquence" (72). Without the external controls of legal recourse and a judging public opinion, Kurtz is devoid of the internal fortitude necessary to maintain fidelity to these learned virtues; faced with the foreign desires to which the wilderness solicits his indulgence, Kurtz can not remain faithful to his "magnificent eloquence"—his morally superior, civilized self. Kurtz chose the noble, philanthropic course, and had courageously attempted to implement it within the

most isolated depths of the continent. From Marlow's perspective, his inability to uphold resolute fidelity to the best of his civilization does not spoil the merit of those ideas that he espoused.

Appreciating Kurtz's deplorable flaw, Marlow assigns his misdeeds to those of a man who had lost his way, choosing instead to see him as the personification of his altruistic words. Kurtz took the form of the transcendent peroration found in a report he had written, which had been solicited by the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs and is described by Marlow as "a beautiful piece of writing" (61). In a manuscript obtained by Marlow Kurtz writes, "'[whites] must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings—we approach them with the might as of a deity … By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded'" (61). Contradicting the notion of suppression incorporated into the soliciting society's title, Kurtz did not plan to abuse the advantageous position afforded to him by the white man's divine, and previously unencountered, appearance for his own ends, or any commercial goals pursued by his employer. Abiding by his altruistic sentiments, he planned on using his position of power for a "good practically unbounded." The words appealed to Marlow's own sacrosanct sense of moral duty, prompting him to adopt a wholehearted belief in the merit of Kurtz's stated mission. Continuing reading, Marlow describes:

> from that point on he soared and took me with him. The peroration was magnificent, though difficult to remember, you know. It gave me the notion of an exotic Immensity ruled by an august Benevolence. It made me tingle with enthusiasm. This was the unbounded power of eloquence—of words—of burning noble words. (61)

These two lines, the only primary account of Kurtz's celebrated oratory included by Marlow in his tale, inspired Marlow with such force that they prompted a physical, tingling reaction. Echoing this illusory quality of Kurtz's myth, Marlow describes his rhetoric as "difficult to remember," reinforcing the fundamentally transient nature of words, especially when they exist independent of congruent action, which contradicts the importance he places on them. Ironically, the "unbounded power of eloquence—of words—of burning noble words" described by Marlow does not inspire harmonious application of the words' sentiments; instead, it arouses devotion within himself, and all of those who had heard Kurtz speak. Unbeknownst to Marlow, Kurtz had come to represent for him a demigod figure, providing for him the same effect as the various "ideas" worshipped the countless others he observed who he had deemed delusional or otherwise dismissed as worth emulating.

A Tragic Misunderstanding of 'The Horror'

Enthralled by the spirit of Kurtz's vision, Marlow disregards the postscript, "'Exterminate all the brutes!'" (62), tacked on to the end of the report by Kurtz. He believes the addendum to be uncharacteristic of the contents found within the pages, explaining, "There were no practical hints to interrupt the magic of current phrases, unless a kind of note at the foot of the last page, scrawled evidently much later, in an unsteady hand, may be regarded as the exposition of a method" (61-62). The postscript contradicts the "moving appeal to every altruistic sentiment," prompting Marlow to find it "curious" that Kurtz had

"forgotten all about that valuable postscriptum, because, later on, when he in a sense came to himself, he repeatedly entreated me to take good care of 'my pamphlet' (he called it), as it was sure to have in the future a good influence upon his career" (62). Unable to envisage a man losing his coherence, Marlow assumes that Kurtz had forgotten about the postscript. This decision is impacted by Marlow's existence within his own narrative—the journey he had undertaken to envision a personality or identity for himself in the unfamiliar land that he felt was an accurate representation of himself. As he holds onto his tenuous conception of his own identity, Marlow perceives the final form of Kurtz's evolution, diminished by the forces of the unintelligible environment, as "unsteady" (62). While Marlow is searching for the appropriate representation of himself in his new environment, which must remain consistent with the person he remembers himself being before he came to the Congo, hebelieves Kurtz found that desired conviction once he had been taken from his Inner Station and put on a ship back to Europe, during the time "when he in a sense came to himself."

It is through this self-serving conception of Kurtz which Marlow understands his cry of 'the horror.' Foreshadowing earlier in his tale the man that Kurtz would become, Marlow alludes despicably to the Kurtz he would know, the "flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly" (19). Yet, following his description of the "expression of somber pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror—of an intense and hopeless despair" that Marlow witnessed before Kurtz cried out his final summation, "The horror! The horror!" (86), Marlow offers his own final and enduring analysis of that "flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil," maintaining Kurtz was a "remarkable man" (87). From Marlow's perspective,

Kurtz had changed in his final moments. Marlow describes Kurtz's stare as one "that could not see the flame of the candle, but was wide enough to embrace the whole universe, piercing enough to penetrate all the hearts that beat in the darkness. He had summed up—he had judged. 'The horror!'" (88). This justifies, in Marlow's eyes, the conception of Kurtz as the personification of his altruistic professions. Kurtz presided over the "rapacious and pitiless folly" only because he was lacking in restraint, the moral fortitude to reject the selfish incantations offered by the wilderness. That Kurtz could sum up and judge, and realize the devolution from emissary of civilization to demonic abomination that he had completed, is "a moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats" (88). This epiphany validates Marlow's initial projection of Kurtz, at least in his own eyes, and restores Kurtz as the antithesis of his irrational, impulsively violent peers.

Possessed by his vision of Kurtz, Marlow does not allow his interpretation of his anguished cry to align with his own observations. His linear perception of Kurtz, one which constricts him to envisioning Kurtz only as good or bad, as a "pulsating stream of light" or a "deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness," ignores Kurtz's complexities, and does not allow for acknowledgment of any changes Kurtz might have undergone while living isolated from his former society in an unfamiliar wilderness. Recounting a conversation with the Russian trader, Marlow exclaims, "I don't want to know anything of the ceremonies used when approaching Mr Kurtz," explaining to his audience,

> such details would be more intolerable than those heads drying on the stakes under Mr Kurtz's windows. After all, that was only a savage sight, while I seemed at one bound to have been transported into some lightless region of subtle horrors,

> where pure, uncomplicated savagery was a positive relief, being something that had a right to exist—obviously—in the sunshine. (72)

Details of Kurtz's manipulation of the native population would be "more intolerable than those heads drying on the stakes" because they complicate Marlow's rationalization of Kurtz's appalling actions. Hearing these details would undermine his ability to believe that Kurtz was a remarkable man who simply had fallen prey to the malicious wilderness that inevitably corrupts the colonizer, the place where unspeakable brutality "had a right to exist—obviously—in the sunshine." Though Bernard Paris argues Marlow expresses his horror at Kurtz's behavior in insistent, repetitive terms out of guilt for the affinity he otherwise describes feeling for him,[29] he frequently recounts details of this horrifying behavior—the "pure, uncomplicated savagery"—in order to convince himself, and consequently his audience, that Kurtz's deplorable example was defined by such simple abominations. To claim that Kurtz's power for discourse, which embodies the righteous intentions that Marlow believes redeemed him, had been used to exploit the native population, would complicate his idealized version of Kurtz. Marlow needs this vision, which places it beyond reproach, and ensures his continued detachment even from the reality of his observations he is relaying to his audience.

Kurtz's recovery, however, entails his acknowledgement of these very details Marlow will not even allow himself to consider. In his final moments Kurtz had summed up, as Marlow states, though his insight is far more pervasive than Marlow is willing to entertain. Kurtz comes to see his magnificent eloquence not as a source of boundless good

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[29] Paris, *Conrad's Charlie Marlow*, 48

that he had merely been led astray from, but as the source of all the senseless violence and exploitation found in the land. He understands that, in the absence of the external guidance offered by European society, he had idealized his own arbitrary construct—the "idea" that redeemed his actions. Suresh Raval supports this reading, stating, "[Kurtz] is horrified not just by his own appalling behavior, but by his knowledge that his eloquence and idealism are only masks which hide the truth."[30] Presented with the anarchic disorder found outside of society's comforting imposition of prevailing ideals and networks of belief, Kurtz's own construct, erected to fill this gaping void, serves only to distract him from the truly detestable nature of his dissonant actions.

Kurtz's realization that his righteous intentions do not justify his inhumane actions affirms the hypocrisy of the contemporary European society that Marlow desperately wants to uphold. Civilization is not an end in itself, its purpose consists of its ability to inspire action that conjures with its professed ideals. Kurtz's deterioration into a relentless plunderer in the absence of civilized society demonstrates that society has failed, or worse, is not even engaged, in its primary capacity as a teacher of restraint and promoter of correct, decent action. He is exposed to the lie of civilized society: the idea that its mere existence is proof of its citizens' triumph and inherent greatness. The truth is, it simply mitigates the world's inherent disorder, and guides its citizens to act toward arbitrarily valued ends. Kurtz, in his moment of clarity, sees the world as a formless place devoid of inherent meaning. Elaborating on the fundamental anarchic conditions that necessitate the

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[30] Raval, *The Art of Failure*, 35

realization of arbitrary, illusory constructs, Avrom Fleishman argues, "If we are to give a name to Kurtz's vision of 'the horror,' it might appropriately be *anarchy*: that state of social decomposition at the opposite pole from organic community."[31] The severing of the individual's relationship with a stable order of society, Fleishman explains, awakens latent anarchy within the individual. This dormant uncertainty requires that the individual construct his own coherent identity—his own "idea." These human rationalizations conceived to palliate the disorder, not any atavistic environment or primitive lifestyle or customs, are the wellspring of the darkness that Kurtz acknowledges in his final anguished moments.

This acknowledgment of human mental machinations as the force disconnecting man with his observed reality undermines the notion of progress made by civilized man and suggests the existence of a human likeness between the colonizers and the colonized. Peter Brooks notes that Kurt's cry of 'the horror' "appears as minimal language, language on the verge of reversion to savagery, on verge of a fall from language."[32] While I agree with Brooks' assertion that Kurtz's jumbled language undermines Marlow's description of Kurtz's judgment as a victorious and masterful articulation, I contend his interpretation of Kurtz's grand summation taking the form of an incoherent grunt as a demonstration that the very logic of *Heart of Darkness* is "unspeakable," one which renders language inadequate to describe what happens to the characters in the novella, who, after all, are

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[31] Fleishman, *Conrad's Politics*, 92

[32] Brooks, *Reading For the Plot*, 250

physically separated from the system of human social structures which makes language possible. The form of Kurtz's cry does challenge Marlow's understanding of it—and of Kurtz's character—as its reversion to a savage, primordial form suggests a universal human likeness embedded within Kurtz's realization of the arbitrary means by which humanity imposes order upon its intrinsically anarchic environment.

That Marlow, recalling looking upon Kurtz in his deathbed, describes Kurtz's soul as "satiated with primitive emotions, avid of lying fame, of sham distinction, of all the appearances of success and power" (85) elucidates Marlow's misunderstanding of him. He correctly ascertains that Kurtz is conflicted, but he grossly misstates the opposing forces contained within him. Kurtz does not see the root of his mistake as the simple inability to acknowledge the detestable nature of his actions; he was never attracted to anything inherent to "lying fame" or "all the appearances of success and power." He is appalled by the ease with which he rationalized a justifying code of conduct for his senseless destruction. This sinister capacity for idealizing arbitrary constructs is fundamentally human. That Kurtz's signal for understanding this horrifying truth takes the form of an incoherent grunt undermines Marlow's belief that "primitive emotions" had ever taken hold of Kurtz. Marlow's descriptions of 'primitive' and 'savage' sentiments are just as arbitrary as the illusory human social structures that allow them to be communicated and understood. His inability to perceive outside of his own "idea" denies him the knowledge that Kurtz had condemned the necessity to appeal to any "idea." Tragically, Marlow had also observed this to be true, but he is unwilling to accept the consequences of this truth. Needing to uphold the society from which he derives his own identity as a moral and

civilized person, Marlow's projection of Kurtz facilitates his own hypocrisy: the practice of the self-deception he had noticed and criticized in others.

VI. Kurtz's Eternal Disciple

Any episode following Kurtz's anguished cry, the moment toward which Marlow's tale is pointed ever since he recalls the beginning of his journey to the Congo on the French steamer, is doomed to feel anticlimactic. That is, of course, unless Marlow's existence as a narrator within a larger story is appreciated. Conrad's choice to extend Marlow's exposition beyond Kurtz's dramatic epiphany does not diminish the moment's significance, it only serves to shift his own preoccupation away from any meaning of Kurtz's cry, and focus it toward Marlow's reaction to the knowledge he believes he has gleaned from Kurtz. The application of this wisdom manifests itself in Marlow's meeting with Kurtz's Intended. Elaborating on the importance of this event within the context of the novella in a letter to his publisher William Blackwood, Conrad wrote, "the interview of the man and the girl locks in—as it were—the whole 30,000 words of narrative description into one suggestive view of a whole phase of life, and makes of that story something quite on another plane than an anecdote of a man who went mad in the Centre of Africa."[33] Though Conrad asserts this claim in his trademark cryptic fashion, the quote does support the notion that the novella is primarily concerned with matters other than Kurtz's glorious destruction.

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[33] Letter dated May 31, 1902; Blackburn, ed., *Joseph Conrad: Letters to William Blackwood and David S. Meldrum*, 154

The story is relayed to the reader by Marlow, who, by his self-serving interpretation of Kurtz's horrifying cry and his subsequent lie to Kurtz's intended, unwittingly becomes the object of the critique he believes he is performing on the characters in his story. After eschewing the various comforting delusions employed by his peers to impose order upon unintelligible circumstances in the Congo, Marlow, with his lie, cements his conception of himself—his own "idea"—as a proud emissary and caretaker of his civilization. Oblivious to Kurtz's repudiation of the impulse to subscribe to arbitrary social structures, which only serve to distract the individual from the inherently formless world that exists absent from human perception, Marlow ironically uses his false interpretation of Kurtz's summation to reach the resolution of his futile journey and to justify his reaffirmed belief in the virtue of European society.

A Dishonest Lie

Marlow returns to Europe with a tenuous conception of himself, as he remains incapable of reconciling his genuine belief in the boundless potential for good found within the ideals that underwrite the colonial endeavor with the perverted application of these ideals he witnessed in the Congo. Recalling the immediate aftermath of Kurtz's death, Marlow asserts, "I remained to dream the nightmare out to the end, and to show my loyalty to Kurtz once more" (87). His experience in the Congo was a nightmare because it stripped him of his conviction. Suresh Raval states as much, arguing, "Marlow is a representative of Western culture who is distanced from that culture's grandest claims about itself; he is

utterly devoid of confidence."[34] While Raval claims Marlow has lost his belief in his civilization—and himself—because he has come to see the self as an arbitrary construct rather than one possessing a coherent identity, as I believe Kurtz did, I maintain he has arrived at this point of uncertainty because of his inability to digest the implications of the horrid application of his sacrosanct ideals for his perception of his own identity.

Illuminating the general trajectory of the deconstruction of his conviction, Marlow, while in the unnamed sepulchral city before departing for Africa, describes himself as unsettled by hints of the hypocrisy he would see, but still able to exist within its midst. Upon his return, after seeing this hypocrisy in practice, he recalls, "resenting the sight of people hurrying through the streets to filch a little money from each other, to devour their infamous cookery, to gulp their unwholesome beer, to dream their insignificant and silly dreams" (88). He attributes this intense antipathy to the commonplace individuals' existence as "intruders [upon his thoughts] whose knowledge of life was to me an irritating pretence, because I felt so sure they could not possibly know the things I knew," admitting, "I was not very well at that time" (88-89). Marlow reasonably concludes that he was unduly harsh in condemning the actions of ordinary citizens, who were not exposed to the evident display of their culture's nearly irredeemable contradictions in the Congo, as hopelessly futile. By subtly affirming he "was not very well at that time," however, he implies his belief that he has since become well. Attributing his inexcusable behavior to a "temperature [that] was seldom normal in these days," Marlow explains, in a moment often overlooked

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[34] Raval, *The Art of Failure,* 43-44

by Conrad's critics, that his aunt's attempts to nurse his strength were "beside the mark," as "It was not my strength that wanted nursing, it was my imagination that wanted soothing" (89). This is a key moment in Marlow's narrative, which plainly exposes the impact that the perception of his world has on his mental stability. He acknowledges the discontent he was bound to feel following the traumatic exposure to senseless, unrestrained violence, which also happened to undermine his belief in his most sacred values, and prescribes the solution to rest within his imagination, a mode of perception. Marlow had been driven throughout his journey by an innate desire to create an "idea," a personal narrative to define himself by, that could reconcile his fierce moral values with the baseless exploitation his own society, the origin of his morality, had implicitly sanctioned. At this moment in his exposition he explicitly acknowledges the failure, up until this point, of the imaginative process he had unknowingly undertaken. While he remains unaware of the cognitive rationalizations he is engaged in, he appreciates, on some level, the role that perception will play in his eventual return to stability.

Claiming to have had "no clear perception of what it was I had really wanted," while proposing he might have visited the Intended out of "an impulse of unconscious loyalty" (91), Marlow implies his meeting with the Intended was inevitable and beyond his control. The encounter was unavoidable, though not due to "an impulse of unconscious loyalty." He travels to her doorstep to complete his unresolved imaginative mission, the impulse, which has driven him since the beginning of his expedition to the Congo. While relaying his story to his audience, Marlow believes, in hindsight, he has reached a sufficiently informed state. Despite this he frequently asserts his lasting affinity for Kurtz, statements, which for many

critics comprise the story's essential contradiction, and goes as far to state, "[Kurtz] had one friend at least, and he had conquered one soul in the world that was neither rudimentary nor tainted with self-seeking" (62). As he approaches the Intended's home, Marlow notes the feeling that Kurtz "lived then before me; he lived as much as he had ever lived" (91). Waiting at the door, he describes feeling, "[Kurtz] seemed to stare at me out of the glassy panel—stare with that wide and immense stare embracing, condemning, loathing, all the universe. I seemed to hear the whispered cry, 'The horror! The horror!'" (92). As Ludwig Schanuder notes, Marlow clearly sees his own face, but the implication is that he has taken on Kurtz's features.[35]In this moment immediately before he is to meet the Intended, Marlow remembers Kurtz's whispered cry, and his own accompanying interpretation of it. Affirming the coherency of his narrative, Marlow arrives at the Intended's doorstep to maintain fidelity to his society's justifying and righteous ideals, the importance and redeeming nature of which being the lesson he has learned from Kurtz.

With his lie to the Intended, Marlow appeals to his society's prevailing gender conventions, thereby soothing his imagination through the assumption of the role of chivalric defender of his society's moral superiority. Recalling looking at a picture of the Intended, Marlow immediately describes her "beautiful expression" and "the delicate shade of truthfulness upon those features" (90-91). Seeming "ready to listen without mental reservation, without suspicion, without a thought for herself" (91), she fulfills, from Marlow's perspective, the stereotype of the passive, selfless woman. Ironically, Marlow is

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[35] Schnauder, *Free Will and Determinism in Joseph Conrad's Major Novels*, 146

essentially replaying his earlier conversation with his aunt, during which he avoided confronting his complicity in his society's disingenuous adherence to its righteous goals by projecting the delusions he had undertaken onto her, and onto all of women who are "out of touch with the truth" (14). Bruce R. Stark argues the Intended directed the conversation and coerced Marlow's lie in an attempt to bolster her illusions.[36] This manipulation, I believe, is performed by both parties, however, as Marlow observes the Intended to possess "a mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering" (92). Appreciating this capacity, Marlow recalls,

> bowing my head before the faith that was in her, before that great and saving illusion that shone with an unearthly glow in the darkness, in the triumphant darkness from which I could not have defended her—from which I could not even defend myself. (94.

While his aunt's professions of imperialism's philanthropic pretense, sentiments he had observed to be hollow, causes him to project his guilt onto her, the Intended offers herself as an outlet for Marlow's remorse by assuming the role of the innocent hapless lover needing affirmation of her man's greatness. With this acknowledgement, Marlow explains the rational necessity for him to abide by the code of chivalry to protect the Intended, Kurtz's grieving and helpless lover.

The coercion described by Stark, however, also suits Marlow's own desires, as his manipulation, albeit in a paradoxically passive manner, allows him to justify assuming the identity of a protector of his civilization's moral potential. Suresh Raval explains that the

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[36] Stark, "Kurtz's Intended: the Heart of Darkness," 548

encounter shifts the narrative of Marlow's tale because it "captures his relation to the culture about which he has become so disillusioned."[37] Marlow had previously been unable to rationalize the hypocrisy embodied by the incongruent actions he witnessed in the Congo—the darkness from which he could not even defend himself. With his lie—a noble, albeit ironic, sacrifice, as it is described by Nina Pelikan Straus[38] and countless other critics—Marlow inherits a reason to withhold the frightening truth he observed in Africa from the Intended, his society, and most importantly, himself. Chivalry provides him a reason, and a virtuous one at that, to suppress the memory of the Company agents' divergent actions, which Kurtz, the greatest of the deplorable plunderers, had redeemed with his dramatic summation—his "moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats, by abominable terrors, by abominable satisfactions." Kurtz's flaw, in Marlow's eyes, was his inability to remain faithful to his righteous intentions, and Marlow is unwilling to repeat this mistake by sharing with the Intended the discomforting truth, whose capacity for self-deception, as argued by Raval[39], is the hallmark of her society. From this perspective, the Intended represents, at least for Marlow, the redeeming ignorance of his society. That she can withstand her grief to maintain an unwavering devotion to Kurtz, and the moral superiority that Marlow believes he represents, affirms for Marlow that the Intended, and the civilization she symbolizes, is worth protecting from the ghastly, and fundamentally

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[37] Raval, *The Art of Failure*, 32

[38] Straus, "The Exclusion of the Intended from Secret Sharing in Conrad's Heart of Darkness," 129

[39] Raval, *The Art of Failure*, 32

contradictory, truth of his experience. With his lie, Marlow had finally envisaged a suitable rationalization for the corruption he witnessed of his righteous ideals, which allows him to act as the emissary of his civilization, a role he had wanted to fulfill all along. The lie, and the consequential identity Marlow assumes, not only upholds a consoling fiction for the Intended, as Ludwig Schnauder[40] argues, it supports, and in a sense completes, the arbitrary identity that Marlow has created for himself.

Marlow's explicit statement of his contempt for lying, a quote often cited by critics as evidence that his lie to the Intended was out of character, and thus is the source of the guilt that prompted him to share his story, can actually be understood as an implicit, though unexplored, acknowledgment of the impact that perception, and his need to construct his own narrative, has on his enduring loyalty to Kurtz. When Marlow tells his audience, "There is a taint of death, a flavour of mortality in lies—which is exactly what I hate and detest in the world—what I want to forget" (32), the course of his experience must be considered. His identity possesses a flavor of mortality throughout his time in the Congo, as the hypocritical application of his sacrosanct values undermines his belief in them. He is forced to examine his fundamental conception of himself and his society, and the narrative he creates in order to sustain them—his projection of Kurtz—is, in actuality, a lie. He detested the arbitrary notion of himself—and of his civilization—that he observed in the world, and wanted only to combat the mortality associated with his fractured, diminishing conception of himself, by finding enduring conviction to believe in. He is finally

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[40] Schnauder, *Free Will and Determinism in Joseph Conrad's Major Novels*, 145

unwilling to continue to endure his attempt to reconcile the discrepancies between his idealized account of himself and the reality of his observations, and he eventually abandons his introspective inquiry, with his commitment to projection of Kurtz and his subsequent lie to the Intended, in favor of indulging in the delusions he had previously condemned. Marlow is envious that Kurtz's soul was able to "look within itself" (83); he wants only to escape the mortality of the narratives he employs to realize a coherent identity by finding his own permanent truth. Subconsciously, he maintains Kurtz was a "remarkable man" (87) and a "universal genius" (90) due to his ability to find that conviction as he peered over the edge. Kurtz "had something to say [and] He said it" (88) while Marlow remains guilty of finding "with humiliation I probably would have nothing to say" (87).

Conrad's Critique of Marlow

The moral force of Marlow's exposition is complicated by the ambivalence with which he continues to describe Kurtz through the end of his account. Marlow believed the "heavens would fall upon my head" (96) following the lie, suggesting he thought he had withheld at least some measure of truth by not repeating Kurtz's anguished cry. Yet when he affirms for the Intended that Kurtz was a "remarkable man" (93) he genuinely believes it, and only repeats this phrase, one that he had gone to great lengths to adorn for his audience, to the Intended "unsteadily" (93) because he understands that they find him remarkable for different reasons. Marlow feels that not addressing this discrepancy is dishonest. To have maintained factual accuracy by regurgitating the words 'the horror, the

horror' would have, in this instance, misconstrued the truth as Marlow knows it. Had he not recounted the whole experience in the Congo, which culminated in Kurtz's final judgment, the Intended would not ascribe the same meaning to Kurtz's cry that he does. In this sense, his lie is not that at all, as he believes Kurtz to be an enduring symbol of the moral superiority and idealistic greatness of his civilization; Kurtz was a great man, from Marlow's perspective, thus the Intended should continue to see him as such, and she should be allowed to remain devoted to her society's greatness, of which she saw Kurtz to be a reaffirming example.

It appears that Marlow has reached the point where moral protests or self-assertion must end in silence, or the withholding of his unqualified experience, as Suresh Raval argues.[41] For Marlow to have performed this moral act of restraint, he needs to have intentionally done so, though as he describes his encounter with the Intended to his audience, he undermines the potential existence of any such motives. Relaying his perception of the meeting, he remains ambivalent toward Kurtz, asserting, "There remained only his memory and his Intended—and I wanted to give that up too to the past, in a way—to surrender personally all that remained of him with me to that oblivion which is the last word of our common fate" (91). Before meeting with the Intended, Marlow describes himself as wanting to rid himself not only of Kurtz's memory, but also of his grand judgment, his "moral victory"—"the last word of our common fate." This desire complicates the loyalty to Kurtz, and the redeeming ideals he embodied, that he had

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[41] Raval, *The Art of Failure*, 41

professed earlier, and reveals Marlow as not just ambivalent, but as starkly duplicitous. He believes in his society's noble intentions, as he always has, but cannot forget their horrid application. The lie, and subsequent absence of catastrophic consequences, makes Marlow more comfortable with the role that it had ascribed to him, one that does not mediate his two conflicting impulses so much as it endorses the suppression, or qualification, of one in favor of the transcendent redemption offered by the other.

His moral will, devoid of focused intention, alters nothing. He has brutally shown his audience that their values hold no efficacy outside the physical confines of their community, yet he reaffirms these values. He is aware that Europe does not practice the values it professes, but he remains delusively committed to the notion that those sacrosanct values, which are central to his society's self-description as civilized people, can be effectively translated into virtuous action, even if by promoting this view he is not doing so himself. The only logical conclusion that his audience can have drawn from his tale is that which he has concluded: European society's values are self-justifying, even absent of congruent action. The lie is Marlow's summation—and the climax of Conrad's story. It is the moment when Marlow's driving impulse to uphold his society's self-described identity prevails over his honest attempts at introspection. He tells the story to his audience so that they can fully understand Kurtz's final gasp, and he denies the Intended an accurate account of Kurtz's final words because the fiction is more precisely aligned with the conclusion that he had earned. He does so not out of moral restraint, but because he needs to say *something*. He cannot rationally ascribe significance to his experience without

condemning his society. Being the source from which he derives his own identity and sense of purpose, it is beyond reproach.

VII. 'Savage' Impositions of Order

The implications of the existence of an omniscient narrator outside of Marlow, and the impact this nebulous figure, the narrative's outermost layer, has on the work's consummate assertions, are often left unexplored. This narrator puts forth a strikingly different opinion of imperialism's contemporary iteration than Marlow does, as Tom Henthorne notes[42], which draws into question the enduring impact of Marlow's tale on his audience. The question remains as to what Conrad attributes imperialism's failures, and to what degree he deems imperialism—and the European society that supports it—to be unfit. It seems reckless to ascribe either viewpoint, in its entirety, to Conrad, though he evidently is not endorsing imperialism, or the hypocrisy that perpetuates its incongruent practices, in any fashion. While Conrad's voice cannot be attributed to any one character in the novella, I believe the tension provided by the narrator's framing of Marlow's story illuminates an outlook mired in frustration over the nonexistent possibility for corrective action that can be seen as most accurately reflecting Conrad's boldest assertions.

The narrator's closing remarks place Marlow's tale within the novella's larger story, focusing the work's consummate contentions on the audience's reception of Marlow and

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[42] Henthorne, *Conrad's Trojan Horses*, 128

his tale. Tom Henthorne observes similarities between the narrator's opening and closing statements regarding the position of the *Nellie* upon the River Thames, suggesting Marlow's tale is received without moral or practical consequence. Before Marlow begins his tale, the narrator describes the old river "after ages of good service done to the race that peopled its bank," as "spread out in the tranquil dignity of a waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth" (4). Following Marlow's stark revelation of the utter lack of humanity exhibited by Europe's courageous colonizers, the narrator closes Conrad's work with strikingly similar language, stating, "the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed somber under an overcast sky—seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness" (96).

I do not interpret the similarities between the narrator's foreword and framing of Marlow's story as a veiled radical indictment of imperialism, suggesting England's tranquil waterway, far from being an originator of light, is actually the source of darkness, as argued by Henthorne.[43] There are cosmetic differences between the two passages; the day "was ending in a serenity of still and exquisite brilliance" with the sky "a benign immensity of unstained light" (4) before Marlow began to speak, whereas a new day had begun "under an overcast sky" following the conclusion of his tale. Evidently, Marlow's tale is not entirely neutral, with its brutal depiction of far off lands contradicting their popularly consumed romanticized version. This stark depiction inspires the same reaction within the audience as it does Marlow: an inscrutable pang of guilt that cannot be reconciled with their self-

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[43] Henthorne, *Conrad's Trojan Horse*, 128

descriptions as civilized emissaries of progress. The shift to a dull sky, one that dampens the sailor's vigor but is not a menacing threat to the successful outcome of his mission, signifies nothing beyond this ominous, though elusive, remorse. Before Marlow's exposition, the *Nellie* awaits only "the turn of the tide" (3), while at its conclusion the ship has "lost the first of the ebb" (96), but is otherwise ready to chart its course "into the heart of an immense darkness." The narrator, who prefaces the tale as "one of Marlow's inconclusive experiences" (8), and boasts of London as the "biggest, and greatest, town on earth" (3), extolling the virtue of the "Hunters for gold or the pursuers of fame" (5) of whom the nation is proud, still perceives the darkness as being external. Like Marlow, the narrator remains uncertain of the extent of his society's culpability. Extending Marlow's realization of Kurtz's horror, the logic of which he subsequently applies when qualifying his experience to the Intended, reassures his audience that fidelity to their righteous philanthropic pretenses is all that is needed to avoid the darkness that had befallen Marlow's characters. This self-justifying approach, one which avoids criticism of their insular professions of greatness, implicitly sanctions the stifling of African humanity that Chinua Achebe detects[44]. Marlow's mercantile-oriented audience is free to resume suppressing foreign customs and exploiting the resources of far off lands, so long as they avoid senseless violence and over indulgence.

Marlow's hypocritical summation establishes him, in the eyes of his audience, as an object of the critique he has performed throughout his story, thereby justifying the

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[44] Achebe, "Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness"

narrator's expressions of remorse devoid of any sense of culpability. Immediately following Marlow's exasperated plea for his audience to understand that "We live, as we dream—alone" (33), a justification for his obsession with Kurtz, the narrator interjects in an often overlooked passage, cryptically stating:

> It had become so pitch dark that we listeners could hardly see one another. For a long time already he, sitting apart, had been no more to us than a voice. There was not a word from anybody. The others might have been asleep, but I was awake. I listened, I listened on the watch for the sentence, for the word, that would give me the clue to the faint uneasiness inspired by this narrative that seemed to shape itself without human lips in the heavy night-air of the river. (33)

The narrator is made uneasy by Marlow's story precisely because, he, like Marlow, cannot articulate the specific reason for his discomfort. His apprehension is grounded in its paradoxical appearance as transcendent, existing beyond the bounds of humanity—it "seemed to form itself without human lips"—yet so essential to the every-day human experience. The narrator's interjection, immediately following Marlow's description of Kurtz as illusory, implicitly compares Kurtz's appearance to Marlow with that of Marlow to his audience. Marlow is as arbitrary as the ideologies conformed to by the Company agents he describes with indignation, and as illusory as the projection of Kurtz that seduces him, prompting him to resign himself to the existence encompassed by self-delusion that, until his lie to the Intended, he had desperately sought to avoid.

Intuitively Marlow knows this about himself, and that his society's self-description as a civilized and moral people is undermined by its continued support for the hypocritical application of its ideology in the Congo. J. Hillis Miller attributes Marlow's inability to reconcile his observations with his idealized world to constant discrepancies between his

nearer and further vision, which evoke within him conflicting impulses to live in his experience and to lift his eyes beyond his experiences in search of their larger meaning.[45] Upon leaving Europe, Marlow's immediate vision is made acutely aware of the disorder that exists beyond the reach of his society's social structures, while his further vision is unwilling to accept the implications of his actions: the bankruptcy of his society's underpinnings, its professions of its own moral superiority and greatness.

Marlow's unwillingness to examine his society's sustaining assumptions hearkens to an aforementioned reference to Nic Panagopoulos' astute assertion that Conrad "shared with [Arthur] Schopenhauer the basic assumption that the world of the senses is devoid of substance or meaning save that which the individual projects onto it in the act of perception."[46] The primary function of society is to allow the human mind to ascribe significance to this natural world devoid of inherent meaning through the elevation of social institutions that arbitrarily provide structure. Marlow attempts to explain to his audience the necessity of these arbitrary constructs and narratives to upholding the human ability to perceive and project meaning—he alludes to the importance of a devotion to efficiency to saving the colonizer from the 'midst of the incomprehensible' in his preamble, expresses his detestation of the mortality of lies, and attempts to impart that before he met Kurtz, he appeared to him as only a word, a shadowy myth. This arbitrary act of perception is so fundamental to his thought process that he is unable to remove himself from it to

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[45] Miller, *Poets of Reality*

[46] Panagopoulos, *The Fiction of Joseph Conrad,* 19

articulate its importance to his audience—it remains inscrutable to him, and to them. That Kurtz, in his final moments, is able to acknowledge the impact that human social constructs and personal narratives had on his ability to rationalize the merit of his deplorable, utterly savage actions, clarifies, and affirms, his frequent portrayal as a "universal genius" (90).

Though Conrad's pessimistic vision is often depicted as elemental nihilism, I believe it can be more aptly described as frustration regarding the self-sustaining nature of ideology. That is to say, the fundamental assumptions of human social orders are precluded from examination, even when the application of their core ideals produces evident brutality and hypocrisy, as they are necessary for people to assign meaning to an inherently formless world. Marlow, an idealist who believes himself to be redeemed by his righteous intentions, is nonetheless complicit with imperialism, and thereby perpetuates the common practice of placing valued ideological constructs beyond reproach. In *Heart of Darkness*, however, Conrad does not seek to undermine any political or ideological field, he aspires to explore the fundamental human conditions that support the creation and continued human reliance upon such fields. In asserting that humanity's fundamental existence is within 'the midst of the incomprehensible,' he contends that the European colonizers did not travel to Africa possessing any inherent need to dominate others, they only suppressed the native population to fulfill the learned imperialist dynamic between the colonizer and the savage brutes, which allowed them to maintain their own conceptions of their respective identities in the foreign, unintelligible environment. These

impositions of order are the wellspring of darkness within the novella, and are intended to be seen as far more savage than anything the Europeans encountered in the Congo.

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