

BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL: MARLOW'S AMBIVALENT ALLEGIANCE IN *HEART OF DARKNESS*

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ABSTRACT

Viewing the colonial novel through the lens of the Odyssey theme, the protagonist's physical movement from the familiar Western world into an alien terrain becomes profound, as this endeavour proves to be an epic journey that changes the protagonist's conception of the civilisation in which he was born, raised, and, more importantly, reshapes the moral and social codes that define this civilisation. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is among the best-known works of this theme, as its ominous title suggests a prophetic pilgrimage that is heading, blindfold, for an impenetrable mystery, and Marlow, one of the novel protagonists, Alice-like, grows and shrinks as he delves deeper and deeper into the jungle. Observing Marlow's sentimental journey in the heart of darkness closely, this paper seeks to examine the attempt Marlow makes to define the civilisation in which he was nurtured and the ambivalent allegiance he thus pledges.

Keywords: Conrad, Colonialism, Morality.

INTRODUCTION

Viewing the colonial novel through the lens of the Odyssey theme, the protagonist's physical movement from the familiar Western world into an alien terrain becomes profound, as this endeavour proves to be an epic journey that changes the protagonist's conception of the civilisation in which he was born, raised, and, more importantly, reshapes the moral and social codes that define this civilisation. Travelling from the presumed centre of the civilised world to a primitive territory, the protagonist negotiates the passage attentively, yet this peregrination, having been transformed from a Gulliver-like travelogue into a spiritual voyage of self-discovery, forces him to undergo a psychological, if not physical, reconstruction. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is among the best-known works of this theme, as its ominous title suggests a prophetic pilgrimage that is heading, blindfold, for an impenetrable mystery, and Marlow, one of the novel protagonists, Alice-like, grows and shrinks as he delves deeper and deeper into the jungle. To précis the impact this experience has upon him, Marlow states: "It was the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience. It seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me – and into my thoughts" (Joseph Conrad, 11). Seeing from this aspect, Marlow's peregrination can thus be understood on three related levels. First of all, it is an actual, physical voyage from the heart of Europe to Africa; secondly, it is Marlow's moral journey from naïveté to sophistication as he confronts the uncivilised wilderness; and finally, through observing the workings of imperialism, it denotes Marlow's psychological venture from the known to the unknown (Robert Hampson). As Marlow graphically relates his brief yet complex encounter with Kurtz to his audiences, he delves, not just into the impenetrable darkness of Africa, but also more deeply into the innermost recesses of his own thoughts.

DISCUSSION

To probe the transformation Marlow undergoes, his sentimental journey towards the so-called Dark Continent is divided into three distinctive phases: prior to Marlow's departure from Europe, his brief stay in the Congo region and his eventual homecoming to Europe. And similar to the opening of *Almayer's Folly*, *Heart of Darkness* begins with dreams of glory. A group of passengers, on board the yawl Nellie, are waiting for the tide to turn to enable their departure. Waiting patiently on the deck of Nellie, they are bound to follow the river, like many before them, to meet their destinies. Brooding over this great history of adventures and explorations, the anonymous frame-narrator speaks with romantic eloquence of all the great men who have sailed forth on the Thames: "Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame, they all had gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire" (Joseph Conrad, 8). For this narrator, the "hunters for gold" or the "pursuers of fame" are the conveyors of Empire. Embodying the ordinance and glory of Empire, these men have not only conquered territories with their swords, but dispersed the darkness of "an unknown earth" with their torches. While this unnamed narrator romanticises the noble idea of imperialism and praises these colonialists as Empire builders, Marlow, the only passenger on board who is still "follow[ing] the sea", observes the glorious achievements accomplished by the colonialists in a different light (Joseph Conrad, 9). The grandeur of London is somehow, in Marlow's eyes, illusory. In the face of the city's splendour, Marlow, the main narrator and also the vehicle for the author's own voice, sees only "one of the dark places of the earth". Bounded together by neither social contract nor moral code, under the façade of civility and law, for Marlow, London is indeed an unlit place, a real "heart of darkness". Armed with his critical eyes, before embarking on his journey of a lifetime, Marlow himself occupies an unusual margin of the ambivalent insider. He has genuinely been burdened with his foresight.

Marlow's doubts about the "emissaries of light" becomes obvious when he begins to question the enlightened project the European colonists assign themselves to, for being a European working for a trading company that is run for profit, on a first glimpse, Marlow himself is undoubtedly a member of the colonial enterprise, a politico-economic category he deeply criticises. Although he embraces a different set of values to his colleagues', that alone cannot exorcise him from the moral unease felt for taking part, regardless of how small this part is, in a collective conspiracy that strangles Africa: "After all, I also was a part of the great cause of these high and just proceedings" (19). The sober, self-deprecating tone indicates Marlow's reluctance to accept this unwanted yet undeniable membership. Alone in the club administered for profit, Marlow learns of the story of Kurtz. "That man" as the manager calls him, a reference that marks Kurtz's otherness, represents a redeeming light from utter darkness, a radiant hope by which Marlow wishes to cut through his disillusionment about colonialism. Marlow seeks comradeship in Kurtz, the leader of the so-called "gang of virtue" who, unlike the predatory colonist colleagues who plunder Africa for personal voracity, braves the jungle with a deliberate belief – an "ideal" that Marlow believes to be necessary to motivate and justify the European invasion of Africa.

Between the gangs of "virtue" and the "vultures", there could be no doubt about which end of the spectrum Marlow leans towards. Although the choice Marlow made here attests to his moral framework, in which right and wrong may readily be defined, it also proves to be fraught with controversy. It must be remembered that Marlow unilateral alliance with Kurtz is forged before their encounter has occurred; without physical contact, the man Marlow idolises at this stage is an individual whose idealist image he projected out of some

fragmentary rhetoric and descriptions, which is in turn propagated in the stories told by other faithless trading agents. In effect, the allegiance Marlow dedicates to Kurtz is founded upon the ideas Kurtz represents, yet they have no bearing on the real character of the man. Without a shred of evidence to support the idealised image of Kurtz, Marlow is subjected to a formidable challenge while attempting to warrant the credibility of his narration. While physical contact between them remains unattainable, Kurtz, the most ideal representative of the civilised values, is simply a “word” – symbolic yet unsubstantial – to Marlow. Like the mythical Siren, Kurtz is calling Marlow from the heart of the lawless jungle with a voice full of mystery. Upon Kurtz’s words rest Marlow’s conceptions as to who his hero is, what his facts are and how to survive the temptation of unrestrained power. “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other word would smell as sweet”. Unlike the confident assertion by Juliet in Shakespeare’s *Romeo & Juliet*, Marlow has only the name to cling to in his fantasy about Kurtz. And Kurtz’s talent in rhetoric certainly drums up the expectation. Conrad characterises Kurtz as “eloquent”, nonetheless, as Jeremy Hawthorn notes, “eloquent” is a phrase Conrad hardly uses innocently: by it he nearly always implies a morally questionable talent with words, an ability to build beautiful verbal structures which are at variance with what is really the case. Language is indeed deceptive in Conrad’s fictional world, for what is being said can never capture the essence of the action that takes place; behind the power of oratory always hides character flaws. As the drama evolves and more disturbing details referring to Kurtz’s lone quest at the heart of the wilderness are uncovered, Marlow, who has invented the saint-like identity of Kurtz in order to mitigate the moral discomfort he has suffered in the region where “the merry dance of death and trade” is routinely performed (Joseph Conrad, 17), is compelled to accept the shocking reality that behind the solid and quixotic image of Kurtz lies a fathomless abyss. Marlow cannot find Kurtz where he thinks he is; the embodiment of the Enlightenment melts into thin air. Can Marlow himself navigate out of this disorientation?

External referents are symbolic translations of internal issues and, at the end, Marlow’s assiduous study of Kurtz constitutes no less than an expedition into his own innermost thoughts. At the start of his journey, Marlow states that “I was curious to see whether this man who had come out equipped with moral ideas of some sort would climb to the top after all and how he would set about his work when there” (Joseph Conrad, 33). With such a mingling of hope and scepticism, Marlow proceeds up the muddy, glistening river toward the heart of the Dark Continent, where the “remarkable” Mr. Kurtz stays.

The upstream navigation to Kurtz is likened to “travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world” (Joseph Conrad, 35), a metaphor that alludes to a reversion of civilisation. Whilst the familiar structure of referents determining the boundary between the civilised and the primitive become indistinct, Marlow finds himself sailing into a dense fog of ambiguity, where the moral imperatives he accepts as axiomatic cease to exist. Marlow is soon to discover that the standards of the civilised world quickly lose their relevance as the wilderness dominates. Time has no meaning here, and facts are irrelevant. Whilst the seemingly strong, impenetrable sane men choose to retain their sanity by waltzing their way round the tricky slope of barbarism, their movement is hasty and judgement rough. No space is allowed for deliberation: when one loses customary civilised securities, individuals have no option but to trust their innate strength and faith in order to survive. Having set Kurtz on a pedestal for the virtues he apparently represents, Marlow soon suffers an ultimate defeat in discovering that the innate strength and silent dedication to civilisation, which he believes to constitute a strong shield against barbarism, is what Kurtz is short of.

Although depicted as the embodiment of European's noblest values, Kurtz's approach to Africa does have much in common with that of his predatory colleagues. In fact, he pursues the same sordid goals as his colleagues, but with greater energy and, consequently, with less restraint. In the great solitude of the jungle, he has failed to heed the external and internal restraints, offering himself completely to the dark forces lurking inside. As a result, Kurtz has sacrificed those ideas that brought him to the wilderness, and accepted "unspeakable rites" performed in his honour (Joseph Conrad, 50). In Kurtz's kingdom of Darkness, "everything belonged to him", but for Marlow, the observer/narrator-turned-moral explorer, the most important thing is to know "what he belonged to, how many powers of darkness claimed him for their own" (Joseph Conrad, 49).

Marlow learns of the catastrophic consequence of Kurtz's lone quest through the wilderness from two opposite camps: Kurtz's Russian apostle, and his rival agents. Although insisting that Kurtz should not be judged as and by "ordinary" people, nevertheless, Kurtz's Russian apostle cannot deny a plain yet discomfiting fact that, in exercising the power bestowed upon him by Europe, Kurtz has "raided the country" (Joseph Conrad, 56). A similar accusation can also be found in Marlow's conversation with the company's manager, whose approach towards Africa is strictly economic. "There is no disguising the fact, Mr. Kurtz has done more harm than good to the company. He did not see the time was not ripe for vigorous action ... because the method is unsound" (Joseph Conrad, 61), the manager observes. Tried by a follower and a rival, the united account regarding Kurtz's journey towards Enlightenment these two men deliver attests to the fact that, carrying the arrogant isolation of the colonialist to its extreme, Kurtz has lost self-restraint and any notion of moral conduct. Without this inner template to guide his journey through the jungle, Kurtz soon succumbs to the temptation, the self-appointed God is transformed into a Devil. Behind the surface of civilisation lies only a sham and fraud. For someone who attempts to use Kurtz as an example to explain, if not explain away, the atrocity inflicted on the natives in the name of the Enlightenment, the disillusionment Marlow suffers cannot be more dramatic.

Whilst imputing Kurtz's crime of genocide to his lack of self-restraint, Marlow also raises doubts about the role Europe plays in Kurtz's moral degeneration. Condemning the imperial power that supports Kurtz, Marlow declares that "All Europe contributed to the making of Mr. Kurtz" (Joseph Conrad, 50). Europe, the centre of civilisation in which Kurtz was born and raised, imparts to Kurtz not only the noble ideas of the improvement of life for the natives in Africa, but also the drive to effect that transformation by economic means. Without restraint – not a capital virtue among those so impatiently committed to such ends and means – economic activity, compromised and led by greed, comes to destroy the ends it was intended to affect. In this respect, Europe is Kurtz and should be held accountable for being Kurtz's partner in crime, a crime committed openly and shamelessly in the name of progress.

Seeking Kurtz, an allegedly civilised man, in the depths of the uncivilised territory, Marlow is himself exposed to the very temptation that consumes his idol. Whilst Kurtz "had stepped over the edge" of humanity, Marlow "had been permitted to draw back [his] hesitating foot" from "that inappreciable moment of time in which we stop over the threshold of the invisible" (Joseph Conrad, 69). Like Coleridge's ancient mariner, Marlow is spared, but for "[going] through the ordeal of looking into it" (Joseph Conrad, 65), he is now endowed with the knowledge and will have to bear this knowledge of the darker side of man for the rest of his life. For ridding Marlow, and by extension, the readers, of their blissful ignorance, Kurtz becomes the real hero whose story smashes any justification for colonialism and the Enlightenment ideals which are appropriated as a window dressing.

For that reason, even though Kurtz's method is "unsound" and his soul has gone "mad", for Marlow, the official biographer of Kurtz, he remains a remarkable man. Marlow's reasoning is probably empirical and psychological; Kurtz wins Marlow's admiration by exhibiting a heroic strength of will – "he has something to say" and "he said it" (Joseph Conrad, 69). "The horror! The horror!", Kurtz "had summed up – he had judged". The words at Kurtz's deathbed cannot lift him to redemption; nevertheless, they drive him back to where he used to belong: the realm of the moral. Kurtz's life at the heart of the wilderness is by no means the textbook model of righteousness and honesty, but his final verdict on the crime he has committed serves as a warning for the latecomers and ensures his status as a thoughtful man. Despite knowing the cost of Kurtz's infamous conquest, which is "paid by innumerable defeats, by abominable terrors and by abominable satisfaction", Marlow nevertheless applauds it for a moral victory (70). To borrow Rita Dove's phrase, "Sometimes a moment is a monument"; to Marlow, the reputation of his hero should remain intact, for Kurtz, in a way like no one else's, had learned and accepted the flaws in himself and the fragile promises of the Enlightenment.

Having exposed himself to the very factor that claims most of the Europeans their morality and sanity, Marlow returns to Europe a changed man. His journey has taken him to the heart of darkness where the elusive truth remains unspeakable, and he is, accordingly, obliged to tell a lie, for the truth "would have been too dark – too dark altogether ..." (Joseph Conrad, 76). Solidarity demands Marlow's silence in that it provides an identity to which he, as an individual, subscribes. By providing this security, it requires a minimum obedience to consensus, which is, at times, unquestionable. Whoever violates this golden rule of solidarity is therefore condemned to exile. In the case of colonialism, as the overwhelming belief among self-regarding Europeans exalt the benevolent intentions of the Enlightenment, the true story of Kurtz would be seen either as an exception or irrelevant to the grand project. The unbearable darkness is never in the script. And it never will be. Reflecting upon his African adventure, Marlow's experience is that there are no depths we cannot sink to while a viable standard cannot be found. Voluntary self-restraint serves merely as an inadequate brake – the shine of unprincipled self-discipline comes off once the rugged reality impacts on the fragile surface.

This is the "hidden truth" that Marlow discovers in the deepest of the jungle, or rather at the innermost of man's heart. And this knowledge is difficult for Marlow to share with his fellow Europeans. Because "with solid pavement under [their] feet, surrounded by kind neighbours ready to cheer [them] or fall on [them], stepping delicately between the butcher and the policeman", they cannot possibly imagine "what particular region of the first ages of man's untrammelled feet may take him into by the way of solitude – utter solitude without a policeman – by the way of silence – utter silence, where no warning voice of a kind neighbour can be heard whispering of public opinion" (50). Marlow remains silent about his epic journey to the African wilderness, thereby allowing his fellow Europeans to continue to live in a world of "sunny illusion", a world of blissful ignorance from which he has now been cast out" (Martin Tucker, 30).

Europe's aspiration, or rather Kurtz's aspiration, to become a superman, in hind sight, of course, turns out to be a super struggle and, subsequently, super disaster. It is thus in Marlow's disillusionment with imperialism that Conrad invites us to bear witness to the moral perils of superimposing idealism on the so-called barbarians. By entering this moral vacuum, he unwittingly involves himself in an irreversible path down into the precarious power relationship. In his lone pursuit of moral superiority, Kurtz loses the company with

whom he shares a common value system. Without any support from that moral community, Kurtz's high-mindedness finds no collaborator, no conversant, and no interpellator. The destitution is devastating. On the one hand, his isolation from the Western civilisation deprives him of the vital source of self-identity; on the other, the self-righteous hubris he displays puts him on a par with any other agent he despises. Indeed, Kurtz is merely another imperialist with a moralistic penchant.

CONCLUSION

In his search for Kurtz in the heart of the Black Continent, Marlow enters what Arnold van Gennep calls a liminal state, as he not only leaves the world he is familiar with, but more importantly, crosses the border between the civilized world and the uncivilized world. No matter how carefully he prepares for his journey to find Kurtz, his understanding of the situation is far from the reality. In the banal familiarity of everyday life, it is a comforting thought to believe that individuals remain steadfast in the face of change. Likewise, it is often taken for granted that the leaders of the so-called civilized world will remain true to their beliefs and give birth to babies of the Enlightenment. The impact of this traumatic experience completely changes Marlow, showing him how fragile faith is and how complex human nature is. There is no return to innocence. The silence Marlow maintains after the journey retains him with the gang of complicity. To Conrad, the secret has been broken.

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