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Constructing Intelligibility Within the Unintelligible: Identity as an Enabling Restriction in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim*, and *The Secret Agent*

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Geoff Gilbert

B.A., Emory University, 2012

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Abstract

Constructing Intelligibility Within the Unintelligible: Identity as an Enabling Restriction in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness, Lord Jim,* and *The Secret Agent*

By Geoff Gilbert

While identification of the paradox that pervades Joseph Conrad's fiction is significant, it is even more important to ask what it is doing. Conrad posits the human experience as inscrutable. His characters, forced to confront this uncertain world, always fail. Though this sense of inevitable failure has invited interpretation of Conrad as pessimistic—and even nihilistic—there is a recognizable pattern that governs the failure he presents. Conrad's emphasizes the existence of his characters within society, the context within which they act. The social systems that organize their world, whether they are moral or legal, always fail them. Revealed as insufficient, the systems are gestured to as the source of paradox and contradiction in Conrad's fictional worlds. I argue, however, that, while it is significant that these systems are flawed, it is even more telling that Conrad's characters never cease to rely on them.

Conrad portrays identity as the human quality that does not allow his characters to escape the need to rely on these hopelessly flawed systems. Identity is positioned as the narrative by which the individual understands himself and the world around him; it allows the individual to face the uncertainty that Conrad sees in the world. Identity, however, is not able to transcend the social systems that organize the world, as they are the only tools available that can make the world appear intelligible. Marlow is Conrad's only character who seems capable of identifying this restriction, yet he is unable to face the uncertain world without identity. That Marlow's critical capacity falls short, as he chooses to retreat within a consoling fiction rather than attempt to imagine criteria independent from the ordering systems of his society by which he can identify himself, exhibits the totalizing nature of the inscrutability that, for Conrad, defines humanity. Identity enables the individual to function within an uncertain world, but it also restricts him from being able to understand that world and the forces that act upon him within it.

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Contents

Introduction

Over the years Joseph Conrad's work has become inextricably associated with paradox, and rightfully so. Scholars frequently point to Conrad's peculiar biography as the wellspring of the uncertainty that pervades his work—his birth into the Polish aristocracy; the revolutionary zeal and early death of his parents; his lengthy career as a sailor and subsequent late start to his writing career at the age of thirty-two; his decision to write in English, his third language; and his tenuous relationship with the society of his adopted England.[1] Conrad's fiction certainly possesses the deep skepticism one might expect to find in a perpetual nomad. He never orients himself in opposition to any particular establishment, choosing instead to take aim at the very notion of authority. Despite authoring *Nostromo* and *Under Western Eyes,* major works of fiction that criticize the Western European political and social perspective but refuse to offer an alternative, Conrad, as Avrom Fleishman explains, is not overtly political.[2] The enigmatic world of Conrad's fiction refuses to elevate any particular perspective, and in doing so it prompts a reflexive turn toward the very machinations by which meaning is formed.

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[1] The work of Zdzislaw Najder elucidates Conrad's atypical background and the myriad influences it made available to him. In this passage I am drawing specifically upon Najder's essay "Conrad in His Historical Perspective," collected in Ted Billy's *Critical Essays on Joseph Conrad*.

[2] In the introduction of his book, *Conrad's Politics*, Fleishman writes, "[Conrad's] novels must be read as dramatic expressions of a complex political imagination, and are therefore not reducible to political ideology . . . Conrad was open to the prevailing political ideas of his time, those which it inherited from a century-old debate on the bases of social philosophy, and . . . the fiction which derived from his speculations was more complicated than received opinion would have it."

Conrad's social and political inclinations are best illustrated by Jacques Berthoud's analysis of the reliance of Conrad's recurring character Charlie Marlow on positive illusion in *Heart of Darkness*:

> [T]o affirm the values of the active life without blurring [Marlow's] sense of its underlying contradictions . . . is more than the culminating idea of an extraordinary complex and concentrated work of fiction. It is also one of the central preoccupations of the major works of the first half of Conrad's career as a novelist, enabling him to do full justice to the paradoxes within his own nature—to his urge towards scepticism and to his need for faith.[3]

Conrad is not willing to neatly condemn ideals as empty and worthless. He is able to acknowledge the tenuous nature of any romantic conception of a morally governed reality while appreciating the profound influence moral ideas, no matter how illusory, could exercise on himself and those around him. Conrad could never envision an alignment of the worlds of ideas and observed reality, nor could he ever escape the need to do so.

Perhaps Conrad's existence as an outsider, devoid of any perspective with which he naturally aligned, made the incongruence of his observations particularly apparent. Each of the three novels I will examine foregrounds the discord between the reality of the society Conrad observes and its conception of itself, an authorial position which imbues his fiction with an ironic tone that suggests the impossibility of reconciling such an incongruity. The dearth of stability—be it moral, political or

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[3] "Heart of Darkness," *Marlow*, ed. Harold Bloom. Though I believe Berthoud too easily conflates Marlow's position with that of Conrad, and despite my disagreement with his hasty distinction of Conrad's major works into halves, two positions I will seek to subvert throughout this work, I find Berthoud's identification of one of Conrad's major paradoxes—his simultaneous urge toward skepticism and need for faith—to be profound. Conrad frequently disavows European claims of enlightenment and moral authority, but he is never able to envision a society cohering upon any other grounds.

philosophical—in his fiction provides it with a seemingly endless capacity for moral and social criticism. Najder identifies Conrad as "one of the leading pioneers of moral thinking in fiction," explaining, "[to] a large extent it is to him that we owe the vision of man as facing the indifferent or even hostile universe with his own code of behavior, his own concept of moral order."[4] Echoing the importance of moral considerations to Conrad's work, Suresh Raval contends, "[Conrad's] fiction is almost always concerned with problems of a social, historical, and moral nature, and with the institutions that constitute, sustain, and complicate forms of life in society."[5]

Conrad engages the moral dilemmas that provided complexity to his observed reality, but he is never able to resolve them, or even to privilege one response to the breakdown of moral authority over any other. Critical interpretations of this uncertainty in Conrad's work range from assertions of ambiguity that amounts to emptiness to contentions of radical nihilism. Conrad's perspective is certainly pessimistic, but the function of this negativity within his fiction remains unresolved. Harold Bloom asserts, "There are no victories in Conrad, whether transcendent or immanent."[6] This line of argument is difficult to contest, considering the near unanimous destruction of the protagonists in his major works.[7]

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[4] "Conrad in His Historical Perspective," *Critical Essays on Joseph Conrad*, ed. Ted Billy, p. 24.
[5] *The Art of Failure: Conrad's Fiction*, p. 3.
[6] "Introduction," *Marlow*, ed. Harold Bloom, p. 3.
[7] By 'major works' I mean the five novels upon which the majority of scholarly attention has been focused—*Heart of Darkness, Lord Jim, The Secret Agent, Nostromo*, and *Under Western Eyes.* I write that the destruction of the protagonists in these works is near unanimous because of the unclear position Marlow assumes in both *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim*, one I will seek to explain throughout this work.

Regarding the negativity produced by the failure of Conrad's protagonists, Bloom contends, "If truth is too dark altogether, then we turn to a fiction, not to evade the truth entirely, but to pay some final tribute to the courage of our broken idealism."[8] Idealism can only be broken, though, if it were ever attainable. For Conrad, as evidenced by Marlow's unwavering belief in his enduring adherence to his 'idea' and Stein's nebulous marshaling of reality and the idealism attained through imagination, this was never the case. In fact, much of the hypocrisy evident in Conrad's fiction is a product of the unavoidable tension arising out of his society's faith in a morality that could never actually be realized.[9]

Deprived of a system of ideals and beliefs that accords with his observed reality, Conrad's fictional worlds appear as vertiginous amalgamations of insufficient rationales for conduct. Writing on Jim, Bernard Paris posits, "[Jim is] [a]n illustrative character, [who] seems to embody some of Conrad's themes: that there are many truths but no Truth, that we live in a world of doubts, that life and people are enigmatic."[10] Absent the possibility of identifying any prevailing notion of truth, the elevation of any action or belief over any other becomes problematic. It is this denial of all possible answers that Alan Warren Friedman identifies as the defining characteristic of both *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim*.[11] Any reader seeking a coherent rationale to explain the failures of Conrad's characters, as we all are

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[8] "Introduction," *Marlow*, ed. Harold Bloom, p. 3.
[9] Conrad's most explicit fictional example of the inability for European morality to be realized is that of Jim. Branded as dishonorable for his desertion of the *Patna*, Jim is only able to restore his embodiment of his society's maritime ideals, at least in his own eyes and those of Marlow, by allowing himself to be killed for his role in the events that lead to the death of Dain Waris.
[10] *Conrad's Charlie Marlow*, p. 77.
[11] "Conrad's Picaresque Narrator," *Marlow*, ed. Harold Bloom, p. 78.

bound to do, is left only with the conspicuous themes of doubt and uncertainty. Accordingly, Raval describes Conrad's work as an "art [that] refuses to offer comforting certitudes."[12]

Since Conrad does not provide an overriding purpose by which meaning can be ascribed to action and belief, emphasis shifts to the individual's navigation of the uncertain and morally ambiguous world. In *Conrad's Existentialism*, Otto Bohlmann identifies various strains of existential thought in Conrad's fiction that serve to foreground the experience of the individual.[13] He interprets the lack of any uniform system of value in Conrad's work as commentary on the absence of any inherent meaning found in the world independent of human subjectivity, and even states that Conrad is a great novelist precisely because he does not possess any theory as to the purpose of life.[14]

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[12] *The Art of Failure*, p. 17.

[13] *Conrad's Existentialism*. Bohlmann writes: "[T]he existential attitudes most fully discernable in Conrad . . . in brief are Conrad's approach to the tragic tension between limited man and the indifferent universe he inhabits; to the supremacy of emotional life over rationality, focusing on man in the whole range of his existing as a subjective interpreter of the world; to the role of feelings such as alienation, despair, nausea and anxiety; to man's quest for authentic selfhood (with its attendant questions of freedom, decision, action and responsibility); and to interpersonal relationships and the qualities they demand" (xv, xvi). I am foregrounding existentialist interpretations of Conrad in order to highlight his focus on the individual's experience of reality. My reading of Conrad is not existentialist, though, as I do not believe he is seeking a more authentic form of existence by which the world can or should be organized. Conrad, like the existentialist mode of thought, sees meaning as formed by the individual, but his fiction pursues the perspective the individual must assume in order to participate in and benefit from society. This perspective, identity, is posited here as a sacrifice that affords the individual participation in the community, but restricts his ability to examine the beliefs of that society.

[14] *Conrad's Existentialism.* Bohlmann writes: "Conrad shares the existentialist view that any interpretation of the world simply reflects an individual's experience of it at

The individual's imposition of purpose upon his chaotic and inscrutable environment, the identity by which he identifies himself,[15] becomes the subject of Conrad's narratives. Of *Lord Jim*, Bruce Johnson, who is also working within the existentialist tradition, writes, "In the end *Lord Jim* is about the isolation of a human soul, not human community, not even the love between two people."[16] Jim has become estranged not only from his society, which has condemned him as cowardly and unfit for maritime service, but also from himself. In order to re-attain identification with his society's naval ideals of honor and service, Jim must pursue them to their absurd extremes. Jim's death, his "marriage to a shadowy ideal of conduct,"[17] is cast as a necessity of the human condition. Value in Conrad's fiction, Johnson notes, "arises from a strong sense of identity and possibly in no other way."[18]

For Conrad, the world and the people who operated within it possessed a complexity beyond comprehension. Though European morality could also be used to justify the brutal suppression of foreign peoples, Conrad, like his character

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a particular moment" (8). The second reference can be found on the first page of the text.

[15] Identity is a term that is crucial to my argument. I define identity as the individual's construction of a system of meaning that allows him to conceive an image of himself. Identity possesses an undeniable social component, as the individual's system of meaning unavoidably interacts with the ideology of the society in which he lives. I will draw attention to social categories from which identity can be derived—the political, professional, domestic—during my discussion of *The Secret Agent* in the second section, but I use the term identity primarily to refer to the framework of significance that makes experience intelligible for the individual.

[16] *Conrad's Models of Mind*, p. 65.

[17] *Lord Jim*, p. 318. All citations from *Lord Jim* are from the Signet Classics edition cited at the end of the paper. Future references will appear parenthetically.

[18] *Conrad's Models of Mind*, p. 66.

Marlow, was unable to condemn the society that embodied such hypocrisy as unequivocally wrong. The world of ideals represented the satisfaction of his need for faith. Rather than justifying any notion of radical nihilism often derived from his fiction, the "irreconcilable antagonisms," as Conrad described the discord between mankind's rational principles and his chaotic reality, "make our life so enigmatic, so burdensome, so fascinating, so dangerous—so full of hope."[19] Perhaps the hope these fundamental paradoxes offered Conrad was the ability to fall back upon an even higher faith, one predicated upon humanity's overriding ignorance—"[t]he only indisputable truth of life."[20] Though Conrad may have found solace in his embrace of paradox, his readers are left only with the dizzying complexity that prompted him to assume that position. The individual construction of purpose and value is foregrounded as an antidote to the inherently meaningless and chaotic world, but there still remains a conspicuous absence of any belief system through which various perspectives can be marshaled.

Building on the seminal Conradian criticism of Ian Watt and Cedric Watts, an increasing amount of recent scholarship explores the effect that the absence of a prevailing perspective in Conrad's work has on the reader. Watt pursues the bearing of certain literary devices, particularly symbolic deciphering and delayed decoding, that infuse Conrad's fiction with an ambiguity the reader must parse through to derive significance.[21] In emphasizing Conrad's "uncompromising commitment to the

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[19] Taken from a letter Conrad wrote to the *New York Times*. The full quotation can be found in Benita Parry's *Conrad and Imperialism: Ideological Boundaries and Visionary Frontiers*.
[20] Taken from the same letter noted above.
[21] *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*

actual complexities of human experience," Watts, too, identifies in Conrad's work a preoccupation with the relativism of perception, an effect he argues is developed through ambiguity, irony and contradiction.[22] More recent scholarship has coopted previous emphasis on the production of paradox in Conrad's fiction in order to analyze the reader's role in the production of meaning, namely his response to Conrad's narratives mired in hypocrisy and paradox.[23] Claude Maisonnat aptly summarizes this critical turn: "it is the self-reflexive nature of Conrad's texts that appeals to thinkers, insofar as it also questions the role of the interpreter in the reading process, and highlights the conditions implied by his methodological procedures, whether they are conscious or not, acknowledged or not."[24]

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[22] *A Preface to Conrad*, p. 55. In addition to *A Preface to Conrad* I am drawing upon Watts' essay "Conrad's Covert Plots and Transtextual Narratives," which can be found in *Critical Essays on Joseph Conrad*, a collection of scholarship on Conrad edited by Ted Billy. Conrad, Watts argues, produced the ironic tone that defines his work through three techniques geared toward disrupting the reader's expectations: the use of a reductive perspective that shows less than the full amount of what is happening in the world of the story; a frustrating context that appears to render unattainable the goal of activity; and delayed decoding (a term he attributes to Ian Watt), a technique by which Conrad confronts the reader with an effect while delaying knowledge of its cause. Watts' criticism began to illuminate the means by which Conrad produces paradox, and is, in my humble estimation, one of the primary forbearers, along with Watt, to more recent scholarship that explores the centrality of Conrad's treatment of perception in his stories.

[23] The work of Vincent Pecora ("Heart of Darkness and the Phenomenology of Voice"), Paul Wake (*Conrad's Marlow: Narrative and Death in 'Youth,' Heart of Darkness, Lord Jim and Chance*) and Nidesh Lawtoo ("The Horror of Mimesis: Echoing Lacoue-Labarthe") each engages the reader's interaction with Conrad's production of paradox. Each emphasizes the dissemination of narrative authority in Conrad's work and the role this breakdown plays in prompting the reader to participate in the construction of meaning. Considered from this perspective, Conrad's fiction appears to be focused on its own interpretation, an activity all readers must partake in.

[24] "The Voice of Darkness," p. 164. *Conrad's Heart of Darkness and Contemporary Thought*, ed. Nidesh Lawtoo.

Conrad's fiction becomes one preoccupied with the production of the various fictions that sustain life. By subverting the reader's expectation for cogent meaning, Conrad emphasizes how the creation of value and purpose is a narrative process. The identities of both the individual and his society are thus portrayed as illusory, albeit necessary, stories that we tell ourselves. While these narratives provide the benefit of allowing the individual to make sense of the inherently formless and chaotic world, they also preclude the capacity for self-examination necessary to curb the ills and excesses produced by his society's inevitably myopic ideology. Encompassing virtually the entire foundation of the individual's subjective response to the world, ideology thus appears as totalizing. Conrad, as Edward Said explains, discovered "that the chasm between words saying and words meaning was *widened,* not lessened, by his talent for words written."[25] In order to achieve his delicate objective of illuminating the fictitious foundations of personal and social identity he makes his stories nearly unintelligible.

My thesis will explore Conrad's narrative choices and techniques through which his fiction reflexively identifies the inescapability of identity and the ideologies from which identity is derived. The first section emphasizes the contribution of the setting of his novels—both physical and ideological—to the production of a world defined by uncertainty and lacking inherent meaning. The second section analyzes Conrad's treatment of identity, the response of the individual and society to the formless objective reality. This response is posited as delimiting, as its necessity to the individual's comprehension of the world places it

[25] "Conrad: The Presentation of Narrative," *Critical Essays on Joseph Conrad*, ed. Ted Billy, p. 29.

beyond examination. By presenting identity as the individual's response to an inherently formless natural world, Conrad problematizes the construction and communicability of meaning. This problematization foregrounds the narrative process by which meaning is formed, thus prompting the reader to examine that process.

My choice to restrict my consideration of Conrad's work to *Heart of Darkness, Lord Jim,* and *The Secret Agent* is one of practicality—novels such as *Nostromo* or *Under Western Eyes* could just as easily have been included within my analysis. I do not believe any divisions should be drawn within Conrad's canon, whether they be on the grounds of story content, narrative form or style, or political orientation. I maintain that throughout his body of work Conrad remains preoccupied primarily by the ineffable perplexities of the subjective human experience, the irreconcilable tension between his need for faith and the impossibility of a universal system of meaning capable of satisfying that insatiable desire. Perhaps this is why, in the words of Frederic Jameson, nearly nine decades after his death Conrad's position within the literary annals "is still unstable, undecidable, and his work unclassifiable…"[26]

[26] *The Political Unconscious*, p. 198.

Contextualizing Failure: The Paradoxical Creation of Meaning

Conrad's fiction is undeniably pessimistic. His characters frequently fail, and amidst a world of instability he repeatedly refuses to valorize, or even rationalize, their failure.[27] Failure in Conrad's fiction, however, must be contextualized. As J. Hillis Miller explains, Conrad "sees civilization as an arbitrary creation, resting on no source of value outside humanity."[28] Though this perspective portrays the foundations of human civilization as illusory, a theme that I believe echoes throughout Conrad's work, it also establishes mankind's existence within a broader, non-human world. Seen from this distance, civilization becomes a distinctly human response to a natural world devoid of value, at least as we are able understand it. That this response is fraught with contradictions that produce inescapable moral predicaments is only part of the story[29]; despite its imperfections, civilization is at

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[27] In *Free Will and Determinism in Joseph Conrad's Major Novels*, Ludwig Schnauder asserts, "In Joseph Conrad's novels the majority of protagonists fail in a more or less spectacular manner in what they attempt to achieve" (7). Though this will certainly appear self-evident to most, if not all, of Conrad's readers, the ubiquity of failure in Conrad's fiction prompts us to attempt to understand and explain his pessimism. Though Schnauder argues, "this list of failures suggests that Conrad's characters have little control over their lives" (7), I believe Conrad is exploring the very possibility of control. Absent any given goal to act toward, the existence of any parameters for such control becomes very problematic.

[28] "From *Poets of Reality*," *The Secret Agent: A Casebook Edited by Ian Watt*, p. 182. Though Miller is referring specifically to *The Secret Agent*, I believe this shrewd analysis can be applied more generally to the totality of Conrad's work.

[29] In *The Art of Failure: Conrad's Fiction*, Suresh Raval writes: "Conrad criticism characteristically probes his work for ambiguities and paradoxes and their relation to the moral implications for human action. The consequence of this sort of inquiry has been that some critics see a pervasively dark and nihilistic attitude in nearly all his major fiction, whereas other critics see a robust common sense which helps restrain and qualify the nihilistic vision of life" (p. 3). I believe that contextualizing Conrad's fiction as taking place within human civilization, which is unavoidably arbitrary, reconciles these divergent opinions. Society is a practical response to the formless natural world; it allows humanity to cope with and understand its relative

its core the necessarily fictitious basis for human meaning. Consideration of man's arbitrary creation—the conditions that demand his imposition of purpose upon his inscrutable environment, the illusory origins of these projections and the false sense of stability they produce—must bear on all readings of Conrad's work.

For Conrad, anarchy is the fundamental condition of man's place within the world.[30] Society is mankind's subjective response to the absence of inherent order, order which is necessary for the construction of systems of meaning. Conrad's persistent, though easily overlooked, allusions to the natural setting of his stories accentuate the disorder inherent in the world, the context within which his characters act. Scrutinizing anthropomorphic accounts of nature, Conrad's representations of the interactions between man and the natural world evoke Friedrich Nietzsche's argument for an irreproachable divide between man and the objects of his perception. In his essay "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense," Nietzsche writes:

> Generally it seems to me that the correct perception—which would mean the full and adequate expression of an object in the subject—is something contradictory and impossible; for between two absolutely different spheres, such as subject and object are, there is no causality, no correctness, no

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insignificance. Hypocrisy arises when society forgets that it does not rest upon stable foundations and that it is constantly engaged in the constructing of meaning and purpose.

[30] In Conrad's work, social and political institutions impose intelligibility upon the fundamentally chaotic and anarchic state of the world. In *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim* Conrad explores the morality produced by modern European societies by physically placing his characters beyond the reach of the societal institutions that cultivate its moral ideology. Writing on the iconic character of Kurtz, Avrom Fleishman argues, in *Conrad's Politics*, "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" (92). Conrad is frequently drawing attention to this fundamental condition of disorder that modern civilization obscures.

> expression, but at most an *aesthetic* way of relating, by which I mean an allusive transference, a stammering translation into a quite different language.[31] (Nietzsche's italics)

In Conrad's work, this inherent division—the depiction of the natural world as an entity independent from the people who populate it—emphasizes mankind's ephemerality and relative insignificance; his characters' understanding of the natural world is revealed as one of the subjective creations of civilization. Though Conrad never ceases to explore the moral consequences of his characters' actions and those of the society that produces them, his separation of man from the natural world emphasizes the inherent lack of extant order, the only foundation upon which moral analysis can be made.

Conrad frequently calls into question man's superiority over his environment by establishing the natural world as a brooding force opposing human endeavors. In

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[31] "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense," *Critical Theory,* ed. Robert Dale Parker, p. 94. I do not contend that Conrad wrote with Nietzsche in mind; I only seek to argue that Nietzsche's ideas, primarily his theory of the foundational metaphor, resonates within Conrad's fiction. Any attempt to detect Conrad's relation to Nietzsche is restricted to his rare and isolated references to Nietzsche, though these few recorded comments make it clear that Conrad was aware of Nietzsche's philosophy and that he disagreed with much of what he knew of Nietzsche's ideas. David W. Tutein's *Joseph Conrad: An Annotated Bibliography* makes note of Conrad's contention with what he saw as Nietzsche's mad individualism and affirms that Conrad had considered Nietzsche's conception of the superman (75). These references to Nietzsche, found in personal letters Conrad had written, fail to offer any articulation of Conrad's understanding of Nietzsche. George Butte's essay, "What Silenus Knew: Conrad's Uneasy Debt to Nietzsche," acknowledges the cursory nature of Conrad's recorded thoughts on Nietzsche's philosophy. This, he contends, leaves us without any specific historical connections between the two men, aside from Conrad's vague dislike of what he knew of Nietzsche's thought. I also draw upon Edward Said's essay, "Conrad and Nietzsche," which identifies three similarities that link the two together: 1) the view of language as perspective, 2) their shared sense of intellectual adventure, which leads to the discovery of inevitable antithesis to be found everywhere in human existence, 3) emphasis on the inconclusive experience.

Lord Jim Conrad writes, "The tumult and the menace of wind and sea now appeared very contemptible to Jim, increasing the regret of his awe at their inefficient menace" (5). For Jim, the sea possesses a "sinister violence of intention," and its whims present "unintelligible brutality" (7). Mirroring Nietzsche's theory of the division between subject and object, Jim can only understand his environment by personifying it. He assumes the sea's activity to be aimed at himself and, more generally, at people. Given man's commercial use of the sea, bad weather seems inefficient. Instead of accepting man's dependence on the sea, Jim ascribes to it sinister intentions.

Conrad associates this anthropomorphic understanding of nature with the illusory basis of civilization. Echoing Jim's conception of nature, Marlow, in *Heart of Darkness*, describes the surrounding wilderness as a "great wall of vegetation, an exuberant and entangled mass of trunks, branches, leaves, boughs, festoons, motionless in the moonlight, [that] was like a rioting invasion of soundless life" (36).[32] Solipsism here is expressed through Marlow's appeal to metaphor. Describing the jungle as the invading force, despite his own participation in a literal invasion of the Congo's land and its people, Marlow, like Jim, can understand nature only in relation to himself.[33] He recognizes the jungle as a "crested" force that is

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

[33] Regarding man's understanding of himself in relation to the surrounding world, Nietzsche writes: "[Man] designates only the relations of things to human beings, and in order to express them he avails himself of the boldest of metaphors. The stimulation of a nerve is first translated into an image: first metaphor! The image is then imitated by sound: second metaphor! And each time there is a complete leap

"ready to topple over the creek, to sweep every little man of us out of his little existence" (36), though he can only describe its significance through a metaphorical depiction of nature as a rioting invasion. Marlow's explicit acknowledgement of mankind's relative insignificance is supported by his appeal to metaphor, the only language through which it can be expressed.

Aside from his recognition of man's tenuous position within the natural world, Marlow introduces an awareness of temporality with regard to the environment, an allusion that will question the narrative of progress that is driving the European colonial impulse. Following his description of the jungle as a brooding force that is biding its time, waiting for its inevitable triumph over man, Marlow recalls a vision of an ichthyosaurus, an extinct marine reptile that presumably would have frequented the same river in prehistoric times, "taking a bath of glitter in the great river" (36). This evocation of primordial human history, Ian Watt argues, is "part of Conrad's reflection of a wider, though indirect, aspect of evolutionary theory in *Heart of Darkness*."[34] His incorporation of a long-extinct animal into Marlow's present scene opens his analysis of the relation between man and nature to the entirety of history. By suggesting man's position toward the natural world may not have fundamentally changed since the prehistoric era from which modernity is assumed to have evolved, Conrad makes tenuous any narrative of progress.

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from one sphere into the heart of another, new sphere." "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense," *Critical Theory*, ed. Robert Dale Parker, p. 92.

[34] *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 155

Civilization emerges as the innovation that has altered man's conception of his relation to his environment. Travelling down river, Marlow identifies the landscape as "the shackled form of a conquered monster," expressing that the "earth seemed unearthly" (44). This conspicuous paradox, the appearance of an unearthly earth, illuminates the aestheticization of man's conception of his environment. Depicted as an aesthetic response to a distinctly non-human world, Jacques Berthoud explains, "civilization is thought of not merely as a given, but as something achieved—something deliberately constructed and upheld in defiance of an elemental nature."[35] The earth clearly cannot be unearthly, but Marlow can identify it as such because of his aestheticized notion of nature; civilization can only understand the natural world in relation to itself.

By coupling the anthropomorphic conception of nature with the illusory basis of civilization, Conrad examines their bearing on one another. Civilization is a construction that serves, in part, to allow man's rationalization of his relative insignificance in comparison to the overwhelming force of the natural world. Nietzsche identifies any human understanding of the objective world as an instance of metaphor. Only by "forgetting this primitive world of metaphor … in short only because man forgets himself as a subject, and indeed as an *artistically created* subject," he explains, "does [man] live with some degree of peace, security, and consistency."[36] Marlow's imposition of humanity upon the wilderness allows him to see something other than a destructive force biding its time; this figural

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[35] "Heart of Darkness," *Marlow*, ed. Harold Bloom, p. 89.
[36] "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense," *Critical Theory*, ed. Robert Dale Parker, p. 94

interpolation of the natural world facilitates Jim's comprehension of the sea's otherwise irrational fury. Marlow and Jim only achieve the 'peace, security, and consistency' necessary for the construction of a coherent rational understanding of the world by their lack of awareness of metaphor's position at the basis of their ability to perceive. From this metaphorical foundation the notion of civilization can be artistically conceived.

Though set in London, *The Secret Agent* also uses the natural world to emphasize civilization's illusory foundation. As Ludwig Schnauder argues, "The urban environment in *The Secret Agent* is often given organic or anthropomorphic qualities so that it fulfills a similar thematic function to nature in *Heart of Darkness*."[37] Walking the streets of London on his way to the French embassy, Verloc watches the "carriages [that] went bowling by" and observes "here and there a victoria with the skin of some wild beast inside a woman's face and hat emerging above the folded hood" (17).[38] Elaborating on the landscape, the narrator asserts, "a peculiarly London sun—against which nothing could be said except that it looked bloodshot—glorified all this by its stare. It hung at a moderate elevation above Hyde Park Corner with an air of punctual and benign vigilance" (17). The narrator

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[37] *Free Will and Determinism in Joseph Conrad's Major Novels*, p. 200. The comparison Schnauder makes between nature in *Heart of Darkness* and *The Secret Agent* is the similar thematic function it plays as a foil to man's greatness. Though Schnauder argues that the city's "*in*organcisim" (his italics) is one of the many causes of its inhabitants' overwhelming sense of alienation from themselves and one other, I argue that Conrad collapses the distinction between the organic and the inorganic in an attempt to find the source of these feelings of alienation: man's ignorance of his society's fundamentally illusory nature.

[38] Conrad, *The Secret Agent*. All citations of *The Secret Agent* are from the Barnes & Nobel Classics' 2007 edition. Future citations will appear parenthetically within the text.

absurdly ascribes the virtues of punctuality and benign vigilance to the sun, despite the fact that its cyclical patterns are the basis from which these human qualities are derived. Neither natural nor completely man-made, a hybrid landscape is being described, one possessing a personified sun and a lady wearing a dead beast. This peculiar scene—and the city that houses it—is made to appear exceptional, though, as it is dignified by the sun's glorifying stare.

These bizarre descriptions of the landscape are associated with the inane English society that provides the perverse framework of intelligibility within which Conrad's characters act. Containing "topographical mysteries," the streets that Verloc is walking possess a "clean wall between two houses, of which one rationally enough bore the number 9 and the other was numbered 37" (19-20); and for some inscrutable reason Verloc encounters a house labeled "No. 1 Chesham square" while "Chesham square was at least sixty yards away" (19). As Avrom Fleishman explains, "the irrational social order is crystallized in the confusion of the urban landscape … Its relation to the larger absurdities of society is suggested by Verloc's very acceptance of it."[39] The city embodies an "inorganic nature," appearing as "matter

[39] "The Symbolic World of *The Secret Agent*," *The Secret Agent: A Casebook Edited by Ian Watt*, p. 172. Fleishman also writes, "Incapable of death, the world of inorganic nature is equally incapable of life…" (171). His argument spans a complicated reading of animalistic symbolism in the text that eventually concludes with an equation of man and animal. The comparison produces an "entire society that comes to be seen as a jungle of animal forms obeying the laws of predatory survival" (175). His argument for society's, and perhaps the individual's, self-cannibalism, one I will make in a less explicit manner, interprets Verloc's last meal of cold beef as a metaphorical consumption of Stevie, whose failure sets in motion the events that will eventually consume Verloc. Though I appreciate the nuance of Fleishman's argument, I am ambivalent toward it due to its reliance on this symbolic comparison between man and animal. I believe a similar tension, prompted by the frequent juxtapositions of man and nature, plays out on an ideological level. By examining the

that never dies" (19). Verloc, however, "did not trouble his head" about either the city's topographical mysteries or its lifeless effervescence, as "his mission in life [was] the protection of the social mechanism, not its perfectionment or even its criticism" (20). Verloc's London "generates its own darkness, an especially human one, not the transhuman blackness of *Heart of Darkness*, but an obscurity made of illusion, fatuity, and blindness,"[40] qualities that facilitate Verloc's thoughtless protection of the social order without concern for perfection or even criticism. The city's confidence—the exceptionalism radiated by the sun that hovers over it—is a sham, a fervent, though illusory, belief defined by its meticulous avoidance of introspection.

Echoing Nietzsche's conception of the foundational metaphor, man has constructed the edifice of civilization. He derives order from the natural world—a punctual sun—that he has subsumed into one great, tautological explanation of his society's inevitable greatness and progress.[41] The circular logic of the social mechanism makes society readily intelligible for its citizens. Verloc can only imagine himself as his society's protector if that society can be easily identified. His society's

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authenticity of all that is portrayed as organic, Conrad questions not only civilization's self-professed narrative of progress, but also its very foundation.

[40] J. Hillis Miller, "From Poets of Reality," *The Secret Agent: A Casebook Edited by Ian Watt*, p. 180.

[41] In *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*, his seminal contextualization of Conrad's work and thoughts, Ian Watt explains: "Conrad, then, shared with the Victorians their rejection of the religious, social and intellectual order of the past, but he also rejected, as completely as Yeats, Pound, Eliot, Joyce, Lawrence or Thomas Mann, the religion of progress with which they and the Edwardians had replaced it … This alienation from the prevailing intellectual perspectives both of the past and of his own time naturally did much to colour Conrad's picture both of his own selfhood and of his role as an author." My thesis is an attempt to identify the perspective extant in Conrad's fiction that criticizes the prevailing social and political attitudes of his time, primarily the aforementioned belief in progress.

narrative of its own greatness is, for Verloc, its defining quality. Its opulence and luxury are the manifestations of that greatness; they are the visual cues that solidify his conception of himself as its protector and form the basis of his rationalization for the legitimacy of his role: "[Verloc] surveyed through the park railing the evidences of the town's opulence and luxury with an approving eye. All these people had to be protected. Protection is the first necessity of opulence and luxury" (18). Verloc need not ever "trouble his head," as the cultural narratives of his society provide a framework of significance that he can simply assume. The role that already exists for him has ensured that he will never face the daunting prospect of constructing meaning for himself. The social mechanism has effaced the formless uncertainty of the natural world; Verloc is not even aware of its existence as the force opposed to human intelligibility that necessitated humanity's response, the civilization that now makes the world intelligible for him. In order to perpetually endure, mankind has detached itself from the mechanisms by which the significance it celebrates is formed; it has sacrificed the ability to create new meaning. By ensuring its survival amidst the disorder of the natural world, mankind has become equally as incapable of life as it is of death.

In Marlow's seminal preamble to his tale in *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad explicitly addresses the fictitious basis of civilization's guiding principles. The Roman colonizers who came to England during the height of their empire, Marlow contends, lost themselves in "that mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs in the forests, in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men"; their attempts at colonization, which eventually would give way to the birth and rise of modern England, failed

because they were unable to live within "the midst of the incomprehensible" (7). What would save the modern Englishman, Marlow explains, "is efficiency—the devotion to efficiency" (7). Though he depicts imperialism as "the conquest of earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves," Marlow maintains, "what redeems it is the idea only" (7). The idea is "not a sentimental pretence," nor is it akin to an idealism fixated upon a static ideal; it is more aptly understood as the incessant act of believing. What is necessary, Marlow explains, is "an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to…" (7). Efficient devotion to anything—it need only be capable of being worshipped—is the ability that, according to Marlow, separates the modern Englishman from the failed Roman colonizers. Here we find the willful blindness that characterizes the world of *The Secret Agent*. Marlow presents the colonizing community's fictitious mission as neither good nor bad, but as necessary; the principles that comprise its ideology cohere the community by providing it with the vital feelings of significance and purpose.

In *Lord Jim*, Stein's conception of imagination functions similarly as the basis for a rationally coherent worldview. The imagination acts like a dream, creating, for the dreamer, an entirely new world. Explaining Jim's situation to Marlow, Stein contends:

> A man that is born falls into a dream like a man who falls into the sea. If he tries to climb out into the air as inexperienced people endeavor to do, he drowns—*nicht war?* … No! I tell you! The way is to the destructive element submit yourself, and with the exertions of your hands and feet in the water make the deep, deep sea keep you up. So if you ask me—how to be? (161)

The dream, according to Stein, is the fundamental state of existence. Those who are experienced, presumably people who enjoy a relatively content existence, do not try to disrupt this dream, to climb out of the sea. They use their efforts to embellish the dream, to make the deep, deep sea keep them up. For if they attempt to climb out of the sea and disrupt the dream, they will drown in the endless mass of dreams presented to them. Stein has not misunderstood the human condition, as Bernard Paris contends; his conception of the 'dream' does not require a denial of reality.[42] Instead, he elucidates the extent, limited or not, to which reality is predicated upon idealized actualizations—an expression of reality that is essential to understanding Conrad's fiction.[43] Problems arise when one becomes cognizant of "[a dream] which he certainly did not catch … that is the trouble—the great trouble…." (164). Emphasis on the dreams one did not catch has the same effect as removing oneself from a dream. It disallows immersion into any one dream, opening the individual to an unintelligible world of competing narratives.[44]

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[42] In *Conrad's Charlie Marlow,* Paris writes: "Stein has described not the human condition but that of persons who are driven to actualize their idealized image of themselves and who must, therefore, deny reality."

[43] The postcolonialist critic Benita Parry misunderstands this vital insight when she describes Stein as a prophet of utopian aspiration that "continues to affirm the urge to envision and implement transfigured human order" on page 141 of her essay "*Lord Jim*," which can be found in *Marlow*, a compilation of essays on Conrad edited by Harold Bloom. Stein does not promote a transfigured human order, he is identifying the extent to which reality relies on the idealized figures that provide people with a sense of significance and purpose. This insight is vital to Conrad's representation of reality.

[44] Bruce Johnson makes a similar argument in the chapter entitled "Psychology of Self-Image: *Lord Jim*" in his book *Conrad's Models of Mind*. On page 57 he writes, "Thus Stein is committed to the process, the form of idealism rather than any specific content." I agree that Stein, like Marlow, is asserting the need for fidelity to an ongoing imaginative process. However, I disagree with Johnson's contention that Stein is aware of the implications of his belief. Marlow is certainly unaware of the

Both Marlow's 'idea' and Stein's 'dream' create, for the individual, a narrative of existence from which meaning can be derived. The 'idea,' Fleishman argues, "provides the colonizer with purpose, [and] again makes him feel as if he is at the service of a state, a society."[45] Society's primary function is to make life intelligible for its citizens—"it is the function of the cultural pattern to eliminate troubling inquiries by offering ready-made directions for use, to replace truth hard to attain by comfortable truisms, and to substitute the self-explanatory for the questionable."[46] Efficient devotion to an "idea" makes life much simpler for mankind, whose fundamental state of existence is firmly within the "midst of the incomprehensible." The state—and the society that upholds it—need not be anything more than an idea or a dream; upheld as an aspiration, society becomes a reality that must be constantly constructed, providing, for its citizens, the required object of worship. In order to enjoy the benefits of this creation, however, man must remain oblivious of its artistic production.

Perhaps the sea was the quintessential setting for Conrad to begin his exploration of society's fictitious mission.[47] The small, enclosed space of the ship

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dynamism he implies, as he repeatedly expresses belief in the moral ideals of his society, a practice that denies him the knowledge of himself that he seeks. Stein, though, is never faced with an event in which he would have to practice his idealism, leaving us without the possibility of ascertaining his intentions.

[45] *Conrad's Politics*, p. 98-99.

[46] Alfred Schutz, *On Phenomenology and Social Relations*, p. 81. Conrad's fiction resonates with the social phenomenology of Schutz. Concerned with the experience of reality, Conrad's work explores the narratives by which people define themselves and understand the world that is presented to them.

[47] In *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*, Ian Watt writes: "Conrad's years at sea were everything for his career as a writer. Not because they gave him a subject—Conrad surely would be a major novelist quite apart from the sea stories; but because to the earlier perspective of every kind of alienation there was added a foreground of

provides an immediate and urgent experience that is antithetical to the distance separating the individual from society's necessarily abstract pillars. In such close proximity to one's peers, focusing one's attention on readily identifiable tasks organized toward the conspicuous goal of safe passage on the brooding, irascible sea, any dishonest intent, or activity that fails to contribute to these recognizable goals, becomes manifest.[48] Within this context, the intentions of James Wait and Donkin of Conrad's *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* are immediately drawn into question, and Jim's failure to perform his duty and remain with his ship is magnified. On a ship the rules of conduct are clearly defined; the concrete nature of activity exposes hypocrisy. The world of the ship is a simplified version of reality where causality is much more easily traced. It presents a narrative of reality that is far more resistant to hypocrisy than those offered by the abstract ideology of society. And when that ship fails you, Jim explains, "your whole world seems to fail you; the world that made you, restrained you, has taken care of you" (91).

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immediate experience which featured a series of the most direct personal and social commitments—to his career, to his fellow-seamen, to his adopted country" (p. 7). The immediacy of experience on the ship, and the direct causal links this forms between the actions of its inhabitants, serves as an apt foil for the vast distance separating the individual from society's illusory pillars, the principles that define the citizen's context for action.

[48] In *Joseph Conrad: Language and Fictional Self-Consciousness*, Jeremy Hawthorn writes: "The transition from the life of a sailor working in situations where words are used in a concrete, direct and immediate way, to sitting in front of a sheet of paper and spending perhaps hours searching for the right word, must have struck Conrad, when he meditated upon it, very forcibly. Deceitful or dishonest usages of words are soon exposed on a ship, because of the concrete nature of the tasks that have to be undertaken by collective, physical labour" (17). The disappearance of the concrete nature of tasks within the complex, and alienating, modern society will be more apparent as I continue to discuss *The Secret Agent*.

The expression of society's capacity for hypocrisy, however, is hardly exclusive, in Conrad's fiction, to the setting of the ship. In *Heart of Darkness*, the passage in which the French warship Marlow is travelling on fires its rounds indiscriminately into the African continent exhibits the limits of the European perspective and the potential for the application of this perspective to diverge from its guiding ethos. Marlow explains, "there wasn't even a shed there, and [the ship] was shelling the bush . . . In the empty immensity of earth, sky, and water, there she was, incomprehensible, firing into a continent" (16). Though Marlow acknowledges "there was a touch of insanity in the proceeding," the sailors remained ignorant of any absurdity, as one earnestly assured Marlow, "there was a camp of natives—he called them enemies!—hidden out of sight somewhere" (16). The existence of the traditional ordering systems—war, camp, and enemies—in a foreign environment, Peter Brooks argues, "led to the logical consequences—men-of-war, cannonades—which are wholly incongruous to the situation requiring mastery."[49] Unable to analyze the situation independent of these traditional ordering systems, the European colonizers demonstrate that their perspective is not universally applicable. Yet they continue to brand the unfamiliar natives as "enemies" and "criminals" (18)—language Cedric Watts identifies as "sincerity in the use of euphemistic jargon"[50]—safe within the bounds of their ideology, an illusion that

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[49] *Reading for the Plot*, p. 241

[50] *A Preface to Conrad*, p. 129. Elaborating on the significance of the Europeans' ignorance, Watts writes, "If the Europeans were represented as *consciously* hypocritical, the tale would be less incisive, for conscious hypocrisy entails recognition of truth" (129). The very absence of truth is the object of Conrad's critique. Truth, represented by systems of order, are preconditions of logical action.

masks the absence of a perspective from which they can derive order. The fundamental disorder the Europeans must encounter, Brooks argues, illuminates the "very lack of possibility of order."[51] Finding themselves in 'the midst of the incomprehensible,' the colonizers must efficiently—and ruthlessly—devote themselves to their own 'idea.' In doing so, however, they subvert their description of themselves as civilized people and unwittingly expose the conditional nature of such claims.[52]

While the Europeans in *Heart of Darkness* remain ignorant of their use of "euphemistic jargon," Stevie, in *The Secret Agent*, understands language in only the most literal sense. Stevie, Jeremy Hawthorn contends, "cannot go beyond personal experience, he cannot arrive at abstractions . . . [and] although he never detaches

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Absent any universally applicable ordering systems, the colonizers must stick to their own.

[51] *Reading for the Plot*, p. 242. The full quote reads: "The text, then, appears to speak of a repeated "trying out" of orders, all of which distort what they claim to organize, all of which may indeed cover up a very lack of possibility of order." Marlow's entire narrative can be understood as a quest for order. His lie to Kurtz's Intended, a retreat back to the comfortable confines of the European ideology, expresses the lack of inherent disorder, and thus, the necessity of choosing one of the various 'ideas' capable of providing an illusory order.

[52] Homi Bhabha's theory on the effect of mimicry on colonial discourse, expressed in his essay, "On Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," provides great insight in this instance. Bhabha argues, "The effect of mimicry on the authority of colonial discourse is profound and disturbing. For in "normalizing" the colonial state or subject, the dream of post-Enlightenment civility alienates its own language of liberty and produces another knowledge of its norms." Though there is no example in *Heart of Darkness* of the physical mimicry Bhabha describes, the colonizer's attempts to imagine the colonial subject functions similarly. The colonizers who are cognizant of the duplicitous language they employ—Marlow, Kurtz on his deathbed—become skeptical of their society's 'language of liberty.' Those who do not—everybody else, including the sailors I describe above—become alienated from this liberty. This alienation is the extreme self-doubt Marlow describes as being prompted by the surrounding 'midst of the incomprehensible.'

words from their referents, he fails to understand that other people do."[53] When the anarchist Karl Yundt, an adherent to Karl Marx's economic and social theories, excoriates the "cannibalistic" (48) reality of modern capitalism, Stevie "swallowed the terrifying statement with an audible gulp" (48), and remained in an "excited state" (54) the rest of the night unable to sleep. Similarly, he understands the police as a purely moral apparatus that enacts justice and protects morality. Abhorred by their cab operator's impassioned expression of the plight of the poor, Stevie confidently suggests, "Police" (144). When his sister Winnie explains it is not the purpose of the police, that they "are there so that them as have nothing shouldn't take anything away from them who have," Stevie anxiously replies, "Not even if they were hungry?" (144-145). Stevie, Irving Howe argues, "is meant to convey a purity of pathos and to represent the humanitarian impulse in its most vulnerable form."[54]

His naivety emphasizes the extent to which embodying a certain degree of hypocrisy has become normal; the police may be abstractly imagined to be in the service of justice, but their protection of the wealthy's property from the needy poor approaches an understanding of justice many are satisfied with leaving unexplored. The rarity of Stevie's innocence is dramatized by juxtaposition with the crudely pragmatic Chief Inspector Heat, who believes "the mind and the instincts of a burglar are of the same kind as the mind and the instinct of the police officer . . . [they are] products of the same machine, one classified as useful the other as noxious" (81). That Stevie literally blows up and Heat endures, willing and able to

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[53] *Joseph Conrad: Language and Fictional Self-Consciousness*, p. 91.
[54] "Conrad: Order and Anarchy", *The Secret Agent: A Casebook Edited by Ian Watt*, p. 144.

fight the criminals his society will inevitably produce, exhibits the necessity of a certain capacity to absorb hypocrisy for survival in modern society. Stevie's pastime of drawing innumerable circles that suggest "chaos and eternity" (194) subtly reinforces the dangerous abnormality of his perspective. Unable to idealize society's abstractions, he represents the frailty of mankind prior to its construction of the edifice of civilization that rationalizes the disorder inherent to the "midst of the incomprehensible."

Though ostensibly antithetical to the innocent Stevie, Kurtz, consumed by his own power and wealth, is similarly ignorant to the morally compromised environment he is living in. Having traveled to the Congo to attain the wealth needed to marry his Intended, Kurtz becomes subsumed by the singular fulfillment of his initial goal. Surrounded at the Inner Station by manifestations of his ivory trading enterprise, he imagines everything as belonging to him—"My intended, my ivory, my station, my career, my ideas" (85). Lost in his megalomaniacal obsession with himself, Kurtz's "unsound method" did "more harm than good to the company" (77). While I do not disagree with Avrom Fleishman's contention that Kurtz is designed to show the fatal bankruptcy of the work ethic,[55] I interpret Kurtz as a foil for Marlow's celebrated example of the efficiently devoted colonizer. Working feverishly on acquiring wealth, Kurtz is seduced by the power that accompanies it, forgetting the moral values of his society.

Kurtz's famous utterance, "the horror! The horror!" (86), is an acknowledgment of his learned ignorance, of the enduring value of the moral ideals

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[55] *Conrad's Politics: Community and Anarchy in the Fiction of Joseph Conrad*, p. 106

he had conveniently discarded. If we were to name Kurtz's 'horror,' Fleishman argues, "it might appropriately be anarchy: that state of social decomposition at the opposite pole from organic community."[56] Kurtz is horrified not only by the fact that he had deceived himself, but also by "his knowledge that his eloquence and idealism are only masks which hide the truth."[57] The truth is a fundamentally anarchic state of existence that humanity combats with a mask of ideology. Whereas Stevie, unable to conceive an abstract understanding of language, is unwittingly making this realization every day, Kurtz is only impacted by it at the end. His ignorance made possible the overwhelming success that prompted his revelation, while Stevie, too acutely aware of the inherent duplicity in ideology and the language that supports it, is ostracized by his society, having never been able to believe in an 'idea' of his own.

Jim suffers a total destruction similar to that of Stevie and Kurtz, though his failure results from a complete commitment to his society's ideals. While Kurtz embraces his own ideology of power and wealth at the expense of that of his society—a misalignment that prompts his cry of 'horror'—Jim is destroyed by his inability to separate himself from the ideals of his community. Jeremy Hawthorn argues that "Jim's failure is a failure to relate the concrete and the abstract: in the course of the novel he oscillates between extremes of near total idealism and an inability to escape from brute facts at all."[58] His belief in the abstract—the maritime ideals of honor, courage, and service—is called into question by the outcome of the *Patna* inquiry, while he is never able to understand the significance of the concrete,

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[56] *Conrad's Politics: Community and Anarchy in the Fiction of Joseph Conrad*, p. 92
[57] Suresh Raval, *The Art of Failure*, p. 35
[58] *Joseph Conrad: Language and Fictional Self-Consciousness*, p. 40

the painful and unavoidable fact that he did abandon the *Patna*. What really matters to Jim, Ian Watt explains, is "his failure to live up to his own ego-ideal in his own eyes. From this follows Jim's need to contest the opinions of others who assume that his real character is defined by his desertion of the *Patna*."[59] His inability to reconcile the abstract with the concrete is a failure to understand that the abstract governs his interpretation of the concrete, and that his interpretation is just one of an infinite possibility; in terms of the parameters set forth by Stein, Jim seeks to climb out of the sea that is his dream, and in doing so, he abandons his perspective—his dream—and can no longer narrativize his actions.

Having lost the consistency afforded to the artistically created subject, Jim attempts to reacquire such security by completely re-committing himself to his tarnished ego-ideal. While the coherence of Kurtz's perspective is shattered by his climactic revelation, Jim's is dissipated by the public opinion that judges his character in accordance with his desertion of the *Patna.* In the aftermath of the *Patna* inquiry, Jim explains to Marlow, "I couldn't bear think of myself" (143). He has disrupted the narrative by which he defines himself. His actions following the inquiry—his time bouncing around from port to port and the heroic role he assumes in Patusan—are motivated by his desire to adhere by the abstract ideals of his society and thereby repair that narrative. The choice he faces following the murder of Dain Waris, one between attending to his immediate self-interest or maintaining fidelity to his ideal of conduct, offers him the opportunity to correct the mistake he made when he deserted the *Patna*. Righting the wrong that undermined his

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[59] "The Ending of Lord Jim," *Critical Essays on Joseph Conrad*, ed. Ted Billy, p. 89

conception of himself, he surrenders to Doramin's judgment, choosing to go "away from a living woman to celebrate his pitiless wedding with a shadowy ideal of conduct" (318). In doing so, Jim upholds the prophecy set forth in the final words he spoke to Marlow: "I must go on, go on for ever holding up my end, to feel sure that nothing can touch me. I must stick to their belief in me to feel safe and to—to. … I shall be faithful…I shall be faithful" (254). Jim's final act, however, is not the selfless moment he imagines it to be; it is really the final act in his commitment to complete egotism.[60] Like Kurtz's unwitting immersion in his 'idea,' Jim is finally submerged in his dream. Though Jim strove to reach this point and Kurtz only realized his existence within it right before his death, the tenet linking them together is their reliance on the 'idea' or 'dream' that comprises the entirety of their perspective, for their respective ideologies are the only means by which they can organize a world inherently devoid of order.

Ironically, the only relatively successful characters in Conrad's fiction are delusional, either due to willful ignorance of the existence of a reality counter to their own, or fervent, unyielding identification with a chosen purpose or cause. Only when the character is made cognizant of his adherence to such a fictitious 'idea' or his chosen subscription to his own personal 'dream,' does he fail and meet destruction.[61] Whereas Kurtz is made aware of his arbitrary choice of wealth and power as his personal mission, the Chief Accountant at the Outer Station is able to

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[60] Mark Conroy makes a variation of this argument in his essay "Paragon and Enigma: The Hero in *Lord Jim*" published in *Marlow*, edited by Harold Bloom. On page 157 he writes: "What seems at first glance to be the act of profoundest altruism, the sacrifice, is really the moment of greatest egotism."

[61] The lone exception being Marlow who I will discuss in detail in the next section.

remain devoted to his work, though he is only able to "maintain his sense of order [by] being insensitive to what is transpiring around him, including the suffering of his fellow human beings."[62] In *Lord Jim*, Chester never becomes aware, unlike Jim, of the illusory basis for his devotion to seeing "things as they *are*" (122, Conrad's italics), and in *The Secret Agent* the anarchist Michaelis is blessed with the capacity to simultaneously deride capitalistic competition as ruthless and demeaning while being generously supported by his platonic benefactress who is ironically inspired by sympathy for the futility of his passion.

Conrad, however, leaves these deluded characters on the periphery of his tales, providing for his readers only uncertainty regarding the impetus of the repeated failure of his protagonists who seem to have achieved, or at least to have attained the capability of achieving, self-awareness of their condition. Absent resolution we are left only with paradox, the most significant of which hinges upon the ability to construct meaning. In a formless world, there is no inherent structure to which man can appeal. Absent any objective purpose capable of governing human activity one must be constructed, albeit on a necessarily fictitious basis. These constructs may be illusions, Anthony Winner explains, "but the illusion they represent may finally be the necessary paradox inherent in the maintenance of a moral meaning in a dark world."[63] Moral criticism and hypocrisy in Conrad's work stems from this identification of the fundamental misalignment between the desire for universally applicable systems of meaning and the impossibility of their construction.

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[62] Bernard Paros, *Conrad's Charlie Marlow*, p. 23
[63] "*Lord Jim*: Irony and Dream", *Marlow*, ed. Harold Bloom, p. 184

Understood within the context of a world devoid of inherent order, the ubiquitous failure running through Conrad's fiction is not representative of a nihilistic worldview. The repeated failures of Conrad's protagonists are simply acknowledgments of man's imperfection as a moral creature, a condition resultant of the discord between the concrete and the abstract, one that is embodied by Jim. Man is eternally striving for meaning, however, in order to stabilize his position within an uncertain world. Imposing his image upon the environment, man is able to understand, and thus overcome, the uncertainty regarding his relation to the non-human world. From this illusory, though vital, foundational meaning, man's rational worldview is artistically created. What man forgets, Stein reminds us, is that nature, not man, is "the great artist. … Man is amazing, but he is not a masterpiece" (156-157). Man, however, is skilled enough to subdue the 'great artist' by subsuming it. Civilization, the pinnacle of man's artistry, has effaced the 'midst of the incomprehensible,' the inscrutable message he receives from the natural world.

A Delimiting Response: The Enabling Restrictions of Identity

I.

Conrad's fiction relentlessly assesses the authority of fixed standards. The fundamental paradox pervading his work—man's need to order an inherently formless world—exposes the vital, though intrinsically illusory, nature of such standards. Denying any potential for universal meaning, Conrad gestures toward the individual as the potential progenitor of a stable source of value. Repudiation of such fixed standards, the existentialist critic Bruce Johnson argues, produces for Conrad the "distinctly modern belief that value arises from a strong sense of identity and possibly in no other way."[64] Identity, the individual's construction of a framework of intelligibility within which he conceives a conception of himself, houses, for Conrad, the individual's only resort, in a world devoid of inherent order, for the structure that must underlie any system of meaning.

Conrad, however, does not merely elevate the individual's subjective response to the world, in place of the discarded universal standards, as the authoritative source of meaning. Identity possesses an undeniably salutary function, one best expressed by Edward Said's identification of character within Conrad's work as the quality that "enables the individual to make his way through the world, the faculty of rational-self possession that regulates the exchange between the world and the self."[65] Yet Conrad's fiction is littered with characters—including but not limited to the aforementioned Kurtz, Jim, Stevie, Chester, the Chief Accountant, and Michaelis—whose extreme exercise of rational self-possession produces 'ideas'

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[64] *Conrad's Models of Mind*, p. 66
[65] *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography*, p. 12

and 'dreams' that leave them comfortably deluded within the frameworks of intelligibility they have constructed, seduced by their own personal narratives of significance.

While a strong sense of self provides confidence sufficient for action amidst paralyzing uncertainty—"the more cogent the identity, the more certain a course of action," Said contends[66]—its importance to the individual's understanding of his world also places it beyond reproach. As responses to a formless and unintelligible natural environment, the 'idea' and the 'dream' demand the production of a totalizing worldview that intrinsically promotes alienation. Bruce Johnson argues, "in the end *Lord Jim* is about the isolation of a human soul, not human community, not even the love between two people."[67] Jim's image of himself as the embodiment of the maritime code of honor propels him to Patusan, beyond the physical boundaries of his society, and prompts him to resign himself to death in order to uphold his chosen identity. Kurtz's myopic devotion to the systematic accumulation of wealth and power and Stevie's literal interpretation of his society's moral rhetoric yield similar isolation and eventual destruction.

In order to uphold the beliefs that comprise their character each must eliminate the possibility of a self outside of their chosen identity. Said argues, "Truth for Conrad was, I believe, the negation of intellectual difference. … Lodged within the obliterating shadow of truth, a man feels indifferent to everything outside."[68] This manner of truth is predicated upon negation. The image of the self in

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[66] *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography*, p. 12
[67] *Conrad's Models of Mind*, p. 65
[68] *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography*, p. 137-138

possession of truth is all that remains. Once this "egoistic image is formed," Said explains, "then the individual begins to think that the world must be organized according to the image."[69] The individual's identity, his image of himself, becomes inextricable from the world he perceives. Totalizing in nature, it cannot allow for self-examination. Beyond reproach, that identity is both enabling and restricting; it allows Conrad's characters to conceive of themselves as agents able to act, but it also demands a complete devotion that is their undoing.

Heart of Darkness and *Lord Jim,* through Marlow's struggle to achieve certainty, and *The Secret Agent*, through its sustained development of the motifs of alienation and indifference, call attention to identity's inherent limits. Society in *The Secret Agent*, Ian Watt asserts, is "really one vast conspiracy of blindness."[70] It remains unaware of the paradox that its citizens inevitably brush up against, the tension between protection and destruction of a necessary, though fatally restricting, established order. Conrad, in *The Secret Agent*, probes the paradox that yields blindness, Jeremy Hawthorn explains, by employing "processes of indirect mediation," a topic Conrad had dealt with before, "but in the context of imperialism, where the 'distance from the steam of beasts' is a geographical distance, a separation at once verbal and cultural."[71] Set in London, where dissonance between intended and expressed meaning cannot be attributed to geographic and cultural distance, *The Secret Agent* nonetheless presents a series of relationships—between policeman and criminal, law and anarchy, husband and wife—that belie expectation.

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[69] *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography*, p. 138
[70] *Essays on Conrad*, "The Political and Social Background of *The Secret Agent*," p. 125
[71] *Joseph Conrad: Language and Fictional Self-Consciousness*, "*The Secret Agent*: Animism and Alienation," p. 73

Each citizen, whether he be an anarchist, policeman, thief, tradesman, or statesman, agrees that life is a game with unstated rules everyone must obey, but they are oblivious of each other's personal conception of such rules. They are all, J. Hillis Miller argues, "more or less living a lie. They are alike in their refusal to look for the truth behind the surface of things, and in their determination to maintain the status quo."[72]

II.

The significance of the aversion to self-examination seen in *The Secret Agent* is best understood in relation to the difficult task of identifying the critical position Marlow assumes within his own narratives. I will first track Marlow's understanding of his experiences, and the identity his ruminations inadvertently express, before discussing the nebulous web of ostensibly reliable assumptions offered by the society of *The Secret Agent* to its citizens. In both cases, identity is posited as the mechanism of rational self-possession that enables understanding of and participation in the world, but also as the restriction that precludes the individual's examination of that world and his place within it. This incapacity for self-examination is the source of the failures of both Marlow, who cannot attain the self-knowledge he desperately seeks, and the Verlocs, whose physical destruction is the fulcrum around which *The Secret Agent* is constructed.

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[72] "From *Poets of Reality*," *The Secret Agent: A Casebook Edited by Ian Watt*, p. 180

Marlow's existence as a narrator within a larger story complicates the reader's reception of his narrative.[73] Aside from the introduction to Jim in the first four chapters of *Lord Jim*, Marlow is the exclusive purveyor of information regarding the larger stories that contain his narratives. As Vincent Pecora notes, Conrad deliberately questions the reliability of this information by placing the entirety of Marlow's narrations within quotes, a narrative technique that invites the reader to interpret Marlow's intentions.[74] While the stories Marlow tells in *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim* present themselves as accounts of the trials of Kurtz and Jim, they are really recounts of his experiences of the two figures. He is at once a reporter of their stories and an interpreter of their meaning. This distinction between narrator and character, one identified by Bernard Paris as the division between a literary device meant to be looked *through* and a subject to be looked *at*,[75] is far too often overlooked. Only by acknowledging Marlow as both the source of virtually all of the

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[73] I treat Marlow as the same character in *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim*. Though *Heart of Darkness* was published before *Lord Jim,* neither work provides us with any textual evidence that can allow us to presume, as Alan Warren Friedman does in his essay, "Conrad's Picaresque Narrator," and Bernard Paris does in his book, *Conrad's Charlie Marlow*, that Marlow recounts his experience of *Heart of Darkness* before that of *Lord Jim*. I do not believe that Marlow's character develops from one book to the other. He is the same uncertain narrator in both works whose pursuit of an objective notion of truth precludes him from recognizing himself as the idealist that he is. Additionally, as both of Marlow's narratives are self-containing texts devoid of references to one another, I go to great lengths to ensure that the claims I make about his character are substantiated with textual evidence from both books.

[74] "*Heart of Darkness* and the Phenomenology of Voice," p. 998

[75] *Conrad's Charlie Marlow*, p. 2. I do not believe Paris follows through on his stated mission to look *through* Marlow as opposed to looking *at* him. He is correct in identifying the solidification of identity at the core of Marlow's narratives—"[Marlow] telling his story is part of his struggle to grasp the meaning of the Congo experience and to reestablish a conception of existence with which he can live" (55-56)—but I think he strays off the mark with his assertions for Marlow's eventual resolution of his identity crisis.

information contained within the two books and as a character whose perspective indelibly shapes the stories he tell us can we begin to sift through the contradictions that define his narratives. Doing so allows us to begin to pursue the meaning of the narratives and the character of the narrator who delivers them to us.

Perhaps the primary obstacle to identifying Marlow's conception of himself is his choice to never state the motives that prompt his narrations. Though he is clearly disgusted by the brutality he witnessed in the Congo, and he expresses explicit fascination with the bearing of Jim's act of cowardice on his character, Marlow's tales conclude only with ambiguity, leaving the reader—and the audiences of his orations[76]—uncertain of his opinion of Kurtz, Jim, and the societies that prompt their actions. Complicating the identification of his motives are the moments, in both *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim*, in which he expresses acute self-doubt regarding the efficacy of his words. Anticipating the need to justify to his audience in *Heart of Darkness* his attraction to Kurtz, a fascination he had previously condemned when expressed to him by the other company agents in Africa, an exasperated Marlow pleads:

> 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 …. It is impossible. We live, as we dream—alone…. (33)

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[76] I am not overlooking the fact that Marlow has an audience within Conrad's stories as well as an audience—the reader—outside of them. I will address the importance of the audiences within the stories throughout this discussion of Marlow. For now, I must establish Marlow as a character in his own right who is telling a story, no matter the audience. In doing so, I will demonstrate that his stories represent, for him, an attempt to establish a coherent identity, and that his attempts inadvertently probe the limits imposed by the assumption of identity.

In *Lord Jim*, attempting to qualify his excitement for the sense of self-importance Jim has found in Patusan, what he fears will appear to his audience as "sheer sentimentalism," Marlow conveys remarkably similar sentiments: "He existed for me, and after all it is only through me that he exists for you … Frankly, it is not my words that I mistrust but your minds. I could be eloquent were I not afraid you fellows had starved your imaginations to feed your bodies" (170). Marlow is afraid it is impossible to impart to his audience the significance that the events and characters of his stories hold for him, a complication that perhaps undermines the reliability of the significance he feels. Bruce Johnson is correct in asserting that, "in the end *Lord Jim* is about the isolation of a human soul."[77] The human soul that is isolated, however, is not that of Jim but that of Marlow, the character attempting to relay to us the story of Jim. Marlow's stories unwittingly foreground this isolation, making it even more imperative that the reader identify just what it is he is afraid he cannot express.

Despite the deep reservations he conveys, Marlow continues with the stories he has chosen to tell, as there is a finality of judgment he is seeking. Immediately following Kurtz's climactic utterance, Marlow asserts: "droll thing life is—that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose. The most you can hope for from it is some knowledge of yourself—that comes too late—a crop of unextinguishable regrets" (87). Having "wrestled with death," Marlow is distraught to find "that probably [he] would have nothing to say" (87). Ironically, Marlow, as

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[77] *Conrad's Models of Mind*, p. 66

his audience is certainly aware, has had a great deal to say. His narration, though, does not, for him, contain final judgment—the ever-elusive "knowledge of yourself." Kurtz's apparent possession of this knowledge of himself prompts Marlow to affirm: "Kurtz was a remarkable man. He had something to say. He said it" (87-88).

Similarly, in *Lord Jim*, Marlow, while lamenting the impossibility of communicating final judgment of Jim to his audience, asks: "Are not our lives too short for that full utterance which through all our stammerings is of course our only and abiding intention?" (170). Marlow is pursuing that "full utterance," "his only and abiding intention," but it always seems to elude him. While he was humiliated, when juxtaposed with the example of Kurtz, to find that he could not produce such an utterance, here he has "given up expecting those last words" (170). He maintains, however, that if these last words "could only be pronounced, [they] would shake both heaven and earth" (170). So entrenched within his habit of telling stories is his inability to achieve resolution that he has ceased to even expect it. If he was, however, somehow able to conceive that knowledge of himself it would "shake both heaven and earth," destabilizing his entire world.

Marlow's enduring commitment to telling his stories, even when repeatedly faced with the failure to pronounce a comprehensive assertion of significance, illuminates the motives for his narrations and the significance that his tales contain. His disbelief in the efficacy of narration is not some sort of expression of the inescapability of subjectivity, nor is his inability to articulate final verdicts a denouncement of the possibility of doing so. If it were, he would not tell stories. We are not only told, at the start of *Heart of Darkness*, that Marlow is known for his

"propensity to spin yarns," but also that, for him, "the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze" (6). The meaning of a story envelopes the tale that once contained it; it can only be brought forth by the act of telling and identified after it has been told. Marlow needs an audience, one within the story Conrad is telling, not to receive, or even understand, his narration, but as a vehicle to facilitate the production of the tale's meaning. The unnamed narrator, a member of Marlow's audience within the larger story, gives us this characterization of narrative, one that Marlow is unaware of, before we have even encountered Marlow's tale. The novel's layered, though easily overlooked, narrative structure invites the examination of Marlow's intentions that I am performing. This remark, though cryptic upon first reading, alerts us, along with the quotations Marlow's words are placed within, that we cannot take his story at face value. We cannot accept any of his valuations because he only possesses the capacity to convey meaning through the act of expression. Marlow, as I will demonstrate, is unaware of the significance of his ruminations and will not be able to identify the knowledge of himself that he utters.

His narratives are expressions of his character; their meaning resides in their production of contradiction that Marlow cannot resolve. The uncertainty that defines Marlow's tone stems from his inability to privilege ideology over observed reality, or vice versa, an impasse that he is constantly brushing up against. In one such instance, the abrupt transition from the preamble to his story in *Heart of Darkness* to the tale itself, Suresh Raval argues, "[Marlow's] words break off because

of his pained consciousness that the parody reveals the desecration of the idea."[78] Marlow's elevation of the 'idea,' any belief "that you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to…." (7), Raval argues, collapses the distinction between the civilized European and the savage prehistoric man of the wilderness and undermines his society's justifying principle of progress, one Marlow had sought to uphold. Ludwig Schnauder contends Marlow is compelled to resume his narrative due to guilt, and that Marlow's desire to narrate his story demonstrates his acceptance of responsibility for the brutality he has seen enacted in the name of his society's ideals.[79]

Though Marlow clearly broaches a logical inconsistency in this passage, he is not consciously aware that he has done so. He resumes his narration by remarking, "I suppose you fellows remember I did once turn fresh-water sailor for a bit" (8), a statement that marks his transition from the theoretical underpinnings of the colonial mission to his recount of the experience that shaped those abstract principles. While stating his justification for the colonial endeavor, he encounters the tension between ideology and observed reality that will pervade his tale; even after having lived through the events he will soon share, he is still not able to resolve this tension. The conflict, its specter complicating any ideological or moral claim

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[78] *The Art of Failure: Conrad's Fiction*, p. 22

[79] *Free Will and Determinism in Joseph Conrad's Major Novels*. The full quote: "His juggling with at least three time levels leads Marlow to choose words which, he realizes, undermine the pro-imperialist sentiments he wanted to express and lead him to stop in his narration altogether … Although he is to an extent compromised by his participation in the imperialist exploitation of Africa and by his initial suppression of the truth about his experiences, his feelings of guilt and his desire to narrate his story show that he accepts responsibility for what he has seen and done" (151, 153).

Marlow wants to make, as Raval and Schnauder note, does not halt his narrative; it necessitates it. His tale is his attempt to negotiate the problematic terrain established by the divergence of observed reality from the ideology by which it is purportedly governed.

The progenitor of the irreconcilable tension within Marlow's stories is the problem that demands their telling: Marlow's reluctant, though inextinguishable, affinity for his protagonists, Kurtz and Jim. Though Marlow shares the past actions of his protagonists that he feels taint their moral character—Kurtz became a murderous megalomaniac in the Congo; Jim abandoned his ship and his duty—he nonetheless affirms their greatness. His narratives are attempts to resolve—for his audience and himself—this contradiction, one that complicates his identity as a moral citizen of civilized Europe. Unable to overlook the actions that have undermined their moral intent, the ideology to which Marlow believes they adhere, Marlow, after relaying all of the evidence, is only able to appeal to ambiguous refrains in order to justify their greatness—Kurtz was a "remarkable man" (87), Jim "one of us" (318). Marlow's inability to define these abstruse terms, more than a failing to pronounce judgment, exhibits a lack of knowledge of himself, for to articulate an assessment of his protagonists requires an untangling of the affinity that links him inextricably to their examples, a task he is unable to face.

The ideal of Kurtz allows Marlow to stave off the ubiquitous disorder he encounters in the Congo. The African natives and the land they inhabit appear as

unreadable symbols to Marlow.[80] The example of Kurtz—"the emissary of pity, and science, and progress" (30), the man who Marlow believes "had come out equipped with moral ideas of some sort" (37)—offers for Marlow the potential reclamation of his society's morality, the ideology by which he had ordered the world. It is his 'idea,' the belief that allows him to resist the "fascination of the abomination" and avoid subsumption by "the midst of the incomprehensible" (7). The real Kurtz, of course, does not live up to his example, yet Marlow still maintains he was a "remarkable man" (87). Marlow interprets Kurtz's admission of 'horror' as "an affirmation, a moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats" (88).[81] By accepting responsibility for all the 'horror' he had perpetrated, Kurtz, according to Marlow, had affirmed the righteousness of his moral intentions, and thus affirms, from Marlow's perspective, the virtue of his own 'idea.'

Kurtz's final revelation is, as noted by Cedric Watts, "a compressed paradox, an oxymoron: a statement which mirrors, and does not reduce, the extreme

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[80] Many critics have made this point. In *Conrad's Models of Mind*, Bruce Johnson writes: "As I have suggested, everything associated with the natives is an unreadable symbol to [Marlow]" (76). Peter Brooks' ninth chapter, "An Unreadable Report: Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," of his book *Reading For the Plot* argues that Marlow's tale is a reaction to this breakdown of comprehensibility, and that it produces a work that is almost all about the potential for transmission.

[81] My reading of Marlow's interpretation of Kurtz's 'horror' stands in opposition to the critical consensus. I have not encountered any criticism that explains Marlow's understanding of Kurtz as anything other than some sort of denunciation of the efficacy of moral ideas. I believe this consensus has arisen because of the largely unquestioned tendency to consider Marlow as a character through which we can see Kurtz rather than as a character whose interpretation of Kurtz allows us to look at him. Alan Warren Friedman even goes as far to say: "Having experienced the indecency of Kurtz's life and the difficulty of his death, Marlow now condemns the moral supremacy of ideas, the thesis of *Heart of Darkness*" ("Conrad's Picaresque Narrator, p. 68).

ambiguity of [Kurtz's] characterization."[82] Kurtz, though, is Marlow's character. The statement does not demonstrate, as Watts argues, "Conrad is rather more proficient in generating and dramatising paradoxes than in resolving them,"; it is a "pseudo resolution," [83] but only one that can be attributed to Marlow. Marlow's interpretation of the climactic cry is an expression of the paradox he embodies, the tension between ideology and observed reality.

Overlooking the senseless destruction Kurtz wrought, Marlow believes the virtue of Kurtz's ideology has been redeemed by his confession, an interpretation that allows him to bypass accounting for the hypocrisy of Kurtz's actions. The critique of Kurtz's actions, Raval argues, is a critique of imperialism.[84] It is a critique, however, that Marlow cannot make. To condemn the ideology that justifies imperialism would undermine his own sense of self, as Marlow's 'idea' is predicated upon the virtue of that ideology. The need to uphold the righteousness of his society's morality prompts Marlow to deliver his lie to Kurtz's Intended. He chooses to tell her that Kurtz's last words were her name, as the truth would have been "too dark—too dark altogether…." (96). Ian Watt, among a litany of Conradian critics,

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[82] *A Preface to Conrad*, p. 136. Watts depicts Kurtz as a "janiform character," one who is "both a hollow man and a full man" (136). He attributes this characterization to Conrad, whereas I believe it can only be assigned to Marlow, the character within Conrad's larger story who relays to us all that we know about Kurtz.

[83] *A Preface to Conrad*, p. 136

[84] *The Art of Failure: Conrad's Fiction*, p. 27. Raval makes the mistake of failing to differentiate Conrad from Marlow. On page 41 he writes: "For Marlow, then, Europe never possessed the ideals it professed, though he hopes to see them realized in the practice of representative Europeans such as Kurtz." Marlow is unable to make this realization, as doing so would demand examination of the ideology from which he defines his own identity. Needing identity in order to understand the world, it remains beyond Marlow's capacity for examination. Conrad, however, does express the belief that Europe never possessed the ideals it professed. He does so through the interaction between Marlow and the narrator.

argues that Marlow's lie is a deliberate decision to uphold a consoling fiction for Kurtz's intended.[85] Marlow, however, has conveniently retreated within that consoling fiction. He presents the Intended as "beautiful," foregrounding the "delicate shade of truthfulness upon [her] features" (90-91). Explaining the necessity of protecting her innocence, Marlow recalls having no other option "but bowing [his] head before the faith that was in her, before that great and saving illusion that shone with an unearthly glow in the darkness" (94). Imagining the Intended as the stereotypical delicate and helpless woman, he creates a chivalric pretense that justifies the necessity of his lie. Marlow has certainly preserved the Intended's romantic conception of her fiancé, but he is also shielding himself from the truth of his experience: his righteous ideology, his 'idea' of himself, has been compromised by its appallingly hypocritical application.[86] Needing his 'idea' to

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[85] *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*. A critical consensus has been reached regarding this point. Both Schnauder and Raval, the two critics I have cited extensively throughout my discussion of Marlow and Kurtz, make similar arguments on pages 145 and 34 of their respective works I have cited. Watt writes: "The lie to the Intended, then, is both an appropriately ironic ending for Marlow's unhappy quest for truth, and a humane recognition of the practical aspects of the problem: we must deal gently with human fictions, as we quietly curse their folly under our breath; since no faith can be had which will move mountains, the faith which ignores them better be cherished" (248). I differ in opinion, as noted above, because I do not believe Marlow is aware of what he is doing. Essentially, I believe Marlow has assumed a chivalric stance that facilitates his continued identification with the consoling fiction of his society he is upholding.

[86] Marlow's inclusion of himself within the Intended's consoling fiction problematizes the feminist critique of Conrad. During Marlow's conversation with his aunt near the beginning of his tale, another passage that is frequently used as evidence for Conrad's misogynism, Marlow makes a similar rhetorical move. Marlow contends: "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). Marlow is

order an otherwise unintelligible world he has placed it beyond reproach. Never able to examine his own identity, he cannot attain the knowledge of himself that he so desperately desires.

Marlow exhibits a similar incapacity for self-examination in *Lord Jim*. He sees in Jim "a high-minded absurdity of intention" (148), a mode of existence he is unwittingly seeking to affirm. He feels an inscrutable fascination with Jim, like he does for Kurtz, because his example complicates his sacrosanct 'idea' in a manner he cannot resolve. Marlow contends, "he was a youngster of the sort you like to see about you; of the sort you like to imagine yourself to have been" (96), yet he is also painfully aware of Jim's conspicuous violation of their society's moral code of conduct, his desertion of the *Patna*. His inability to evaluate Jim's response to his failure—"what I could never make up my mind about was whether his line of conduct amounted to shirking his ghost or to facing him out" (148)—is the object of his entire narrative. He lives through Jim's attempt to redeem his stained moral character, an effort that creates an irreconcilable tension between intention and

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responding directly to his aunt's claim that, in the Congo, he will be "one of the Workers, with a capital" (14). He, however, seems oblivious to the fact that he has upheld this definition of himself—and his society—as a moralizing entity with his lie to the Intended. In fact, his conception of himself is akin to the beautiful "world of their own" that he projects onto his aunt, and more generally women. It is this ability to conflate his criticism of the morality of his society, one he identifies himself by, with the stereotypes of that society that allows him to express the hypocrisy of the misalignment between observed reality and the ideology by which it is purportedly governed without destroying his own conception of himself. He has not been "living contentedly" with this "confounding fact," as he must project the fictitious basis of ideology onto his aunt, a realization that would compromise his own prevailing belief in the moral worth of his society's ideology and make him vulnerable to the paralyzing uncertainty of a natural world stripped of ideology.

practice similar to that produced by the example of Kurtz.[87] Unable to accept the shortcomings of the ideals by which he identifies himself, Marlow can only claim "I only knew he was one of us" (170). Marlow evades recognition of his need to preserve his society's compromised ideology by appealing to the oblique refrain. He is never able to clarify the referent of 'us,' as doing so would require condemnation of Jim—and himself.

Marlow's "us" is the romantic individual he cannot admit he is. He identifies this quality within Kurtz and Jim, a capacity to idealize codes of conduct from which they derive their respective identities. His narratives are rationalizations for his desire to elevate their ideologies despite his knowledge of their incongruous actions that appear to have undermined them. Kurtz, after all, was "just a word for [him]" (33), and his words, Marlow affirms to the Intended, "will remain" (94). Jim was a similar sort of dream, who "wouldn't let [Marlow] forget how imaginative he was" (169). His "pitiless wedding with a shadowy ideal of conduct" inspires Marlow to stand up and "answer for his eternal constancy" (318). Marlow's identity is similarly idealized. It explains his childhood tendency to "lose [himself] in all the glories of exploration" (8, *Heart of Darkness*) and his fascination with the blank spots on the map that led him to the Congo. The endless horizon of sky and sea, like the blank spaces on the map, provide for him a boundless template upon which he can project

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[87] In his essay "*Lord Jim*: Irony and Dream," which can be found in Harold Bloom's *Marlow*, Anthony Winner describes this tension as "the irony inherent in the human condition" (184). Marlow must resort to irony in order to "mediate between faith and fact, between the illusion that protects and the need to confront things as they are" (184).

himself, a limitless realm of imagination where his sacrosanct ideals flourish unchallenged.

Marlow's identity, one derived from the imperial ideology his narratives attempt to redeem, is the knowledge of himself that he seeks. He is never able to access that knowledge because he can never escape his own conception of himself, as it provides meaning for him by ordering the world of his observations. Nidesh Lawtoo explains, "Marlow's childish passion for the colonial instrument *par excellence* is predicated on an emotional fascination that totally deprives him of his critical presence to selfhood."[88] Marlow's devotion to his 'idea,' the beliefs that comprise his identity, place it beyond reproach. His narratives dramatize his negotiation of the limit of his identity, a barrier he repeatedly brushes up against but is unable to transcend to attain the knowledge of himself that he seeks. Marlow misunderstands this shortcoming as a "weakness consist[ing] in not having a discriminatory eye for the incidental—the externals." All he can see is "the human being," the idealized notion of self that exists independent of action—the externals. He admits "it's a failing; it's a failing," explaining the outcome it produces: "then comes a soft evening; a lot of men too indolent for whist—and a story…" (70).

The Buddha-like inscrutability Marlow projects at the start of *Heart of Darkness* fools nobody but himself.[89] His ignorance of himself, rationalized as an

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[88] "The horror of mimesis: Echoing Lacouu-Labarthe," *Conrad's Heart of Darkness and Contemporary Thought*, ed. Nidesh Lawtoo.

[89] Allen Warren Friedman makes a similar point in his essay "Conrad's Picaresque Narrator," which can be found on page 67 of the book *Marlow*, a compilation of essays edited by Harold Bloom. Friedman argues that the unresolved inconsistencies within Marlow's narrative, especially the imagery that subtly reinforces the imperialist perspective, belie his lack of wisdom.

inability to pronounce judgment or as a weakness in identifying the incidentals, begets his narratives. His stories become explorations of the irreconcilable tension between the realms of ideology and activity. They inadvertently produce the meaning that envelopes the tale that once contained it: identity's enabling restrictions are self-sustaining. Marlow's uncertainty is a manifestation of the limits he is constrained by. He is able to criticize his identity only by risking its destruction.

III.

The Secret Agent is a dramatization on the societal level of the self-sustaining nature of ideology that Marlow's psychology represents. Assuming as its premise an exploration of the motives behind the failed 1894 attempt to blow up the Greenwich Observatory, the novel foregrounds the notion of impenetrable mystery. Conrad's inquiry yields only the Verlocs, who serve to reinforce the inscrutability of the event that inspired the novel. Appropriately, Conrad concludes the Verlocs' plot—and the novel—with a similarly enigmatic event, the newspaper headline announcing Winnie's suicide: "*An impenetrable mystery seems destined to hang for ever over this act of madness or despair*" (246, Conrad's italics). Presenting a world sustained by a dizzying amalgamation of misaligned assumptions, the novel never escapes this mystique of incomprehensibility.

Dramatizing the inescapability of the incomprehensible, even the most straightforward relationships, such as the interactions between policemen and anarchists, belie expectation. Various social categories from which identity is

derived—such as political, professional, and domestic orientations—form the basis of these expectations. The subversion of these categories is the source of the incomprehensibility that pervades the novel; their definitions should be readily identifiable, but the society of *The Secret Agent* produces an alternate framework of intelligibility, one I will demonstrate is geared toward promoting activity that reifies its own significance, that obscures those recognizable distinctions. This framework induces the participation of the characters of *The Secret Agent* in what Ian Watt identifies as a "vast conspiracy of blindness."[90] Though Conrad's characters are certain of their knowledge of one another, Robert Spector explains, they are completely ignorant of each other's thoughts and plans.[91] Ironically, the novel presents this apparent flaw as the source of its society's strength: the confidence that allows its citizens to function must be predicated upon ignorance.

The police department appears as a metaphor for the indolence that sustains the inane society in which it operates. Comprised of the competing moralities of Chief Inspector Heat and the Assistant Commissioner, the amorphous bureaucracy enacts the disjunction between matter and spirit that J. Hillis Miller argues defines the novel:

> Matter is solid and resists change. It never dies. Spirit, on the other hand, dwells in time. It moves across matter without being bound by it. … Conrad's vision seems to culminate in the recognition of an irreconcilable dualism. Man is the meeting place of matter and spirit and he is riven apart by their contradictions.[92]

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[90] *Essays on Conrad*, "The Political and Social Background of *The Secret Agent*," p. 125
[91] "Irony as Theme: Conrad's *The Secret Agent*," *The Secret Agent: A Casebook Edited by Ian Watt*, p. 167
[92] "From *Poets of Reality," The Secret Agent: A Casebook Edited by Ian Watt*, p. 193

The nameless Assistant Commissioner advocates for hierarchical bureaucracy, the matter that is solid and resists change. Elevating the institution and its structure above the personalities of its servants, he argues that Verloc, who essentially serves as Chief Inspector Heat's informant, "should be surrendered to the Special Crimes division as a whole" (118). Viewing the department's rigid structure as an encumbrance, Heat is the spirit that moves across matter without being bound by it. By working outside of the department he believes he can increase its efficiency, a motive that prompted him to "promise [Verloc] that as long as he didn't go in for anything obviously outrageous he would be left alone by the police" (110). The Assistant Commissioner, Heat's superior, derides Heat as "an old department hand" who possesses his "own morality" (119), and imagines himself as on a "crusade" (182) to rid the department of that subversive morality that "does away with all certitude" (118). The department, the meeting place of matter and spirit, is driven apart by the contradiction of its competing moralities.

Never resolving the department's internal tension, Conrad chooses instead to conflate the ostensibly contradictory positions. The distinction between the two men is muddled, as the Assistant Commissioner's motives for avoiding implicating Michaelis in the investigation undermine his criticism of Heat's private use of department resources: "If the fellow is laid hold of again," then Michaelis' patroness, with whom he and his wife frequently socialized, "will never forgive [him]" (96). Believing himself to be different, The Assistant Commissioner suggests to their superior, Secretary of State Sir Ethelred, that Heat be replaced. Ethelred, caught up in his "sense of the fitness of things" (76), rebuffs the suggestion and encourages the

Assistant Commissioner to focus on his own investigation. That their independent investigations end in the same place, with the decision to let Verloc walk free, is an affirmation of Ethelred's ethos. Believing particulars to be abhorrent—"No. No details, please" (182)—Ethelred, maintaining the chase must go on, cares only for the fitness of their profession. It is appropriate, then, that Conrad leaves the investigations of the respective characters unfinished: the Assistant Commissioner has chased Vladimir away from the Explorer's Club, presumably leaving the reconciliation of his crusade for another day; while the Chief Inspector has dissuaded Verloc from turning himself in and testifying in order to prevent the disorganization of his whole system of supervision. The inconsequential difference between the competing moralities housed within the department is emblematic of the self-sustaining nature of its society's ideology: absent any mission, it simply acts in order to justify itself.

The Verlocs, positioned at the center of this nebulous web of subterfuge, are sustained by a similar commitment to indolence. Paid by the French embassy to inspire anarchist activity, yet protected by the London police to temper that very same anarchist enthusiasm, Mr. Verloc, the anarchist who is ironically "thoroughly domesticated" (12), embodies the absurdity produced by his society's blind commitment to activity. Rationalizing the demand of his profession to both feign activity and remain genuinely committed to indolence, he imagines himself as one of the protectors of the social order, which he associates with "hygienic idleness," against the "shallow enviousness of unhygienic labor" (18). His "mission in life being

the protection of the social mechanism, not its perfectionment or even its criticism" (20), Verloc is interested primarily in the uncritical perpetuation of the social order.

Similarly, his wife Winnie's "air of unfathomable indifference" (11) is the defining quality of her character. Her "uninquiring acceptance of facts" is "her force and safeguard in life" (129) that allows her to endure her mindless commitment to Mr. Verloc, a pledge she assumed to ensure a comfortable life for her aging mother and crippled brother. She "felt profoundly that things do not stand much looking into [and] made her force and her wisdom of that instinct" (147). Remaining true to her character, she does not understand the cause she has committed herself to, the protection of Stevie. She "did not investigate her brother's psychology" (141), choosing instead to ascribe all of his vagaries to "the general definition of "excitement"" (155). She does not detect his moral innocence, his inability to rationalize the hypocrisy of moral rhetoric, a naivety that Verloc will manipulate to convince him of the righteousness of his plan.

Mr. Verloc, after all, "had the greatest moral efficiency," because, as Winnie and her mother had conditioned Stevie to believe, "Mr. Verloc was *good*" (146, Conrad's italics). Unlike Winnie, Mr. Verloc "had gauged the depth of Stevie's fanaticism" (188), and he had used their walks together to "modif[y] Stevie's view of the police by conversations full of subtle reasoning" (189). The ignorance that comprises Winnie's identity, providing for her a framework of intelligibility, a "force" and "wisdom" that facilitates her negotiation of an otherwise asinine world, is her undoing as Stevie's protector. Feeling the nature of Stevie's mental infirmity, along with the rest of the world, did "not stand much looking into," she unwittingly

delivers her brother into the machinations of Verloc's plan, of which she is also ignorant, that will result in his gruesome demise.

The Verlocs' respective incurious natures allow their marriage to work, but they are also the cause of their inevitable undoing. Of their marriage, the unnamed narrator asserts:

> For reasons involved in the very foundation of his psychology, Mr. Verloc was inclined to put his trust in any woman who had given herself to him. Therefore he trusted his wife. Their accord was perfect, but it was not precise. It was a tacit accord, congenial to Mrs. Verloc's incuriosity and to Mr. Verloc's habits of mind, which were indolent and secret. They refrained from going to the bottom of facts and motives. (200)

The Verlocs' shared commitment to refraining from "going to the bottom of facts and motives" unifies them in isolation from one another. Their "perfect" marriage supports their individual ends—Mr. Verloc's indolent habits, and Winnie's desire to protect her mother and brother—but it is "not precise," as they remain oblivious of each other's intentions.[93] Their marriage is made tenuous by the absence of shared understanding. Mr. Verloc's failure to comprehend the importance of Stevie to Winnie's identity as his guardian makes him incapable of predicting her reaction to his death. Though Winnie's movements were "leisurely enough for Mr. Verloc to elaborate a plan of defence," he lacks the framework for understanding her intentions, and the knife "met no resistance on its way" (212-213). Though the news of Stevie's death implanted within Winnie a murderous rage, she too did not realize the extent of his significance to her. By killing her husband, the man who provided

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[93] "Irony as Theme: Conrad's *The Secret Agent*," *The Secret Agent: A Casebook Edited by Ian Watt.* Robert Spector writes: "[Verloc] is no more aware of his wife's feelings, thoughts, and motivations than she is of his."

the comfort that all of her aspirations were aimed toward, she found herself "perfectly in accord" (213) with her dead husband. The literal deathblow had an equal metaphorical effect on Winnie. Just three minutes after she had stabbed her husband and attained "a perfection of freedom" (213) she could no longer imagine a place for herself in the world and had "formed the resolution to drown herself in the Thames" (218).

Despite the tragic outcomes yielded by their habitual ignorance, it does not seem like honesty was ever a possibility for the Verlocs. Mr. Verloc's death, Jonathan Arac notes, comes immediately following his moment of greatest sincerity.[94] He was simply not able to communicate with his wife, to make her appreciate the complexity of the situation that resulted in Stevie's death, because he was ignorant of the centrality of Stevie to her character. Winnie's unquestioned acquiescence to her murderous impulse leaves her in a similarly precarious position. She never truly attains freedom, Ludwig Schnauder explains, as she is "not able to imagine a relationship on any other terms [than those of her marriage with Verloc]."[95] Winnie regards the appearance of Comrade Ossipon as fortuitous. Oblivious of the "business-like" (220) manner with which he is looking at her, he appears to her as a "radiant messenger of life" (222). She is unable to understand the situation from his perspective, a mistake that leads to her demise. Ossipon lives up to his reputation as a manipulative womanizer; he deceives her into trusting him with her money and abandons her once his desire has been fulfilled.

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[94] "Romanticism, the Self, and the City: *The Secret Agent* in Literary History," p. 87
[95] *Free Will and Determinism in Joseph Conrad's Major Novels*, p. 239

The Verlocs are able to live comfortable lives until their routines are disrupted. Unable to act habitually, they are faced with the disagreeable task of thought. Yet they find themselves as ignorant of their own desires as they are of those of the people that surround them. Their routines shelter them from destabilizing scrutiny, making them incapable of the self-awareness they need to avoid catastrophe. Winnie's freedom is so complete, J. Hillis Miller argues, that it is terrifying.[96] Upon hearing of Stevie's death she could not "see what there was to keep her in the world at all" (204). Sheltered within an almost complete ignorance, Winnie is forced to look beyond the meaning generated by her role in society. She finds that there never was anything keeping her in the world other than the purpose she had constructed regarding the maintenance of her family's material comfort. She was so devoted to her cause that she became consumed by it. Denied her identity as her brother's guardian, Winnie is confronted with the terrifying knowledge that there no longer is a place for her in the world. Her marriage, providing her with the role of the wife, is not the stable source of identity it appears to be. Her domestic identity, one predicated on a commitment to just one other person, her husband, should not be so easily misinterpreted as the political and professional identities of the novel's other characters, roles whose definitions are dependent upon the participation of a countless number of individuals. That the Verlocs can practice

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[96] "*From* Poets of Reality," *The Secret Agent: A Casebook Edited by Ian Watt*, p. 184. Miller writes: "Winnie Verloc, after she learns of Stevie's death, is a 'free woman'. Her freedom is such a terrifying completeness that she cannot see 'what there [is] to keep her in the world at all' (p. 251). … Similar shocks destroy the unthinking insulation of other characters. Winnie is the central figure only because she goes from the most complete innocence to the most shattering knowledge of what lies beyond the world…."

such an antithetical notion of marriage, one that unites them only in isolation from one another, is representative of the perverse framework of intelligibility that their society promotes.

The society of *The Secret Agent* shields its citizens from uncertainty by providing for them a framework of intelligibility that presents itself as beyond the need for scrutiny. Offering its citizens defined functions ready for their consumption, it conditions indolence through the removal of the need for them to see beyond themselves. Problems of communicability arise, however, as the assumptions that these functions are predicated upon are not as stable as they seem. The misalignment of purportedly shared frameworks of intelligibility results in destruction, a gruesome fact of which the Verlocs are a powerful example. The ostensible reliability of categories of social identity dissuades the self-examination that would be necessary to avoid the destruction that is the Verlocs' fate. Yet the world is only intelligible for the characters of *The Secret Agent* through their adherence to the assumptions that rest on those categories. The framework of intelligibility of the society of *The Secret Agent*, its ideology, thus is totalizing; its inescapability reifies its own significance making it even more difficult for its citizens to escape.

The Professor, more than any other character in the novel, demonstrates the indefatigability of the totalizing ideology the society of *The Secret Agent* promotes. He possesses a capacity for self-examination that the novel's other characters lack, yet it is only inspired by his own personal failures. Confronted with the realization that positions of authority and influence could not be attained "by the sheer weight

of merit alone," he seeks to expose "the true nature of the world, whose morality was artificial, corrupt, and blasphemous" (72). The societal narratives that he derides exhibit their resilience by absorbing his disenchantment. Unable to escape the abstract categories through which his society generates values, he is not able to discard morality as a flawed paradigm. He, too, imagines himself as a "moral agent" (73), albeit one bent on exposing the hypocrisy of the legal order. His new morality serves his own ends, "the appearances of power and prestige" (73), but, as a revolutionary zeal "prepared by personal impulses disguised into creeds" (72), it also legitimates the hypocritical rules of the game that prompted his disavowal of his society's morality. Though he is an anarchist determined to tear down the system, his own morality does not change the methods by which the corrupt system operates, it only tailors them to serve his own interests. The strength of his society's ideology is demonstrated by the inability of the Professor, the novel's strongest expression of an anarchist truly opposed to the social order, to even imagine what resistance to the social mechanism would entail.

Unable to conceive of a departure from the means by which his society generates meaning, the Professor is made to appear pathetically insignificant. Scorned by society, his extreme resentment demands that he rebel against it. Since he cannot imagine an alternative social organization, his rebellion necessitates his own destruction. Envisaging his willingness to die as the source of his "sheer, naked, inglorious heroism" (60), his greatest fear—his "mistrust of mankind. What if nothing could move them?"—is not unfounded. The detonator he ensures is always on his person is the strength of his resistance. Walking on the crowded London

streets he is able to "meditate confidently on his power, keeping his hand in the left pocket of his trousers, grasping the lightly indiarubber ball, the supreme guarantee of his sinister freedom" (73). His willingness to sacrifice himself does not make him powerful, though. The masses do not want to place their framework of intelligibility under scrutiny. Rather than a man who has attained power and prestige, the Professor continues along "like a pest in a street full of men" (250).

Society is Conrad's answer to the inscrutable mystery to which *The Secret Agent* is responding. It exists to oppose the unknowable, to provide a readily accessible framework of intelligibility that precludes its citizens' need for self-examination. As the Professor notes, "Mankind…does not know what it wants" (245), but society ensures that it does not need to ask what it wants. The London of *The Secret Agent*, J. Hillis Miller argues, "generates its own darkness, an especially human one … an obscurity made of illusion, fatuity, and blindness, the blindness of five million people who agree with Winnie Verloc, that 'life doesn't stand much looking into.'"[97] Society exists to make possible an existence that does not stand much looking into. Erecting barriers between self-assured subjects that have no use for understanding one another, it facilitates the indolent habits of mind of Mr. Verloc, enables Winnie's dearth of curiosity, and ostracizes the Professor for trying to communicate with them, to move them to comprehend the hypocrisy they perpetuate.

The machinations of identity make possible the reign of such a conspiracy of blindness. Just as Marlow cannot detect the significance of his own tales, the London

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[97] "From *Poets of Reality*," *The Secret Agent: A Casebook Edited by Ian Watt*, p. 180

of *The Secret Agent*, despite having been built by people, Ludwig Schnauder explains, "has slipped from their control."[98] Identity affords people the rational-self possession that allows them to act, but its importance constrains introspection. The framework of intelligibility that identity provides prompts the devotion to the status quo shared by Marlow and the Verlocs, as the status quo is what allows them to make sense of their environment. Ruminating on the bleak outlook produced in Conrad's fiction, Harold Bloom contends: "If the truth is too dark altogether, then we turn to a fiction, not to evade the truth entirely, but to pay some final tribute to the courage of our broken idealism."[99] The dark truth is that there does not exist anything beyond the idealism upon which identity is predicated. Conspicuous fissures pervade that idealism, as it is only an imperfect human response to an otherwise unintelligible world. Marlow must continue to tell his tales in order to express his identity, while the Verlocs risk losing themselves if their routine is disrupted. Identity's enabling restrictions preclude the possibility of man controlling himself and his society; they make the world intelligible, but they prevent man from examining that world, unless he is willing to risk his own destruction.

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[98] *Free Will and Determinism in Joseph Conrad's Major Novels*, p. 199
[99] *Marlow*, p. 3

Conclusion

In Conrad's fiction civilization is the distinctly human response to a formless natural world devoid of intelligible meaning. Echoing Nietzsche's theory of the foundational metaphor, civilization possesses an undeniably subjective element that resists categorization. Nonetheless, classifications, the basis of the frameworks of significance that make the world intelligible for mankind, must be constructed in order to make expression of the human experience possible. Once they are formed—and projected beyond their human origins—they ossify, creating a discord between observed reality and the ideologies that purportedly govern that reality.

Conrad is frequently gesturing toward this ubiquitous tension between observed reality and the ideas by which it is ostensibly governed. In a letter sent to Sir Sidney Colvin, an English man of letters, in March of 1917, toward the end of his literary career, Conrad argues that his pursuit of these ideas unites the body of his work:

> Perhaps you won't find it presumption if, after twenty-two years of work, I may say that I have not been very well understood. I have been called a writer of the sea, of the tropics, a descriptive writer, a romantic writer—and also a realist. But as a matter of fact all my concern has been with the 'ideal' value of things, events and people. That and nothing else.[100]

The ideal, the material of all of the formulas, dogmas, and principles that he subverts in his fiction, is the progenitor of the moral paradox that pervades his work. That these moral paradoxes stubbornly evade resolution is Conrad's acknowledgment that man's existence as a moral creature is an impossibility. Universal systems of meaning, including morality, cannot possibly capture the dizzying complexity of the

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[100] An excerpt of this letter can be found on page 3 of W.M. Wallace Bancroft's *Joseph Conrad: His Philosophy of Life*.

human experience. The refrains that function as Marlow's concluding judgments of Kurtz and Jim serve to remind us, as Edward Said notes, just how unique each individual and his experiences are.[101] Conrad implores us to probe beyond the 'ideas' and 'dreams' that are the comfortable end points of the inquiries of his characters.

The subtle, though persistent, presence of the natural, non-human world throughout Conrad's fiction reminds the reader of the necessarily fictitious basis of civilization. It provides the stable ground against which Conrad can present his analysis of humanity's salutary, though problematic, edifice. The natural world, though, is not represented by Conrad as part of any solution for his insatiable faith, for the impossibility of any universal system of meaning. It remains on the periphery of his novels, barely detectable. Yet its enduring presence incessantly imbues Conrad's fiction with its defining irreconcilable moral paradox. Never out of sight, even in the urban London of *The Secret Agent*, the natural world remains as a reminder that civilization is not the stable referent it claims to be.

Amidst the destabilizing backdrop of nature, Conrad's characters never cease their pursuit of meaning. Marlow's narratives, his pursuit of "that full utterance" that is his "only and abiding intention" (170, *Lord Jim*), are Conrad's richest treatment of such hopeless inquiries. Far from attaining clarity, Marlow's tales subvert the possibility of certainty; they only dramatize, as Claude Maisonnat notes,

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[101] "Conrad: The Presentation of Narrative," *Critical Essays on Joseph Conrad*, ed. Ted Billy, p. 41.

the inescapability of interpretation.[102] The unavoidable subjective interpreter, the individual who is experiencing reality, limits the similarities that can be shared by the experiences of different individuals, or at the very least complicates the potential possessed by different individuals to communicate those similarities to one another.

Conrad's emphasis on interpretation is certainly attended by an appeal for awareness. His use of Marlow as a failed interpreter, especially one who cannot parse the conspicuous tension he feels concerning the divergence of his observed reality from the ideas that purportedly govern it, emphasizes his exploration of the manner by which Western Civilization represents itself to itself. This exploration undermines the basis on which Chinua Achebe's accusations of Conrad as a racist rest.[103] Marlow's language is not deliberately racist, as he cannot identify himself without his racist ideology. The West, like Marlow, would have to cease to be itself in order to understand that self.

Conrad, seeking to foreground this incapacity for self-examination, makes his stories nearly unintelligible. *The Secret Agent* is subsumed by inscrutable mystery, its characters trapped within a nebulous web of misaligned assumptions from which they cannot escape, while the books containing Marlow's tales are frequently critically interpreted as being defined by their inscrutability and thematic denial of all possible answers.[104] Marlow's narratives themselves evade both his own

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[102] "The voice of darkness," *Conrad's* Heart of Darkness *And Contemporary Thought*, ed. Nidesh Lawtoo, p. 175.
[103] "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'"
[104] One notable example is Alan Warren Friedman's argument in "Conrad's Picaresque Narrator." On page 78 he writes: "*Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim* …

understanding and that of his audience. The unnamed narrator of *Heart of Darkness* stresses Marlow's incomprehensibility when he notifies the reader of the immanent account of another of "Marlow's inconclusive experiences" (8). Marlow's resolution of his quest with the lie to the Intended, his retreat back within the consoling fiction of his society's ideology, a narrative that has been revealed to him as illusory by his observation of its perverse application in the Congo, is the darkness at the heart of the novels. He is unwilling to face the uncertainty of the world independent of the mask of ideology that makes it intelligible. Accordingly, his tale, presented as a critique of the vapid moral intentions behind the brutal suppression of the natives of the Congo, is devoid of moral consequence: the novel begins, with the *Nellie* awaiting the turn of the tide aboard the Thames, which is "stretched before us like the beginning of an interminable waterway" (3), just as it ends, with the ship ready to commence its journey along "the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth" (96).

Conrad posits identity as the mechanism of rational-self possession that enables the individual's navigation of the formless and uncertain world. It is the best solution to his need for faith, yet it also restricts the critical capacity for self-examination, a vital faculty that would have made it possible for Marlow to denounce the transparently hypocritical ideology by which he identifies himself without destroying his ability to understand the world. Identity's salutary elements, the saving illusions it preserves for the individual, are, the narrator of *The Secret Agent* informs us, the best we can hope to achieve:

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remain two of Conrad's inscrutable fictions because they both raise such questions [of Marlow's awareness] and seem to deny all the possible answers."

> No man engaged in a work he does not like can preserve many saving illusions about himself. The distaste, the absence of glamour, extend from the occupation to the personality. It is only when our appointed activities seem by a lucky accident to obey the particular earnestness of our temperament that we can taste the comfort of complete self-deception. (96-97)

Conrad is willing to face the world absent these saving illusions. He is brave where Marlow is not, or perhaps he has only found the occupation that fits the particular earnestness of his temperament and allows him the comfort of complete self-deception. It must come as no surprise that his fiction, simultaneously the product of this occupation and a potential testament to his bravery, performs his greatest irony: it is through the narrative process of the medium of fiction that he identifies the various fictions that sustain life. He presents identity as such a fictitious narrative; ironically, it is also offered as the restriction that precludes his characters from identifying it as such.

Identity constructs for mankind intelligibility within the 'midst of the incomprehensible,' yet its existence beyond the faculty of self-examination ensures the production of a reality—and a society—that can amount to nothing more than an enigma that resists understanding. In order to benefit from the intelligibility offered by identity, the individual must sacrifice access to the frameworks of intelligibility of those surrounding him. With the potential for communication foreclosed, the individual must incessantly reproduce the narrative of his own meaning. The meaning of this story, an iteration of which is told by Marlow, the unnamed narrator of *Heart of Darkness* cryptically informs us, "[is] not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that, sometimes, are made

visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine" (6). The narrative's meaning is only brought out by its expression. For the individual navigating a formless world, this expression, the story of identity, can never end. The individual's reliance upon that story, his need to keep telling it, ensures, for Conrad, that it will remain a "misty halo," undetected save for the stories capable of briefly shining light on them, sometimes making them visible through their reproduction of the processes that they endlessly employ to produce meaning.

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