

Genocide and the Romantic: The Characterization of Marlow in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

William Baker

Writer's comment: Although I had read "Heart of Darkness" in a previous class, Dr. Dobbins' approach to the material reinvigorated my interest in Conrad's tale of sadistic imperialism. As I wrote this essay, I began to realize the power of Conrad's novella and the necessity of his decision to tell his story through complex fictional means. His experimental approach towards narration allowed Conrad, like any good journalist or non-fiction writer, to reveal the crimes he witnessed in Africa through his detailed descriptions and haunting imagery. His story-within-a-story-within-a-story approach also let him subtly indict Marlow and those like him (including many of Conrad's readers), those hypocrites who would express perfunctory outrage while profiting from the crimes of empire. For the critical analysis that led to this insight, I thank Dr. Dobbins. Thanks also go to Catherine Fung, whose insightful comments on my essays in English 137 and 146 were of the utmost help.

—*William Baker*

Instructor's comment: William Baker is the kind of student instructors of literature love to have for two reasons: first, he knows how to read—which is to say that he takes his time, lingers over the latent potentiality of the text, entertains the ambiguity of what might be there, and comes up with a tentative path through the contradictory labyrinth of meaning while never forgetting that such meaning can never be absolute (at least in the case of British Modernist literature, the subject of William's class). Second, he is able to articulate all of this—beautifully and forcefully—in his writing concerning that which he has read. I know William Baker almost entirely through his writing in English 137, which includes in addition to this essay an essay just as good about Virginia Woolf's "Mrs. Dalloway;" in both, the reader gets the thrill of watching one think quickly, fluently, and confidently without ever losing control of the argument. And for the instructor of literature, there can be no greater thrill. William's essay on the duality of Conrad's narrative approach in "Heart of Darkness" and its connection to the self-defeating ambiguity of his characterization of Marlowe provides a sense of what I mean more explicitly than I do here.

—*Gregory Dobbins, English Department*

TO DECLARE JOSEPH CONRAD'S *HEART OF DARKNESS* a scathing indictment of imperialism would hardly be a revelation. Truly, one might have difficulty finding another work of fiction which so vividly and hauntingly captures the tragedy and brutality of the 19th century European excursions into Africa; although a Russian Pole by birth and an Englishman by choice, Conrad did not shy away from presenting his piece as a harsh condemnation of what the rulers of his native continent were doing to their southern neighbors. Just as important, though, was the fact that Conrad chose a genre of fiction—the novella—to convey his message, albeit in a decidedly unconventional fashion. Apparently, the dual-narration structure of *Heart of Darkness*—with Marlow relating his story to his friends aboard the *Nellie* on the Thames, one of whom narrates the novella itself—was necessitated by the dictates of *Blackwood's Magazine*, which first published the piece (Charters 344). However, Conrad takes what could have been a limitation on his creativity and transforms it into the very fulcrum on which the narrative turns: namely, the ambiguousness of Marlow's nature. Conrad, of course, could have employed his own experiences in Africa as the basis of some journalistic exposé, something akin to subsequent works like Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*. Instead, he realized the possibilities that only fiction could afford him, for one finds Conrad's critique not so much (as many suppose) in what Marlow describes but in the character of Marlow himself. Truly, the nominal protagonist of *Heart of Darkness* stands in for the hypocrisy of an age. Like so many men of Conrad's time, Marlow expresses disdain for the colonial policies employed on the "Dark Continent," yet he shows little concern for the actual human suffering he encounters there; indeed, he does precious little to reform the colonial system he so despises. Ultimately, Marlow becomes complicit in the genocide and the madness in the Congo, choosing to conceal what he has discovered in Africa to protect the naivete of a lady—Victorian ideals of propriety stretched to conceal even the most heinous of crimes.

If from nothing else, one begins to sense Conrad's implicit criticism of Marlow in the character's extreme detachment from the atrocities around him. Indeed, at times Marlow appears so oddly unaffected by the brutality he witnesses in the Congo that the reader tends to wonder about his sanity. Note, most strikingly, Marlow's description of his first extended view of Kurtz's compound. Looking through a spy-glass, the mariner discovers that someone has decorated the area with poles

capped by human heads; his reaction to this horrifying sight, as he explains it, was not one of shock but of mere "surprise" (57). "I had expected to see a knob of wood there, you know," he tells the men aboard the *Nellie* (57). Marlow's matter-of-fact description ("There was nothing exactly profitable in these heads being there") (57) strikes one as horrifying precisely because it leaves out the expected emotions of such a moment—namely, pity and fear. Marlow's detachment from his experiences comes to the fore again, and perhaps even more fully, in his final confrontation with Kurtz. Before Marlow lies a man slipping towards death, a man whom he has traveled hundreds of miles to meet, whose voice and ideas have come to obsess him. And yet, Marlow views the whole affair in an almost clinical manner; once again, human suffering remains for him a remote concept. "Anything approaching the change that came over his features I have never seen and hope never to see again," Marlow explains, but not with any real sympathy. "Oh, I wasn't touched. I was fascinated" (68).

Throughout *Heart of Darkness* Conrad plays with our expectations as readers, portraying Marlow as apparently capable of genuine emotion, only to reveal the heartlessness beneath that exterior. Perhaps the most striking instance of this approach comes as Marlow recounts the aftermath of the attack on the steamer. Truly, in these passages Marlow seems to reveal a basic humanity, sadly recalling the bloodied remains of his native associate. "I missed my late helmsman awfully—I missed him even while his body was still lying in the pilot house," Marlow admits to his friends aboard the *Nellie* (51). Conrad, however, quickly undercuts the pathos of this scene, with Marlow's own words casting doubt about the probity of the "kinship" he supposedly feels for his African colleague:

Perhaps you will think it passing strange this regret for a savage who was no more account than a grain of sand in a black Sahara. Well, don't you see, he had done something, he had steered; for months I had him at my back—a help—an instrument. It was a kind of partnership. He steered for me—I had to look after him, I worried about his deficiencies, and thus a subtle bond had been created which I only became aware of when it was suddenly broken. (51)

The life of a human reduced to the utility of a nautical tool; one wonders if Marlow would have felt any more remorse had the ship's compass gone missing, or if some particularly useful maps had been blown overboard. Indeed, Marlow callously tosses the dead body of his African "friend" into the river ("Then without more ado I tipped him

overboard") (51), as though disposing of refuse or some defective piece of hardware.

Of course, one might argue that Conrad, far from critiquing his main character, only seeks to reflect the reality of men like Marlow through such a characterization. Indeed, experience can sometimes lead a person to seem detached from events which appear to the novice as uniquely horrifying. However, Conrad goes on to criticize Marlow by portraying him as not only lacking in empathy, but also as being a hypocrite, taking part in the Victorian civilization he so vehemently condemns. Marlow claims to be a man of experience and skill, decrying the great criminal waste of men and material he sees upon arriving to Belgian Africa. Note, for example, Marlow's reaction to a French man-of-war firing upon a seemingly empty coastline ("there wasn't even a shed there") (17), a response which seems to separate him from the madness of the Congo—"there was a touch of insanity in the proceeding" (17). And yet, in later passages Marlow is only too glad to praise the Company's nicely quaffed accountant, a man whose elegant accouterments remain just as useless and incongruous as the French bombardment. "I respected his collars, his vast cuffs his brushed hair," Marlow recalls. "His appearance was certainly that of a hairdresser's dummy, but in the great demoralization of the land he kept up his appearance. That's backbone" (21). Similarly, Marlow reveals his naivete in his more general condemnations of colonialism, making specific delineations between the Belgian methods ("aggravated murder on a great scale") (10) and the British approaches ("one knows some real work is done there") (13), as though the English are somehow blameless in the realm of imperial crimes.

It might be argued, of course, that Marlow himself makes these comments with a keen sense of sarcasm or irony. Indeed, one could claim the "double-narration" structure of the text obscures such a playful tone, thereby making this aspect of Marlow's personality unclear. The sailor's own actions, however, suggest that his comments are of a serious nature, and that he ultimately accepts the decadent "civilization" he claims to oppose. As the narrative comes to a close, Marlow visits Kurtz's fiancée, perhaps intending to reveal to her the truth about her beloved, the "justice which was [Kurtz's] due" (76). Yet, when confronted by the young woman ("I want[...]something to live with") (75), Marlow's chivalric tendencies take over, and he offers her a comforting lie rather than a harsh but potentially illuminating truth—

“The last word he pronounced was—your name” (75). Initially, this romanticism would seem to be at odds with Marlow’s nature (“You know I hate, detest, and can’t bear a lie”) (29), and yet Conrad has carefully revealed the sailor’s idealized but demeaning attitudes towards women earlier in the text. “We must help them to stay in the beautiful world of their own lest ours get worse,” Marlow explains aboard the *Nellie*, and in this throw-away remark Conrad reveals Marlow as incapable of offering with any kind of authority the final condemnation of this society and its ill-conceived exploits (49). He is a romantic disguised as a cynic—scratch a little and his hard-bitten exterior, his emphasis on the truth and his willingness to reveal the crimes in Africa, crumbles beneath a love of country and the need to protect that most important of commodities: a young woman’s virtue.

In a more fundamental sense, that Marlow even finds himself able to convey his story at such length to the men aboard the *Nellie* stands as perhaps the clearest expression of his Victorian ideals and his overriding romanticism. If the mariner were truly affected or disturbed by his time in the Congo, the experience would seem to him beyond communication: only one who had seen and felt “the horror” of Belgian African firsthand (as Marlow has) could even hope to wrestle with its disturbing realities. “I had—for my sins, I suppose—to go through the ordeal of looking into myself,” Marlow notes, yet this is nothing more than an instance of self-deception (65): such an “ordeal” would be a highly personal experience, not a parlor-story to be shared with one’s friends. Far from “looking into himself,” Marlow seems intent on making more sweeping (and banal) pronouncements regarding the state of the world around him. Particularly revealing is Marlow’s subtle assertion that the rape of Africa by European “civilization”—which he, of course, claims to abhor—in time may stand as a necessary hiccup on the road of progress, much as England had to be conquered and cultured by the Romans. “And this also has been one of the dark places of the earth,” Marlow reminds his compatriots aboard the *Nellie* as they look out upon the Thames at sunset; he justifies murder in the larger scheme of historical evolution (9). Again, the dual-narration structure becomes important in Conrad’s conception of the story, allowing the author to conveniently limit how much he chooses to disclose about Marlow’s true nature. After all, if Marlow were the sole narrator, his hypocritical comments about imperialism (made directly to the reader) would be too much, a too facile revelation about his personality and beliefs.

However, because Marlow tells the story to his colleagues—colleagues none too taken with his “inconclusive experiences” (11)—one must continually wonder what part of these remarks functions as deeply held conviction, and what part stands merely as embellishment for the sake of good storytelling.

And yet, either possibility remains for Conrad an indictment of Marlow. On the one hand, if the sailor’s story is wholly true, he emerges as a delusional romantic, putting the worst of human experiences into the conventions of the 19th century “travel narrative” and preferring to observe Victorian social niceties rather than to reveal what he has discovered while on the Company’s business. On the other hand, if his story is laced with invention, he becomes little more than a fool, turning tragedy of the highest order into (paradoxically) a night’s good fun. By the end of *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow supposes Kurtz to have gone insane, yet before his death the doomed ivory trader came to a moment of understanding about his experiences in the Congo. Contrastingly, in an evening of rambling and purple prose, Marlow cannot capture the same simple clarity Kurtz achieved in his final moments. “The horror! The horror!” Kurtz exclaims as he slips away (68), and the truth of European colonialism lies in those words for Marlow to discover, if he so desires. But for all his talk of hating lies, Marlow remains only too willing to deceive Kurtz’s beloved—the truth of imperialism and its madness are less important than maintaining a woman’s blissful ignorance. There, then, one finds Marlow’s failure—he remains, after all, just as complicit in the Company as any other agent, perhaps more so. For men like the Manager admit to being interested in Africa solely “[t]o make money, of course” (23). Marlow, however, claims higher ideals, only to betray these ideals for meager rewards: a woman’s innocence, a good story to tell one’s sailing chums.

Works Cited

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