Joseph Conrad
1857-1924

(Born Todor Josef Konrad Nalecz Korzeniowski) Polish born
English novelist, novella and short story writer, essayist, and
autobiographer.

The following entry presents criticism of Conrad’s novella Heart
of Darkness. For a complete discussion of Conrad’s career, see TCLC, Vols. 1 and 6.

Heart of Darkness is considered one of the greatest short novels
in the English language. On the surface it is a dreamlike tale
of mystery and adventure set in central Africa; however, it is
also the story of a man’s symbolic journey into his own inner
being. A profusion of vivid details that are significant on both
literal and symbolic levels contributes to the ambiguity of Con-
rad’s narrative and has led to conflicting interpretations of its
meaning.

Like many of Conrad’s novels and short stories, Heart of Dark-
ness is based in part upon the author’s personal experiences.
In 1890, after more than a decade as a seaman, Conrad re-
quested the command of a Belgian steamer sailing for Africa.
A diary kept during the subsequent voyage provides evidence
that many of the characters, incidents, and impressions re-
called in Heart of Darkness have factual bases. In his preface
to Youth: A Narrative, and Two Other Stories, in which Heart of
Darkness appeared in 1902, Conrad himself states that the
story is “experience pushed a little (and only very little) beyond
the actual facts of the case.” Contemporary critics, however,
agree that Conrad’s manipulation of the African environment
in the novel, and the portraits of greed, destruction, and psy-
chological regression he creates, should be credited solely to
his imaginative genius. In 1896 Conrad had written about his
Congo experiences in the short story An Outpost of Progress,
but he considered Heart of Darkness far superior to that
apprentice work, because while the earlier story was concerned
with individuals, Heart of Darkness examined in detail the
broadest aspects of colonialism. Conrad stated that he sought
to depict “the criminality of inefficiency and pure selfishness
when tackling the civilizing work in Africa” and added “the
subject is of our time distinctly.” Ford Madox Ford, Conrad’s
longtime friend and collaborator, considered Youth, Heart of
Darkness, and The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’ the best of Con-
ard’s works based on his sea experiences. Ford attributed
the success of these works to the fact that they were written while
the incidents were still fresh in Conrad’s memory and the
demands of his career did not interfere with leisurely rewrit-
ing.

Throughout Conrad’s career Heart of Darkness remained one
of his most popular and highly regarded works. The novella
details the story of the seaman Marlow who, fresh from Eu-
rpe, is sent on a boat journey up the Congo River to relieve
Kurtz, the most successful trader in ivory working for the
Belgian government. Prior to their personal encounter, Mar-
low knows and admires Kurtz through his reputation and his
writings regarding the civilizing of the African continent, and
sets out on the journey excited at the prospect of meeting him.
However, Marlow’s experience in Africa inspires revulsion at
the dehumanizing effects of colonialism, a disgust that cul-
minates when he discovers that Kurtz has degenerated from
an enlightened civilizer into a vicious, power-hungry subju-
gator of the African natives. Marlow’s journey forces him to
confront not only Kurtz’s corruption, but also those elements
within himself which are subject to the same temptations that
affected Kurtz.

The relationship of Conrad to his character Marlow has been
a fertile area of critical discussion. Marlow has been variously
perceived as the spokesman for Conrad, a complex and sep-
ate creation, and as a combination of both. F. R. Leavis,
for example, considered Marlow and the author of the story
to be one and the same, and criticized Conrad’s ambiguous
descriptions of Kurtz and his activities in the jungle. Albert
J. Guerard, however, insists that it is the created character
Marlow, not Conrad, who is literally speechless when con-
fronted with memories of Kurtz, and that the resulting am-
biguity illustrates Marlow’s inability or unwillingness to clearly
describe the horror he discovers in the jungle. Most critics
agree with Guerard that the character Marlow is a creation
detached from the author, and that the story is as concerned
with his development and growing perception of the horrors
within human nature as it is with describing Kurtz’s degen-
eration. For that reason Conrad deliberately limited Marlow’s
powers as a narrator. This is in fact accentuated by the nar-
native’s elaborate framing device, wherein Marlow tells his

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story to an unnamed narrator, who in turn comments on Marlow's method of narration.

The affinity between Marlow and Kurtz is considered the most crucial relationship between characters in the story. Two pivotal scenes in *Heart of Darkness* hint at the source of the men's bond, but the precise intention of Conrad remains ambiguous. The first of the scenes, in which Kurtz utters his famous death cry, "The horror, the horror!" is regarded by many critics as Kurtz's realization of the terrifying nature of his unrestrained behavior, a realization that is transferred to Marlow, who is allied with Kurtz through a complex mixture of repugnance and fascination. W. Y. Tindall, however, warns that Marlow contains myriad uncertainties and enigmas, and that his interpretation of Kurtz's final words as a sign of self-disgust and redemption is based on his own perceptions of life, not Kurtz's. Tindall suggests that perhaps Kurtz was lamenting his untimely and violent death, or that he found horrifying the fact that his accumulation of ivory and his godlike reign over the natives had been interrupted. Nonetheless, most critics consider the scene crucial in that Marlow glimpses the barbarous depths to which civilized man can sink, affirming a kinship between the "cultured" Europeans and the "savage" Africans in the lawless jungle. This knowledge alters Marlow's perception of the nature of truth and humanity and leads to the development of the second pivotal scene, which occurs after Marlow returns to Brussels. There, he is asked the nature of Kurtz's final words by the dead man's innocent fiancée, and he tells her that Kurtz repeated her name. Marlow's lie is a widely discussed element of the novella and is subject to many diverse interpretations. Leavis, for example, interprets the lie as Marlow's final acceptance of Kurtz as an apostle of truth who has encountered in himself the essential barbarism of humanity. Others believe that it is the act of a man creating a personal morality based on the protection of the innocent from truth that is difficult to face. Some critics, however, find that the lie weakens the final scene because Marlow's strong insistence upon the value of truth throughout the novella makes it impossible for the reader to suddenly accept falsehood as salvation. In the end, Marlow's lie reflects as much about the subjective nature of truth as it does about Marlow's character.

Many critics have commented on Conrad's evocative powers in *Heart of Darkness*, paying particular attention to his use of imagery, which manages to evoke a sinister atmosphere through the accretion of objectively described details of the African jungle and natives. The visual imagery, which heavily depends upon contrasting patterns of light and dark, contributes most appreciably to the consistently ambiguous tone of the work. To demonstrate the moral uncertainty of this world and of life in general, Conrad consistently alters common symbolic conceptions of light and dark. Thus, white is not synonymous with good, nor black with evil, but rather both symbols are interchangeable. For example, the light of civilization that Europeans bring to Africa is in fact the source of suffering and misery for the people of the continent. Similarly, ivory becomes the ultimate symbol of excess, greed, and savagery, as the Europeans systematically exploit or destroy the natives to acquire it. Throughout the novella, white and black characters are alternately examples of acute suffering, civilized dignity, moral refinement, or violent savagery, demonstrating that no race is wholly good or evil, and that all human beings are a confusing mixture of propensities for all types of behavior. While some critics consider Conrad's imagery vague and confused in a manner that does not present a clear picture of the principal characters and events, most find that the ambiguity of description lends a psychological depth to the story which demands the close attention and involvement of the reader.

The political significance of *Heart of Darkness* has also received much critical attention. C. P. Sarvan has observed that Conrad "was not entirely immune to the infection of the beliefs and attitudes of his age, but he was ahead of most in trying to break free." Social Darwinism and a strong belief in the Carlylean work ethic are two of the Victorian standards that are attacked in the novella. The first served to justify European exploitation of Africa and other areas of the world by purporting that the indigenous peoples were in need of the superior technological and religious knowledge of Europe. In *Heart of Darkness* the hypocrisy of these aims is illustrated by the all-consuming scramble for wealth by the Europeans, who destroy the land and people without remorse. Cedric Watts contends that by contrasting the harmony which exists between the native Africans, and their natural environment with the lazy, brutish grotesques that white imperialists become in Africa, Conrad proves that it is the Africans who are the fittest to survive in their native land and that Darwin's theory was in fact never intended to be applied to races or nations. In one of the work's most memorable ironic reversals of circumstance, Conrad compares the restraint practiced by a group of cannibals with the destructive greed of the European colonizers. In a similar fashion, the work ethic which Marlow seems to embrace, praising its effectiveness in keeping his mind free of undesirable thoughts, is in fact instrumental in blinding him to the events around him. The inhumanity of the work ethic as practiced in Africa is demonstrated by a company accountant who considers the use of his office as an infirmary an inconvenience: he does not care if sick Africans die or not, so long as their illnesses do not interfere with his work. Throughout the novella, Conrad's portrayal of the failure of various European ideologies in Africa suggests the consequent failure and moral bankruptcy of Europe.

Conrad's consciously ambiguous presentation of the relative nature of truth and morality, which compels the reader to take an active part in understanding the novella, is often considered a forerunner of many modernist literary techniques. For this reason Frederick R. Karl has called *Heart of Darkness* the work in which "the nineteenth century becomes the twentieth." The novella's artistic cohesion of image and theme, its intricately vivid evocation of colonial oppression, and its detailed portrait of psychological duplicity and decay have inspired critics to call *Heart of Darkness* the best short novel in the English language. As Karl notes: "It asks troublesome questions, disturbs preconceptions, forces curious confrontations, and possibly changes us."

(See also Contemporary Authors, Vol. 104: Dictionary of Literary Biography, Vol. 10: Modern British Dramatists, 1900-1945; and Something about the Author, Vol. 27.)

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**THE TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT** (essay date 1962)

[The following excerpt from a review of Youth, a volume which contains Heart of Darkness and The End of the Tether, praises the power of Conrad's depiction of horror but disappointingly notes the "preciousness" of Conrad's style.]

Telling tales, just spinning yarns, has gone out of fashion since the novel has become an epitome of everything a man has to say about anything. The three stories in *Youth* . . . are in this
reference a return to an earlier taste. The yarns are of the sea, told with an astonishing zest; and given with vivid accumulation of detail and iterative persistency of emphasis on the quality of character and scenery. The method is exactly the opposite of Mr. Kipling's. It is a little precious; one notes a tasting of the quality of phrases and an occasional indulgence in poetic rhetoric. But the effect is not unlike Mr. Kipling's. The concluding scene of the "Heart of Darkness" is crisp and brief enough for Flaubert, but the effect—a woman's ecstatic belief in a villain's heroism—is reached by an indulgence in the picturesque horror of the villain, his work and his surroundings, which is pitiless in its insistence, and quite extravagant according to the canons of art. But the power, the success in conveying the impression vividly, without loss of energy is undoubted and is refreshing. . . . There are many readers who would not get beyond the barren and not very pretty philosophy of "Youth"; more who might feel they had had enough horror at the end of "The Heart of Darkness." But they would miss a great deal if they did not reach "The End of the Tether." It has this further advantage over the other two tales, that it is much less clever, much less precious.


THE ATHENAEUM (essay date 1902)

[The following excerpt from a review of Youth praises the artistry of Conrad's prose and the craft displayed in his short fiction. The critic also finds in Conrad's work an innovative ability to fully evoke the mood and atmosphere of his settings within a relatively few number of pages.]

The art of Mr. Conrad is exquisite and very subtle. He uses the tools of his craft with the fine, thoughtful delicacy of a mediaeval clockmaker. With regard to his mastery of the conte [story] opinions are divided, and many critics will probably continue to hold that his short stories are not short stories at all, but rather concentrated novels. And the contention is not unreasonable. In more ways than one Mr. Conrad is something of a law unto himself, and creates his own forms, as he certainly has created his own methods. Putting aside all considerations of mere taste, one may say at once that Mr. Conrad's methods command and deserve the highest respect, if only by reason of their scholarly thoroughness. One feels that nothing is too minute, no process too laborious for this author. He considers not material rewards, but the dignity of his work, of all work. . . . [He] has the true worker's eye, the true artist's pitilessness, in the detection and elimination of the redundant word, the idle thought, the insincere idiom, or even for the mark of punctuation misplaced. The busy, boastful times we live in are not rich in such sterling literary merits as these; and for that reason we may be the more thankful to an author like Mr. Conrad for the loyalty which prevents his sending a scamped page to press.

A critical writer has said that all fiction may roughly be divided into two classes: that dealing with movement and adventure, and the other dealing with characterization, the analysis of the human mind. In the present, as in every one of his previous books, Mr. Conrad has stepped outside these boundaries, and made his own class of work as he has made his own methods. All his stories have movement and incident, most of them have adventure, and the motive in all has apparently been the careful analysis, the philosophic presentation, of phases of human character. His studious and minute drawing of the action of men's minds, passions, and principles forms fascinating read-

The reviewer deliberately abstains both from quotation and from any attempt at analysis of a story like "The Heart of Darkness." Any such attempt in a limited space would be a painful injustice where work of this character is concerned. Further, the reader is warned that this book cannot be read understandably—as evening newspapers and railway novels are perused—with one mental eye closed and the other roving. Mr. Conrad himself spares no pains, and from his readers he demands thoughtful attention. He demands so much, and, where the intelligent are concerned, we think he will command it.


THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW (essay date 1903)

[In the following excerpt from a generally positive review of Youth, the critic expresses dislike for Conrad's occasionally intrusive moralizing bent.]

The three stories by Joseph Conrad in the volume called "Youth and Other Stories" are all of the sea, of strange lands, and of abnormal human beings developed under abnormal conditions. The author's exceptional power is manifest in two directions: in his ability to portray extraordinary scenery and in his equal ability to impress a character upon the credulity of his readers. Although the adventures he describes are frequently little short of marvelous, and are laid among scenes wholly alien to commonplace life, they are wrought into a tissue of truth so firm and so tough as to resist the keenest skepticism. The personages who move about the ship, thread unbroken fabric to establish control over swarms of savages by means of the spoken word, lie and cheat, struggle and work, make money and lose it, and talk interminably; these personages are sufficiently interesting in their various activities to lure one through many a patch of wordy underbrush to the welcome clearing where they are plainly to be seen. Their creator treats them with peculiar detachment. He wavers between the objective and the subjective method. Apparently he wishes to move swiftly along his line.
of adventure toward its termination, but his progress frequently is checked by the attacks of analytical meditation that overcome him at quite regular intervals. This entanglement of psychological with external phenomena is more or less wearying, as there is no very delicate adjustment between the mental and physical situations, and we are conscious sometimes of wishing that we might be allowed to supply our own moralizing. . . .

These little speeches which occur—at the reader in quest of happenings—the most inopportune moments when a ship is burning or a man is dying, are undesirably loquacious, although usually apposite enough. They sap one’s vitality of mind and cast the shadow of dullness over what otherwise would be stimulating. Nevertheless, Mr. Conrad has been amazingly successful in managing to convey a sense of solidity and veracity. Not even his Kurtz, the man of impenetrable darkness of soul, is either a bloodless or an incredible figure. Like certain caricatures that in their fidelity to the main facts make ordinary portraiture unconvincing, these grotesque figures drive home to the imagination.


H. L. MENCKEN  (essay date 1917)

[From the era of World War I until the early years of the Great Depression, Mencken was one of the most influential figures in American letters. His strongly individualistic, irreverent outlook on life and his vigorous, invective-charged writing style helped establish the iconoclastic spirit of the Jazz Age and significantly shaped the direction of American literature. As a social and literary critic—the roles for which he is best known—Mencken was the scourge of evangelical Christianity, public service organizations, literary censorship, boosterism, provincialism, democracy, all advocates of personal or social improvement, and every other facet of American life that he perceived as humbug. In his literary criticism, Mencken encouraged American writers to shun the anglophile, moralistic bent of the nineteenth century and to practice realism, an artistic call-to-arms that is most fully developed in his essay “Puritanism As a Literary Force,” one of the seminal essays in modern literary criticism. A man who was widely renowned or feared during his lifetime as a would-be destroyer of established American values, Mencken wrote: “All my work, barring a few obvious burlesques, is based upon three fundamental ideas: 1. That knowledge is better than ignorance; 2. That it is better to tell the truth than to lie; 3. That it is better to be free than to be a slave.” In the following discussion of Heart of Darkness, Mencken describes Conrad’s artistic method, finding that he never defines his characters, but rather reveals aspects of their personality through his fictional situations, a method that forces the reader to suspend moral judgment and confront the basic indeterminacy and meaninglessness of life.]

Like Dreiser, Conrad is forever fascinated by the “immense indifference of things,” the tragic vanity of the blind groping that we call aspiration, the profound meaninglessness of life—fascinated, and left wondering. One looks in vain for an attempt at a solution of the riddle in the whole canon of his work. Dreiser, more than once, seems ready to take refuge behind an indeterminate sort of mysticism, even a facile supernaturalism, but Conrad, from first to last, faces squarely the massive and intolerable fact. His stories are not chronicles of men who conquer fate, nor of men who are unbert and unaudtated by fate, but of men who are conquer and undone. . . . Kurtz, Lord Jim, Razumov, Nostromo, Captain Whalley, Yanko Gooorall, Verloc, Heyst, Gaspar Ruiz, Almayer: one and all they are destroyed and made a mock of by the blind, incomprehensible forces that beset them. (pp. 11-12)

The exact point of the story of Kurtz, in “Heart of Darkness,” is that it is pointless, that Kurtz’s death is as meaningless as his life, that the moral of such a sordid tragedy is a wholesale negation of all morals. (p. 16)

As for Conrad the literary craftsman, opposing him for the moment to Conrad the showman of the human comedy, the quality that all who write about him seem chiefly to mark in him is his scorn of conventional form, his tendency to approach his story from two directions at once, his frequent involvement in apparently inextricable snarls of narrative, sub-narrative and sub-sub-narrative. . . . In “Youth” and “Heart of Darkness” the chronicler and speculator is the shadowy Marlow, a “cloak to goe inibusabel” for Conrad himself. . . . Elsewhere there are hesitations, goings back, interpolations, interludes in the Socratic manner. And almost always there is heaviness in the getting under weigh. In “Heart of Darkness” we are on the twentieth page before we see the mouth of the great river. . . . (pp. 36-7)

In the eyes of orthodox criticism, of course, this is a grave fault. The Kipling-Wells style of swift, shouldering, button-holing writing has accustomed readers and critics alike to a straight course and a rapid tempo. Moreover, it has accustomed them to a forthright certainty and directness of statement; they expect an author to account for his characters at once, and on grounds instantly comprehensible. . . . The discoveries that we make, about Lord Jim, about Nostromo or about Kurtz, come as fortuitously and as unexpectedly as the discoveries we make about the real figures of our world. The picture is built up bit by bit; it is never flashed suddenly and completely as by best-seller calcumts; it remains a bit dim at the end. But in that very dimness, so tantalizing and yet so revealing, lies two-thirds of Conrad’s art, or his craft, or his trick, or whatever you choose to call it. What he shows us is blurred at the edges, but so is life itself blurred at the edges. We see least clearly precisely what is nearest to us, and is hence most real to us. (pp. 37-9)

In the character and in its reactions, in the act and in the motive: always that tremulousness, that groping, that confession of final bewilderment. . . . One leaves “Heart of Darkness” in that palpitating confusion which is shot through with intense curiosity. Kurtz is at once the most abominable of rogues and the most fantastic of dreamers. It is impossible to differentiate between his vision and his crimes, though all that we look upon as order in the universe stands between them. (pp. 39-40)

Conrad’s predilection for barbarous scenes and the more bald and shocking sort of drama has an obviously autobiographical basis. His own road ran into strange places in the days of his youth. . . . Some of his stories, and among them his very best, are plainly little more than transcripts of his own experience. He himself is the enchanted boy of “Youth,” he is the shipmaster of “Heart of Darkness”; he hovers in the background of all the island books and is visibly present in most of the tales of the sea. (pp. 40-1)

Whenever he turns from the starker lusts to the pale passions of man under civilization, Conrad fails. “The Return” is a thoroughly infirm piece of writing—a second rate magazine story. One concludes at once that the author himself does not believe in it. “The Inheritors” is worse; it becomes, after the first few pages, a flaccid artificiality, a bore. It is impossible
to imagine the chief characters of the Conrad gallery in such scenes. (p. 42)

These things do not interest Conrad, chiefly, I suppose, because he does not understand them. His concern, one may say, is with the gross anatomy of passion, not with its histology. He seeks to depict emotion, not in its ultimate attenuation, but in its fundamental innocence and fury. Inevitably, his materials are those of what we call melodrama; he is at one, in the bare substance of his tales, with the manufacturers of the baldest shockers. But with a difference!—a difference, to wit, of approach and comprehension, a difference abysmal and revolutionary. He lifts melodrama to the dignity of an important business, and makes it a means to an end that the mere shockmonger never dreams of. (pp. 42-3)

If you want to get his measure, read "Youth" or "Falk" or "Heart of Darkness," and then try to read the best of Kipling. I think you will come to some understanding, by that simple experiment, of the difference between an adroit artist's bag of tricks and the lofty sincerity and passion of a first-rate artist. (p. 64)


F. R. LEAVIS (essay date 1941)

[Leavis, an influential contemporary English critic, combines close textual criticism with predominantly moral, or social-moral principles of evaluation. Leavis views the writer as that social individual who represents the "most conscious point of the race" in his or her lifetime. More importantly, the writer is one who can effectively communicate this consciousness. Contrary to what these statements may suggest, Leavis is not specifically interested in the individual writer per se, but more concerned with the usefulness of his or her art in the scheme of civilization. The writer's role in this vision is to promote what Leavis calls "sincerity"—or, the realization of the individual's proper place in the human world. Literature that accomplishes this he calls "mature." and the writer's judgment within such a work he calls a "mature" moral judgment. From the foregoing comments it should be clear that Leavis is a critic concerned with the moral aspects of art, but a number of his contemporaries, most notably René Wellek, have questioned the existence of a moral system beneath such terms as "maturity" and "sincerity." Leavis's refusal to theorize or develop a systematic philosophy has alienated many critics and scholars from his work. In the following excerpt, Leavis finds that, at his best, Conrad evokes meaning through the artistry of his description; at his worst, Conrad imposes his comments or needlessly obscures the force of his story with ambiguous terminology and a failure to describe the "unspeakable," a failure that Leavis believes almost destroys the conclusion of the story. Leavis attributes this failure to Conrad's use of Melrow as a narrator. For further discussions of Conrad's treatment of the "unspeakable," see the excerpts by Thomas Moser (1957), Albert J. Guérard (1958), Marvin Mudrick (1958-59), and Frederick R. Karl (1969), and the entry by Frederick Crews in the Additional Bibliography.]

Heart of Darkness is, by common consent, one of Conrad's best things—an appropriate source for the epigraph of The Hollow Men: 'Mistah Kurtz, he dead'. That utterance, recalling the particularity of its immediate context, represents the strength of Heart of Darkness. . . . (p. 174)
regrettable as tending to cheapen the tone. But the actual cheapening is little short of disastrous. . . . Conrad must [in some instances] stand convicted of borrowing the arts of the magazine writer (who has borrowed his, shall we say, from Kipling and Poe) in order to impose on his readers and on himself, for thrilled response, a ‘significance’ that is merely an emotional insistence on the presence of what he can’t produce. The insistence betrays the absence, the willied ‘intensity’ the nullity. He is intent on making a virtue out of not knowing what he means. The vague and unrealizable, he asserts with a strained impressiveness, is the profoundly and tremendously significant. . . . If he cannot through the concrete presentment of incident, setting and image invest the words with the terrific something that, by themselves, they fail to convey, then no amount of adjectival and ejaculatory emphasis will do it. . . . Actually, Conrad had no need to try and inject ‘significance’ into his narrative in this way. What he shows himself to have successfully and significantly seen is enough to make Heart of Darkness a disturbing presentment of the kind he aimed at. By the attempt at injection he weakens, in his account of Kurtz’s death, the effect of that culminating cry. . . . The ‘horror’ . . . has very much less force than it might have had if Conrad had strained less.

This final account of Kurtz is associated with a sardonic tone, an insistent irony that leads us on to another bad patch, the closing interview in Brussels with Kurtz’s ‘Intended’. . . . It is not part of Conrad’s irony that there should be anything ironical in this presentment of the woman. The irony lies in the association of her innocent nobility, her purity of idealizing faith, with the unspeakable corruption of Kurtz; and it is developed (if that is the word) with a thrilled insistence that recalls the melodramatic intensities of Edgar Allan Poe. . . . (pp. 179-81)

Conrad’s ‘inscrutable’, it is clear, associates with Woman as it does with the wilderness, and the thrilling mystery of the Intended’s innocence is of the same order as the thrilling mystery of Kurtz’s corruption: the profundities are complementary. It would appear that the cosmopolitan Pole, student of the French masters, who became a British master-mariner, was in some respects a simple soul. (p. 182)


ALBERT J. GUERARD (essay date 1950)

[Guerard, an American novelist and critic, has written extensively on Conrad. His Conrad the Novelist (1958) is considered the standard critical interpretation of several of Conrad’s works, including Heart of Darkness. The following excerpt is taken from an introduction to a reprint edition of Heart of Darkness and The Secret Sharer; in it Guerard finds that even though Kurtz is one of the greatest portraits of moral deterioration in literature, the principal character of The Heart of Darkness is Marlow, and the story is most concerned not with Kurtz’s fall, but with Marlow’s discovery of his own capacity for good and evil. For further discussion by Guerard of Heart of Darkness, see the excerpt from his Conrad the Novelist (1958).]

Conrad’s stories of adventure and romance nearly always suggest long vistas of experience beyond themselves, and their lonely heroes face no less than our common human destiny.

Marlow’s slow journey up the Congo into the heart of darkest Africa is a journey into the heart of man’s darkness. . . . Most of Conrad’s better novels thrust inward toward psychological complexity and outward toward moral symbolism. This is particularly true of the two short novels in this volume.

Conrad’s long stories and short novels are far more experimental and more “modern” than his full-length novels. The Secret Sharer and Heart of Darkness are among the finest of Conrad’s short novels, and among the half-dozen greatest short novels in the English language. . . . Heart of Darkness . . . is evasive in structure and even uncomfortably wordy. Words! At times Conrad and Marlow seem to want to erect (as does a psychoanalyst’s patient) a screen of words between themselves and the horror of a half-remembered experience. (p. 8)

The Secret Sharer, much the more exciting and more direct of the two, is also the more difficult to analyze and understand. Both are realistic accounts of things that actually happened—of an actual tragedy at sea; of an actual expedition that Conrad made, in 1890, into the heart of Africa. But both stories are also dramas of consciousness and conscience, symbolic explorations of inward complexity. They are, like Faulkner’s The Bear, stories of youth’s initiations into manhood and knowledge, dramatized tests of personal strength and identity, psychological studies in half-conscious identification. Why does Marlow seek out and remain loyal to the unspeakable and savage Kurtz in Heart of Darkness? Why does the narrator (the “I”) of The Secret Sharer protect the criminally impulsive Leggatt? Both have identified themselves, temporarily, with these outcasts and more primitive beings; lived vicariously in them. In the unconscious mind of each of us slumber infinite capacities for reversion and crime. And our best chance for survival, moral survival, lies in frankly recognizing these capacities. At the beginning of Heart of Darkness, Marlow does not “know himself”; at the beginning of The Secret Sharer, the narrator is naively confident of success in the sea’s “untempted life.” The two men must come to know themselves better than this, must recognize their own potential criminality and test their own resources, must travel through Kurtz and Leggatt, before they will be capable of manhood . . . manhood and “moral survival.” The two novels alike exploit the ancient myth or archetypal experience of the night journey, of a profound descent into the primitive and unconscious sources of being. At the end of Heart of Darkness and The Secret Sharer, the two narrators are mature men. And as Marlow and the young captain both sympathize with and condemn these images or symbols of their potential selves, so too does the novelist Conrad. It is this conflict between sympathy and a cold purifying judgment that gives intensity to the stories as works of art. (pp. 8-9)

Conrad’s travelogue of danger and exploitation provides one level of interest and meaning. . . . [The] megalomaniac Kurtz seems the center and “subject” of Heart of Darkness. His is one of the greatest portraits in all fiction of moral deterioration and reversion to savagery as a result of physical isolation. . . . Kurtz the shining idealist not merely exterminated some of the brutes, but put their heads on stakes around his house. He reverted to savagery himself, pretended to supernatural powers, and even “took a high seat amongst the devils of the land” . . . to be worshipped in fit religious ceremonies. Wholly claimed by the powers of darkness, he does not want to leave when the intruding whites come to get him. He returns to the moral universe only in the last hours of his life, when he judges himself succinctly: “He cried in a whisper at some image, at
some vision—he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath: 'The horror! The horror!'" (pp. 13-14)

But Kurtz appears on only a few of these many pages, while Marlow appears on all of them. . . . [The] final center of interest is Marlow, who has identified himself with Kurtz. . . . Marlow allies himself with Kurtz even before he has met him.

What does Marlow mean when he says "that was exactly what I had been looking for to—a talk with Kurtz?" He has been looking forward, perhaps unwittingly, to a prolonged self-examination; to "talking" to himself through the guise of another. . . . Observing Kurtz, and physically wrestling for his body and soul, Marlow can look on our original and savage nature in its nakedness. He can, that is, look into his own deepest self. This is why he ventures into the jungle without help. . . . [And] perhaps the climax of his story occurs when he confounds the beating of his heart with the beat of a savage drum. He too has taken a "night journey" into that unconscious mind which, some of the anthropologists and psychologists tell us, is the same as the primitive and prehistoric mind. Or, in Conrad's own words: "The mind of a man is capable of everything—because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future." (p. 14)

[Heart of Darkness and The Secret Sharer], using slightly different symbolistic techniques, are in fact the same story, and have the same mythical theme—the theme of initiation and moral education, the theme of progress through temporary reversion and achieved self-knowledge, the theme of man's exploratory descent into the primitive sources of being. Conrad believes, with the greatest moralists, that we must know evil—our own capacities for evil—before we can be capable of good; that we must descend into the pit before we can see the stars. But a price must be paid for any such perilous journeys and descents; we must alone for even temporary alliance with the powers of darkness. This, I take it, is the significance of the curious endings of these two novels. The captain of The Secret Sharer takes his ship dangerously close to thereef shored of Koh-King, far closer than is necessary to permit Leggatt's escape. He must take the full risk. . . . As for Marlow, he does his penance by going to see Kurtz's fiancée, and by telling her a lie. "I laid the ghost of his gifts at last with a lie." Does telling a white lie seem a very serious penance to do? "There is a taint of death," Marlow says, "a flavor of mortality in lies . . ."

Conrad, like Marlow, had a passion for truth—including the dark truth concerning our human nature—and a hatred of complacent egoism. He was a pessimist as well as an idealist, yet his pessimism has a consoling solidity. And Heart of Darkness is the most intense expression of that mature pessimism. (p. 15)


HAROLD R. COLLINS (essay date 1954)

[Collins, an American author and editor, is considered an expert on African literature. In the following excerpt he contends that the cannibals and helmsman in Heart of Darkness illustrate the contrast between the dignity of the African who still adheres to a "native" social order and those tainted by the alien influence of Westerners. Collins believes that Kurtz's behavior illustrates the same dichotomy, for Kurtz, like the helmsman and unlike the cannibals, is a man who has lost the customs and restraints of his civilization because of the influence of an alien social group. For further discussion of the role of Africans in Heart of Darkness, see the excerpts below by Chinua Achebe (1977), Cedric Watts (1977), Ian Watt (1979), and C. P. Sarvan (1980), and the entry by Hunt Hawkins in the Additional Bibliography.]

We have to be very chary about pontificating on the "totality of meaning" of "Heart of Darkness."

Of course, wherever we look we see wonderful arrangements. Suppose we consider some humble fellows who have not received much attention in critical discussions, those cannibal crewmen and the unstable native helmsman. If we examine the episodes in which they figure and the comments Marlow makes upon their conduct we shall observe that Conrad has involved these apparently insignificant black men in the main theme.

To be sure, "Heart of Darkness" is primarily concerned with the moral isolation of a man much more impressive than the hungry cannibals and the flustered native helmsman. (p. 300)

Marlow's first casual mention of the cannibal crewmen associates them with the work motive, a prominent motive intimately connected with the testing of Kurtz. "More than once she [the steamboat] had to wade for a bit, with twenty cannibals splashing around and pushing. . . . Fine fellows—cannibals—in their place. They were men one could work with." This compliment ranges the man-eaters with men whom Marlow can respect, those who do real work, along with the British colonists in those dependencies marked red on the map ( . . . "some real work is done in there.")., the accountant who has accomplished starched collars and got-up shirt fronts and whose books are in apple-pie order, the boiler-maker who is "a good worker," that Towsen whose nautical manual shows a "sin- gleness of intention, an honest concern for the right way of going to work" which gives Marlow the impression of having come upon something "unmistakably real."

Most of the white men Marlow meets do not merit the compliment he pays the cannibals. The brickmaker at the Central Station makes no bricks. The "Pilgrims," those "greedy phan- toms," spend their time backbiting and intriguing. The man-ager has "no genius for organizing, for initiative, for order even." The devoted band of the Eldorado Exploring Expedition led by the manager's uncle has "not an atom of foresight or of serious intention in the whole batch of them, and they did not seem aware these things are wanted for the work of the world." Even Kurtz, "the prologer," "the emissary of pity and science and devil knows what else," is no real worker. (p. 301)

Marlow has a good deal to say about the value of work and its connection with reality. To be sure, he doesn't like work itself; he likes "what is in the work,—the chance to find your- self. Your own reality—for yourself, not for others—what no other man can ever know."

When Marlow feels the "mystere- ous stillness" of the Congo's "inner truth" watching him at his work, his work seems mere "monkey tricks," yet he can "find himself" in those "tricks" because he does them well.

If work discloses this kind of truth to Marlow, it also, merci- fully, protects him from another kind. While he worries about the elusive channel, hidden banks, sunken stones, snags, leaky pipes, and the savage fireman, the oppressive "reality" of the Congo jungle, whose stillness suggests "an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention," fades in his con-
sciousness. "The inner truth is hidden—luckily, luckily." He has no time for "creepy thoughts" about the primitive men on the shore who "howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces." His work gives him no time to think of his "remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproot." He certainly does not imply that work means to the cannibals what it means to him, only that the man who does real work is a better man than the one who can not or will not, even though the worker is a black savage. Sham work Marlow calls "unreal." He sees a good deal of such sham work in the Congo: the French war against their native "enemies," the punishment of "criminals," the hiring of "workers" by time contract, the pilgrims "show of work," Kurtz's execution of "rebels." (p. 302)

When the tinpot steamer is fog-bound just below Kurtz's Inner Station and the Pilgrims are "greatly discompos'd" at the prospect of an attack, the cannibal crewmen are calm, have "an alert, naturally interested expression on their faces." Several of them grin as they haul on the anchor chain. Several exchange "short grunting phrases which seemed to settle the matter to their satisfaction." Their headman coolly advises Marlow to catch some of the natives on the shore and give them to the crewmen who would "eat 'im." Now observe that these savages do not behave at all like such "reclaimed" Africans as the prisoners' guard with the unmilitary bearing and the rascally grin, the manager's boy, who announces Kurtz's death "with scathing contempt," and the unstable helmsman, who conducts himself so imprudently during the attack from Kurtz's "admirers." The guard, the manager's boy, and the helmsman are what the anthropologists now call "detrabilized natives"; that is, natives alienated from the old tribal life. The crewmen are still raw bush savages, the sort of Africans most white travelers and settlers prefer to more civilized Africans. Recruited from a place 800 miles from Kurtz's station at Stanley Falls . . . . , they have lived a considerable distance from the coast, from which white influences radiated.

Marlow speaks of the "dignified and profoundly pensive attitude" of the headman who makes the cannibalistic proposal. It may seem strange, but uncivilized savages are dignified. The cannibals in "Heart of Darkness" seem to have the dignity and self-assurance of Africans who still have the comfortable feeling of being valued members of some native social order, who have not been in contact with the whites long enough to be troubled by the social disabilities of a civilized social order, shamed by their ignorance of European technical knowledge, confused by the conflicting moral imperatives of two cultures. They are probably sustained—as Kurtz is not—by the warm close ties of an organic society. (p. 303)

Marlow is not "properly horrified" by the headman's cannibalistic suggestion. Recalling that the pilgrims have thrown most of the cannibals' rotten hippo meat overboard and that their wages of brass wire have not been very useful for purchasing provisions in the riverside villages, he knows that the poor fellows must be very hungry. Indeed he wonders "Why in the name of all the gnawing devils of hunger they didn't go for us—they were thirty to five—and have a good tuck-in for once. . . . They were big powerful men, with not much capacity to weigh the consequences. . . ." He supposes that "something restraining, one of those human secrets that baffle probability," has come into play. But what could restrain such wild men? "Restraint! What possible restraint?" Here we have another of the important motives of the story. Even the manager, who would be happy to hang the independent traders providing "unfair competition," has his restraint: he wishes to preserve appearances. . . . [The] helmsman has no restraint, is like Kurtz in that respect. Those symbolical ornaments on Kurtz's fence signify that "Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts."

Kurtz was on trial in the Congo. Since Marlow calls the cannibals' situation a test, "the test of inexorable physical necessity," their ordeal is a significant link between the "universal genius" and the hungry man-eaters. . . . We might even suspect a further link between Kurtz and the cannibals in that curious cannibalistic metaphor: as that "atrocity phantom" is being carried out of his hut, Marlow "saw him open his mouth wide—it gave him a weirdly voracious aspect—as though he had wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the men before him." . . . We are tempted to try to answer Marlow's question for him: "Was it superstition, disgust, patience, fear—or some kind of primitive honour that curbed the appetites of savages suffering the 'exasperating torment' of hunger?" The answer might explain that "something wanting" in Kurtz, that "small matter which, when the pressing need arose, could not be found under his magnificent eloquence." (pp. 304-05)

No matter what we may happen to know about the eating habits of Congo cannibals, no matter which tribe Conrad's cannibals belonged to . . . we must simply take Marlow's word for it: the restraint was a mystery. And wouldn't we do well to admit that the motives of human conduct are often inexplicable? As Conrad himself says in Personal Record, "The part of the inexplicable should be allowed for in the applauding the conduct of men in a world where no explanation is final." The kinds of restraints that may be depend upon to keep a man within moral bounds in ordinary circumstances have not motivated these savages who have resisted the "dvelity of lingering starvation." They just happen to have that "inborn strength" that is needed to fight hunger properly. Only such "inborn strength" would have saved Kurtz in his trial.

Though we may feel that Conrad might have assigned more prosaic and definite reasons for the good behavior of his cannibals, he has not idealized them; they are not Noble Savages in the manner of H. Rider Haggard. When Marlow heaves the helmsman's body overboard the hungry crewmen are as scandalized as the pilgrims "with a better show of reason"; the second-rate helmsman is becoming a first-rate temptation.

The cannibals belong to that vengeful jungle, that darkness, that has tried Kurtz and found him wanting. While the be-patched young Russian is telling Marlow about his wonderful conversations with Kurtz ("We talked of everything. . . . Everything! . . . Of love, too.") the crewmen are lounging near by, human illustrations of that Congo savagery from which Kurtz's conversational graces have not been able to save him. The headman turns his "heavy and glittering eyes" upon the young man whose mind Kurtz "had enlarged." At that moment Marlow feels very keenly the power of that Congo scene which has been Kurtz's undoing. . . . If Kurtz's native mistress, "savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent," symbolizes the fascination of the Congo scene, the cannibals symbolize its pitiless power, and its reality, which exposes Kurtz's "noble sentiments" as sham.

It is easy to underestimate the importance of the native helmsman in Marlow's journey to "the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of [his] experience." Does it not seem odd that he should recall this insignificant black fellow's foolish conduct in such detail, and make his death scene almost
as impressive as that of Kurtz himself? When Marlow says he is not sure that the "remarkable man" was worth the life they lost in getting to him, he realizes that his listeners will "think it passing strange this regret for a savage who was no more account than a grain of sand in a black Sahara." The reasons he gives for this regret constitute a commentary on the shortcomings of Kurtz.

The helmsman "had done something, he had steered." We have the work motive again. Kurtz has not done any real work in the Congo; his methods are "no methods at all." It is questionable if he has ever done any real work. Was he a painter who wrote for the papers or a journalist who painted, or did he have any regular profession at all? Even Kurtz's cousin back in the "sepulchral city" could not tell "what he had been—exactly." A journalist in that city thinks that Kurtz ought to have been a leader of an extreme party, any extreme party, but political activity of that sort would scarcely qualify as proper work as Marlow understands it.

The helmsman has not, like Kurtz, cut himself loose from all human ties. As a "help," an "instrument," he is in a "kind of partnership" with his captain. His very deficiencies that his captain worries about create a "subtle bond" between the two of them. The "intimate profundity" of that look he gives Marlow when he dies is like a "claim of distant kinship." These human ties mean a great deal to the humble African because he is isolated from his own native society. His conduct in his work gives us the clue for understanding this isolation.

The "athletic black belonging to some coast tribe" is not a good helmsman. He is an "unstable kind of fool," steering "with no end of swagger" while his white man is at his side, but "instantly the prey of an abject funk" the moment he is alone. When Kurtz's "adorners" attack the steamer, he prances about, "stamping his feet, champing his mouth, like a reined-in horse." He leaves the wheel to open the shutter on the land side, fire off the Martini-Henry, and yell at the shore—and gets himself speared for his reckless folly.

Explaining his helmsman's fatal imprudence, Marlow anticipates his comments on the degradation of Kurtz. "Poor fool! If he had only let that shutter alone. He had no restraint, no restraint—just like Kurtz—a tree swayed in the wind." The helmsman has been tested, as the cannibals are tested, as Kurtz has been tested. The cannibals, tormented by hunger, have refrained from eating the pilgrims. Kurtz, in "utter solitude without a policeman" and "utter silence, where no warning voice of a kind neighbor can be heard," has "tacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts," has taken a "high seat among the devils of the land." The helmsman almost wrecks the tinpot steamer, endangers the lives of the passengers, and throws his life away; when the fixed standards of conduct of his profession require steady steering, he can not resist the temptation to caper as though he were dancing an old-fashioned African war dance and to help the pilgrims squat lead into the bush; when he should show his mettle, he merely "shows off."

The helmsman is not dignified and dependable like the cannibals, the "raw bush natives." Anyone at all familiar with modern anthropological studies of the process of "detrabilization" and more recent fiction dealing with Africa will be struck by the fact that Conrad is representing "detrabilized" natives in the characters of the slovenly prisoners' guard, the ill-conditioned manager's boy, and the second-rate helmsman; he is representing Africans who have been deprived of their traditional beliefs and standards of conduct without having assumed, or being able to assume, those of the white men. The manager's boy and the helmsman have come from coast tribes. Africans from the coast would be much more likely to be partially civilized, be "mission boys," in the white settlers' contemptuous phrase, than would those living upriver, for on the coast white men have long had "factories," or trading posts, and the first missions were established there. We may recall Marlow's ironical comments on these partially civilized Africans: "One of the reclaimed" (the guard), "an improved specimen" (the fireman), "an overfed young negro" (the manager's boy), "thought the world of himself" (the helmsman). In "weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways," the Belgian emissaries of light have produced, not dark-skinned gentlemen, but vain creatures whose ways are seldom perfectly agreeable.

Conrad understood that Africans working for white men could suffer from being deprived of the satisfactions of the old tribal life. (pp. 305-08)

Probably we would be quite safe in classing the second-rate helmsman with those Conradian characters that the critics have called "isolates." He has been deprived of the restraints and consolations of a social order, as Kurtz has been. And like Kurtz he lacks that "inner strength," that saving "definite belief" which may save the man thus deprived. (p. 309)

Conrad knew that the white men who come to Africa professing to bring progress and light to "darkest Africa," have themselves been deprived of the sanctions of their European social orders; they also have been alienated from the old tribal ways. Thrown upon their own inner spiritual resources—like detribalized natives—they may be utterly damned by their greed, their sloth, and their hypocrisy into moral insignificance, as were the pilgrims, or they may be so corrupted by their absolute power over the Africans that some Marlow will need to lay their memory among the "dead cats of civilization." (p. 310)


LILLIAN FEDER (essay date 1955)

[Feder, a literary critic with expertise in the study of classical literature and the role of myth in modern literature, compares Heart of Darkness to the Aeneid. Feder finds that Heart of Darkness depicts Marlow's discovery of evil, a discovery precipitated by a descent into a colonial hell that mirrors the descent into Hades in the Aeneid. For a discussion of Feder's interpretation, see the excerpt by Robert O. Evans (1956).]

Marlow's journey in Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" is usually interpreted as a study of a descent into the unconscious self. Of course, the voyage into the heart of darkness is, on one level, a symbolic representation of an exploration of the hidden self and therefore of man's capacity for evil. However, Conrad is not merely narrating a psychological experience; he is dealing with a significant moral conflict. . . . In "Heart of Darkness," Conrad is depicting Marlow's discovery of evil and the responsibilities to himself and to others which this knowledge places upon him. In telling the story of Marlow's attainment of self-knowledge, Conrad does not use the language of psychology. Instead, he employs the imagery and symbolism of the traditional voyage into Hades.
By associating Marlow's journey with the descent into hell, Conrad concretizes the hidden world of the inner self. Through image and symbol, he evokes the well-known voyage of the hero who, in ancient epic, explores the lower world and, in so doing, probes the depths of his own and his nation's conscience. . . . Setting Conrad's story in relief against a background rich in associations reveals the essential unity of his political and personal themes. Moreover, such a reading shows how Conrad, by combining the traditional imagery of the epic descent with realistic details from his own experience in the Congo, created an image of hell credible to modern man.

Though Marlow's journey recalls the epic descent in general, it is most specifically related to the visit to Hades in the sixth book of the Aeneid. In Vergil's poem, Aeneas' descent is part of his initiation for the role of leader of the Roman people. Vergil emphasizes the fact that truth is to be found in the heart of darkness; thus, the Sibyl who, in Vergil's words, "obscurs vera involvens" (hides truth in darkness), guides Aeneas. Moreover, just as Aeneas is about to enter Hades, Vergil interrupts his narrative to ask the very elements of hell, Chaos and Phlegethon, to allow him to reveal the secrets buried in the darkness and depths of the earth. Aeneas' voyage to Hades is one means by which he learns of the tragedy implicit in the affairs of men; this is the price he pays for fulfilling his duty as founder of Rome. In the lower world he looks both into past and the future and, having observed the penalties for personal crimes, he is told of the bloodshed and cruelty which are to weigh on the conscience of his nation—the cost of Rome's imperial power. Aeneas, the pious and worthy man, learns truth through a descent into darkness.

The basic similarity between Marlow's journey and that of the epic hero, the descent to find light, is obvious. There are many close parallels between the two voyages. . . . (pp. 280-81)

At the beginning of the sixth book of the Aeneid, just before Aeneas descends to Hades, Vergil creates an atmosphere of pervading gloom. He speaks of the "gloomy woods," . . . and repeats the phrase "per umbram" (through the gloom). . . . Conrad too establishes this somber mood. Even before Marlow begins his story, Conrad repeats the word "gloomy" continuously in his description of the friends gathered together to hear the tale. Thus, in the second paragraph of the story he mentions a "mournful gloom"; . . . in the third, "the brooding gloom;" . . . in the fourth, "the gloom to the west." . . . Marlow, sitting there like an idol, seems to have brought with him the atmosphere of the world he is about to recreate for his friends.

Just before he begins his story, Marlow, looking out at the Thames, mentions the Romans and their conquest of England. . . . He then goes on to speak of the brutality of the Romans. . . . "What redeems it is the ideal only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unfilial belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to." . . . (pp. 281-82)

Implicit in Marlow's remarks is the theme of the Aeneid, for Vergil is concerned with this "idea," the heroic goal as justification for Rome's plunder and cruelty; moreover, Conrad, like Vergil, sees the tragic limitations of those dedicated to the heroic ideal. Thus, at the very beginning of "Heart of Darkness," the Roman legend, prophesied and justified in Hades, provides an archetypal background for Kurtz's deeds and for Marlow's discovery of himself in a hell perhaps more terrible than Vergil's, but no less enlightening.

Before Marlow may descend into the heart of darkness, he must, like the epic hero, perform certain duties. His visit to the company office suggests a necessary rite performed before the fateful journey. The city itself "makes [him] think of a whitened sepulcher"; the office is in "a narrow and deserted street in deep shadow," and there is "a dead silence." . . . The house itself is "as still as a house in the city of the dead." . . . Thus, Conrad creates the deathly gloom of the world Marlow is about to enter.

In the company office, two women are knitting black wool. Conrad plainly uses these women to symbolize the fates, who, like Aeneas' guide, the Sibyl of Cumae, know the secrets of the heart of darkness. Marlow feels uneasy during these "ceremonies." . . . (pp. 282-83)

He describes one of the two knitting women. . . . She seems to know everything. Marlow goes on to say, "An eerie feeling came over me. She seemed uncanny and fateful." . . . Like the Cumaean Sibyl, the two women guard the way to hell. . . . Then Marlow uses the Latin farewell, evoking its literary and legendary associations: "Ave! old knitter of black wool. Mortiur te salutantis." . . . Conrad uses images of death, but they do not suggest actual death so much as they do the legendary world of the dead, where, paradoxically, the affairs of the living are interpreted and understood. When he is finally ready to leave, Marlow says that he feels as though "instead of going to the center of a continent," he is "about to set off for the center of the earth." . . . (p. 283)

But before he may descend into the heart of darkness, Marlow has another duty to perform. Like Aeneas, he must attend to the remains of someone who has died. Aeneas has buried Venus, a former comrade . . . , and Marlow tries to recover the remains of Fresleven, his predecessor. Marlow feels compelled to perform this rite. (pp. 283-84)

In Marlow's first observations about the Congo, he uses the imagery of hell. Thus, the members of the "chain gang" seem to him to have a "deathlike indifference"; . . . strolling into the shade, he says, "It seemed to me that I had stepped into the gloomy circle of some inferno." . . . "Inferno," of course, suggests the Christian hell as well as the Latin "Inferna," but Conrad's development of the image is so like Vergil's description of Hades in the Aeneid that it seems to evoke the classical hell more readily than the Christian one. His depiction of the natives in the jungle is like Vergil's description of the tormented shades in Hades: "Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees leaning against the trunks," and, like the figures at the entrance to Vergil's Hades, their very attitudes express "pain, abandonment, and despair." Like Vergil's "Diseases . . . Famine . . . and Poverty (terrible shapes to see)," . . . Conrad's figures are "nothing earthly now, nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom." (p. 264)

Up to this point, Conrad has employed the associations of Hades to build up suspense, to tell the reader indirectly that this is no ordinary voyage. He has exploited the strangeness, the mystery, and the pathos of the ancient symbol of hell. Now he uses it with a new brilliance to suggest not only mystery but evil as well. Moreover, through this symbol, he suggests the tragic proportions of his theme and his characters. While he waits at the station, the wilderness surrounding it seems to Marlow "great and invincible, like evil or truth." . . . (pp. 284-85)
When Aeneas first enters Hades, Vergil compares the underworld with a forest. To reach the lowest depths of Erebos, Aeneas must take a journey down the river Styx, which is surrounded by marshes. The boat seems unfit for the journey, but finally Aeneas steps out on the mud and sedge of the shore. Vergil's description of this journey is brief, but he creates an atmosphere of gloom and ugliness very like that which Conrad suggests in his extended account of Marlow's voyage into the heart of darkness. Marlow too has a difficult voyage on a boat that is unsuited to the journey. He and his companions seem like "phantoms," and the earth seems "uneartly." The "black and incomprehensible frenzy" he approaches is at once the jungle, the region of "pre-historic man," and the depths of hell which Kurtz has created and in which he has been destroyed. (p. 285)

When he has almost reached the heart of darkness, Marlow loses his helmsman. Here again Conrad seems to be following Vergil, for Aeneas too loses his helmsman, Palinurus, just as his ship is approaching the shore of Cumea. Palinurus loses his balance and falls overboard; when he has swum to safety, "barbarous people attack [him] with swords," and he is killed, his body floating into the sea. Marlow's helmsman is killed by a native's spear, and he is buried in the sea. Both die "insolent" (guiltless), loyal to their leaders. Aeneas, meeting the shade of Palinurus in Hades, learns of the tragic sacrifice for his mission, and Marlow feels in the dying look of his helmsman a profound intimacy which he cannot forget, for it is a personal tie with one of the victims sacrificed to the "emoti\v\mnities of light." Even more than the groans of the natives, the dying helmsman's last insight, innocent and profound, suggests the tragic consequences of Kurtz's betrayal. (p. 286)

Marlow is eager to deal with Kurtz, or as he refers to him, with "that shadow," and he follows him into the depths of the jungle where he is participating in his fiendish rites. In the description of their meeting, Conrad evokes again and again the associations of Hades. As Marlow approaches, Kurtz rises "unsteady, long, pale, indistinct, like a vapor exhaled by the earth, and swayed slightly, misty and silent." The setting is hell itself, with fires looming between the trees and a constant murmur of voices. A "fiend-like" figure appears. At this point Conrad refers to Kurtz as "that Shadow," this time capitalizing the initial letter, as one does in a name, for Kurtz here is a shade of hell, "this wandering and tormented thing."

Moreover, Marlow has one means of controlling Kurtz: the threat, "you will be lost, . . . utterly lost," doomed to hell entirely. These words draw Kurtz back, but even so Marlow, regarding him, says, "I before him did not know whether I stood on the ground or floated in the air," for they have not left hell. Indeed, the journey next day merely reiterates the image. The crowd "flowed out of the woods again," and, like the wretched shades of Vergil's Hades watching Aeneas' boat, they stood on the shore murmuring and gesturing. And the native woman, like Vergil's shades who "tender\v\mant[que] manus" (stretched out their hands), pleading to be taken aboard, . . . "stretched tragically her bare arms after us over the somber and glittering river." (p. 287-88)

Entering the home of Kurtz's "Intended," Marlow feels that he carries with him the gloom and terror of the heart of darkness. . . .

Moreover, Kurtz's "Intended" is portrayed as no ordinary young woman; she too seems part of the lower world. She lives not in the jungle of Kurtz's hell, but in "a street as still and decorous as a well-kept alley in a cemetery," in a room whose windows are "like three luminous and bedecked columns," and whose piano is "like a somber and polished sarcophagus." This lady with her "pale head," who comes "floating" toward Marlow "in the dusk," her brow "surrounded by an ashy halo," has withdrawn from life to guard the memory of Kurtz. She is given no name except the abstraction, "the Intended," for she has no existence apart from Kurtz. Through his imagery Conrad suggests that she inhabits her own section of Hades, the section devoted to the patient and disappointed shades who carry on their own "mysteries." (p. 289)

Marlow's visit to this lady is the last lap of his journey to Hades. She recalls for him the "eternal darkness" despite the fact that hers is a faith with "an unearthy glow." Speaking to her, Marlow is certain that he will remember the "eloquent phantom," Kurtz, as long as he lives, and he will remember her too, a "tragic and familiar Shade, resembling," in her last traditional gesture of the longed shade, her arms stretched out, "another one, tragic also, and bedecked with powerless charms, stretching bare brown arms over the glitter of the infernal stream, the stream of darkness." . . . Through the image of the "infernal stream," Conrad unites these two shades. On each side of the stream of hell, without understanding, they devote themselves to the darkness Kurtz has created. (p. 289-90)

It is fairly obvious that "Heart of Darkness" has three levels of meaning: on one level it is the story of a man's adventures; on another, of his discovery of certain political and social injustices; and on a third, it is a study of his initiation into the mysteries of his own mind. The same three levels of meaning can be found in the sixth book of Vergil's Aeneid. Like Aeneas, Marlow comes to understand himself, his obligations, and the tragic limitations involved in any choice through this three-fold experience. Kurtz, like Aeneas, starts out as an "emissary of light," but, unlike Vergil's hero, he cannot conquer himself. Through Kurtz's experience, Marlow learns that a man is defined by his work; Kurtz's work has created a hell in the jungle, which destroys him. The symbol of the lower world suggests not only an imaginative union between the ancient world and the modern one, but a judgment on the morality of modern society. (p. 290)


JEROME THALE (essay date 1955)

[Thale has written extensively on the works of nineteenth- and twentieth-century English authors. In the following excerpt Thale finds Marlow's journey up the Congo river analogous to a quest for the grail or some other form of supreme knowledge. In this case, Marlow is the quester, Kurtz the grail, and the supreme knowledge is an understanding of the nature of evil. Thale concludes that the grail motif is linked to the pervasive imagery and symbolic use of lightness and darkness throughout the novel, the ambiguous nature of which is exemplified by the white intruders who bring darkness to Africa in the guise of enlightening culture. For further discussion of the ambiguity of the primary imagery of the novel, see the excerpts below by W. Y. Tindall (1958), Frederick R. Karl (1969), and Ian Watt (1979).]

Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" has all the trappings of the conventional adventure tale—mystery, exotic setting, escape,
suspense, unexpected attack. These, of course, are only the vehicle of something more fundamental, and one way of getting at what they symbolize is to see the story as a grail quest. Though Conrad is sparing in his explicit use of the metaphor ("a weary pilgrimage amongst hints for nightmares"), it is implicit in the structure of the action. As in the grail quest there is the search for some object, and those who find and can see the grail receive an illumination. Marlow, the central figure, is like a knight seeking the grail, and his journey even to the end follows the archetype. His grandiose references to the dark places of the earth, his talk of the secret of a continent, the farthest point of navigation, his sudden and unwonted sense that he is off not to the centre of a continent but to the centre of the earth—these, occurring before he starts his journey, give it the atmosphere of a quest.

And in the journey itself there are the usual tests and obstacles of a quest. After Marlow passes through the bizarre company headquarters in Brussels and the infamous voyage to his journey to the African coast, he makes a difficult and painful journey inland. At the central station he begins a seemingly routine task—going up the river to bring back a sick company agent—which will become his quest. Gradually he learns a little about Kurtz, at first a name; disgust with the manager and reports about the remarkable agent in the jungle make him increasingly eager to see the man. As Marlow's interest in Kurtz mounts, so do the trials and obstacles that are part of Marlow's test. The journey creeps on painfully in the patched ship. Near the end, just before the attack, Marlow realizes that Kurtz is the one thing he has been seeking, the "enraged princess" in a "fabulous castle," whose approaches are fraught with danger.

The grail motif is of course connected with the profuse—and somewhat heavy-handed—light-darkness symbolism. The grail is an effulgence of light, and it gives an illumination to those who can see it. This is the light which Marlow seeks in the heart of darkness. The grail that he finds appears an abomination and the light even deeper darkness, yet paradoxically Marlow does have an illumination: "it threw a kind of light on everything about me." The manager and the others travelling with Marlow are constantly called pilgrims, "faithless pilgrims," and for the faithless there can be no illumination. At the end of his quest Marlow does not find what he had expected all along, a good man in the midst of darkness and corruption. Instead he receives a terrible illumination. Such experiences are as ineffable as they are profound, and this is why the meaning of Marlow's tale must be expressed so obliquely, like the "glow that brings out the haze."

The nature of Marlow's illumination is determined by the remarkable man who is his occasion. And to comprehend Kurtz we must look into the reasons for Marlow's attitude towards him. Marlow is listening to the manager condemning Kurtz's methods as "unsound." "It seemed to me I had never breathed an atmosphere so vile, and I turned mentally to Kurtz for relief . . . it was something to have at least a choice of nightmares." Why must Marlow choose a nightmare at all? Because what he sees in one of the nightmares is so compelling that he cannot remain neutral before it. (pp. 351-52)

[Even] before meeting Kurtz Marlow finds himself on Kurtz's side. Marlow has been disgusted by everything connected with the company; he learns that the manager schemes against Kurtz, because Kurtz, like Marlow, is one of the new gang, "the gang of virtue." The unseen apostle of light becomes the alternative to the cowardly plunderers. But Marlow is not trapped into an incredible allegiance; he knows what he is choosing when he later makes his real choice. Nor is it an unconsidered gesture of escape from the moral decay of the hollow men. His choice is a deliberate one.

Given Marlow's nature and his function in the story his choice must be based on something positive in Kurtz. There are strong hints in the story that Kurtz is a good man gone wrong in the jungle. But if he is merely a victim of unusual circumstances, a man to be pitied, then Marlow's choice is as sentimental as that of Kurtz's fiancée. The causes of Kurtz's tragedy are within—in his towering ambition, and his rootless idealism. Yet the jungle is important, for what happens to Kurtz can happen only under some such conditions. And what Marlow values in Kurtz is so paradoxical that it can be seen only against a dark and mysterious jungle and the corruption of colonial exploitation.

What is it in Kurtz that compels a choice and that produces such a profound change in the imperturbable Marlow? Simply that Kurtz has discovered himself, has become fully human; and Marlow's illumination, the light that is his grail, is a similar discovery about himself and all men. (p. 352)

Here self-discovery is not just the thrill of finding out what one can do, but the deeper task of finding out what one is, of coming to grips with the existence of the self. . . .

Marlow emphasizes that Kurtz is wasted and feverish from this knowledge; "it was not disease"—only the outward manifestation of what went on in Kurtz. . . .

Existence is dangerous, menacing; too dangerous for most of us to discover. Illusion and ignorance, which Conrad treats with a mixture of indulgence and scorn, are what save most of us. "The inner truth is hidden,—luckily, luckily." Women are fortunate to be out of it, living in a beautiful world that does not admit and cannot stand the light. What Marlow has learned through Kurtz he feels he must withhold from Kurtz's fiancée, for it is perilous to "the salvation of another soul." "I could not tell her," Marlow says, "It would have been too dark—too dark altogether."

For such a discovery the context of Africa is important and necessary. From the first pages this is impressed upon us. Marlow opens his tale suddenly and mysteriously, "And this too has been one of the dark places of the earth." (p. 353)

The importance of this kind of milieu is developed through both symbol and statement, and Marlow seems at times to suggest that Africa had been the cause of Kurtz's destruction. "It had caressed him . . . got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own." But there can be no mistake: Kurtz is not a passive victim of Africa. Africa is like existence, is truth. In contrast to the muddle and haze of the company's operations, Africa is real. The blacks have a vitality "that is as natural and true as the surf along the coast." And Marlow altogether prefers his crew of cannibals to his passengers. Ironically, what is dark in "darkest Africa" is not the land or the people, but the world introduced by the bringers of light and civilization.

In another sense, however, Africa seems dark. The jungle is "a rioting invasion of soundless life, a rolling wave of plants, piled up, crested, ready to topple over the creek, to sweep every little man of us out of his little existence." Africa seems dark because it is the test, the condition under which one can come into contact with the self. The journey to the heart of Africa is the journey into the depths of the self: Kurtz and
Marlow travel into the heart of Africa and into the heart of man. The knowledge that is there is so terrifying that its occasion must seem sinister too.

In the depth of the jungle, Marlow tells us repeatedly, one is on one’s own; there is no external restraint. “Anything can be done in this country.” One feels, and Marlow says that one ought to feel, atavistic impulses, a “kinship with that wild passionate uproar.” . . . It “whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude—and the whisper proved irresistibly fascinating.” Outside some such context existence in its simplicity cannot be met. Too many things keep us from travelling into the interior of the self in which we exist. (pp. 353-54)

Here Kurtz is free externally and internally. In the depths of Africa Kurtz is not hampered by outside restraint. Parallelizing this he has journeyed into the depths of the primal self where there are no internal checks on his freedom. The setting of the discovery is aboriginal in the anthropological sense, and, more than this, it is ab-originial in a metaphysical sense. Kurtz’s soul “being alone in the wilderness . . . had looked within itself, and by heavens! I tell you it had gone mad.” For in the mind of man, which “contains all things,” there are terrifying possibilities. (p. 355)

This radical freedom as it exists in Kurtz seems to Marlow both exhilarating and revolting. Exalting because it makes man human, revolting because in Kurtz it is so perverted and so absolute as to exceed all human limits and become inhuman. By distinguishing these two aspects of Marlow’s response, we can make meaningful his commitment to Kurtz. To put it another way, we can sum up the two aspects of Kurtz’s freedom in the phrase “I am.” On the one hand, to say “I am,” is to say that I exist, to say that I am free and have immense possibilities in my grasp. On the other, “I am” is the phrase which only God can utter, because only God exists simply and completely. For Kurtz to say “I am” is the ultimate and complete assertion of himself to the exclusion of all else, the assertion that he is a god.

Before Kurtz’s discovery of his existence can become Marlow’s illumination it has to be realized by both of them. The revelation proceeds through Kurtz to Marlow, and Marlow’s full illumination, his full realization of what it means to be, must wait upon a realization in Kurtz that brings out and confirms what Marlow has already seen in him. A final awareness in Kurtz is needed to make meaningful and universalize Kurtz’s experience. For Kurtz has accepted his freedom, has become human, but he has not evaluated what being human means. He must assent to the knowledge he has been trying to keep off. This realization, which must be distinguished from the agonizing discovery of his existence, can come only as its fruit. Authentic self-knowledge demands a real existent as its object. Having discovered that he can exist, Kurtz must now evaluate existence. “The horror! the horror!” is this evaluation.

The most we can hope for in life, Marlow tells us, is “some knowledge of yourself—that comes too late.” Marlow comes close to death and finds that he has nothing to say. Kurtz “had something to say. He said it. Since I had peeped over the edge myself, I understand better the meaning of his stare, that could not see the flame of the candle, but was wide enough to embrace the whole universe, piercing enough to penetrate all the hearts that beat in the darkness.”

Only after Marlow passes his final test, his brush with death, does the full significance of Kurtz come to him. Kurtz’s last cry takes us to the meaning of the whole African venture for Marlow, the illumination he receives. For Marlow sees that Kurtz’s cry is more than self-knowledge, more than an insight into the depths of his own evil. It is an insight into the potentialities in all men, it gives the perspective in which we must see Kurtz’s discovery of himself. . . . At the time he chooses Kurtz, Marlow declares that Kurtz is “remarkable,” and to the end of the story he uses no stronger—indeed no other—epithet than this. Its occasional ironic uses only point up its understatement. And “remarkable” is Marlow’s comment on Kurtz’s acceptance of his freedom. (pp. 355-56)

Kurtz is the grail at the end of Marlow’s quest, and of all those who come into contact with Kurtz only Marlow—the faithful pilgrim—experiences an illumination. The manager reduces Kurtz to his own terms and cannot see him. The Russian sailor, who admires Kurtz, is too much a fool—perhaps a wise fool—to recognize the challenge that Kurtz has met. The two women each see and love Kurtz, but a false Kurtz, a lie, which Marlow must meet with another lie. . . .

[Marlow] like Gulliver come back to England . . . , cannot stand the smug faces of the people walking down the streets, unaware of the challenge and the danger. Their knowledge of life seems “an irritating pretense.” They do not know that they are and therefore they are not. Marlow scorns them because in the quest for Kurtz he has discovered the dreadful burden of human freedom. His full illumination, his grail, is not transcendent being but the heart of man. Yet it demands the same tests in the journey of purification and produces an illumination equally awful. (p. 358)


ROBERT O. EVANS (essay date 1956)

[Evans disagrees with Lillian Feder’s assessment (1955) of Heart of Darkness as a reworking of the Aeneid. Evans, like Feder, believes that Conrad made use of the imagery of that epic, but finds the novella more closely linked, both in theme and action, to Dante’s Inferno.]

[The Heart of Darkness] is developed in terms of symbols, and it is, of course, not always possible to distinguish a clear separation between the symbolic and literal levels of meaning. For instance, Kurtz is plainly alive when Marlow begins his journey and still alive when Marlow reaches him, but symbolically there is no doubt that he is the arch-inhabitant of Hell or that Marlow, too, has been journeying through Hell, much as Dante did in the Inferno. Superficially there are differences; for example, Marlow travels alone while Dante had Virgil for his guide. But that Africa represents Hell and the great river, Acheron, Phlegethon, Styx, or all the rivers of Hell together is a traditional interpretation of the story. (p. 56)

Miss Lillian Feder [see excerpt above, 1955] has pointed out a number of significant parallels with Virgil’s descent in the sixth book of the Aeneid, but The Heart of Darkness is more than a reworking of an old theme in modern guise. There is no question that Conrad employed epic machinery borrowed from Virgil. Essentially the story is neither a recitation of Kurtz’s awful degradation nor the simple history of Marlow’s
enlightenment. It is a journey through the underworld, for purposes of instruction as well as entertainment, calculated to bring into focus Conrad's moral vision, as it affects the mass of humanity struggling on the brink of the "timid river." The story is really concerned with modern ethical and spiritual values and has far more significance for the reader than any transmutation of Virgil's descent could have. Clearly it was not possible for Conrad, writing in the twentieth century, to view the world with a disregard for Christian ethics, as Virgil had to do. Accordingly one would expect Conrad to have a deeper significance than Virgil. Moreover, as one of his main themes, the descent into Hell, was not Virgil's exclusive property, it would not seem likely that Conrad should owe Virgil more than Dante, or even Milton. . . . The Heart of Darkness is not the apex of a genre but rather a special use of form towards which Conrad had been painfully working in order to express his particular, ethical view of the universe. (pp. 56-7)

From the beginning of the story there is little question where Marlow's journey will lead him, but, as Miss Feder says, the Hell into which Marlow descends is legendary rather than an actual place. This problem of how to give Hell being without the same sense of existence that Dante experienced is one of the most difficult a modern artist can face. One knows it is there, but where exactly is it? . . . Conrad solves his enigma by deft manipulation of symbols and imagery. Marlow, looking at a map of his projected journey, remarks that he is "going into the yellow—dead in the center." But as the symbolic level of meaning shifts slightly, most of the other references to Hell are described as properly black. Marlow's appointment to replace a man who was killed in an argument over two "black hens," an image carefully related to the two females that surround Kurtz. The knitters are working "black wool." Marlow's first contact with the natives is with black men, whose loins are bound in "black rags." The single, outstanding descriptive detail about the European traders is their "black mustaches." The background of Kurtz's mysterious painting was "almost black—sombre." The river is black; "there were shiny patches on the black creek." Even the natives' confidence is a "black display." Thoughts are black. And again, later, the men themselves are no more than grains of sand in a "black Sahara." Conrad colors Hell rightly but only after making it clear, partly through imagery, that it is not a literal place.

Perhaps the author's use of the Inferno is not quite so explicit as that of the Aeneid, but it is probably more important to the development of the story. In the first place, besides being shorter, Virgil's journey is ideologically simpler than Dante's, and the progression into the underworld in the sixth book of the Aeneid is accomplished at a fairly steady rate, while Dante's journey is interrupted; that is, he travels and then stops and comments, continues, and so on. In these respects The Heart of Darkness is more closely modelled on the Italian epic than on the Latin original. But it is the epic nature of the story that is important; throughout Conrad makes considerable use of epic machinery. (p. 57)

[The] structure of The Heart of Darkness, at least from the moment of Marlow's arrival at the first station on the African coast, closely resembles a skeletonized version of the Inferno. And even prior to Marlow's landing the characters in the story would appear to fit nicely into Dante's threshold to Hell. Perhaps the knitters of black wool are slightly misplaced; Dante might have introduced them earlier. The directors themselves, though they do not realize it, belong in the Vestibule, as men whose lives have warranted neither great infamy nor great praise. Seamen who have abandoned the sea, they are now businessmen. . . . But of the whole group only Marlow is shown to have adhered to the true purpose of life, the development of ethical insight, and he is the only one who still follows the sea, a distinction of symbolic importance. Actually Marlow has little space to devote to the directors; they serve as Marlow's audience, but they are not the audiences the author is trying to convince. The Heart of Darkness is not their story. They are really incapable of understanding it, as Conrad suggests when he puts in the narrator's mouth the insipid remark, "we knew we were fated . . . to hear about one of Marlow's inconclusive experiences" (italics mine). But at least they are capable of sensing something special about Marlow, for the same speaker relates that Marlow "had the pose of a Buddha preaching in European clothes and without a lotus flower." This is plain description of Marlow's mission.

The continents, too, are "hollow men" living in or near the Vestibule, except perhaps for the guardians. Some, of course, are better than others. The doctor, like the narrator on the Nellie, has some realization of the importance of Marlow's journey, shown by his farewell, "Du calme, du calme, Adieu." The women in the story, beginning with Marlow's aunt, are not really damned but live in an unreal world of their own, incapable of understanding. Miss Feder has suggested that Kurtz's fiancee may occupy a special corner of Hades because she is related, through imagery, to Kurtz and, she says, has no separate existence apart from him. It is quite true that when the reader meets her she appears dressed in black, but I do not think the color alone enough to consign her to Hell. She is mourning for Kurtz in a mistaken, over-sentimental but not abnormal fashion. And her existence does not entirely depend on him. Conrad uses her primarily for an agent in Marlow's eventual discovery of the ethical nature of life. Structurally she is bound to Marlow. Symbolically Conrad simplified Marlow's problems until they are mostly bound in the experience of falsehood. The most distasteful action Marlow is capable of is a lie, but twice he is brought to tell one. On the first occasion he lies for practical reasons in order to obtain rivets to repair the steamer, symbolizing dishonesty in the course of the normal business of life. Of course, the lie is successful. But later, when he visits Kurtz's "Intended," Marlow tells another lie, this time with no ulterior motive, and this selfless though intrinsically sinful action, a sort of parable, completes his moral vision. Conrad needs the fiancee for Marlow far more than he does to explain Kurtz's presence in Africa. (pp. 58-9)

The close structural parallel between The Heart of Darkness and the Inferno is not explicit at the Vestibule stage. Moreover, Dane borrowed the Vestibule from Virgil, though Conrad's tenants resemble Dane's far more than the Latin poet's. But from the landing in Africa and Marlow's descent into Limbo the relationship becomes unmistakable. Immediately preceding the real descent, Conrad devotes several paragraphs to explanation, in symbolic terms, of his special Hades. He carefully separates Africa from modern civilization by describing machinery rusting uselessly on a hillside. (p. 59)

Next Conrad turns to Marlow's meeting with the Chief Accountant, noteworthy for his gentle annoyance at having his work disturbed by a dying man on a litter placed in the office with him. The accountant is beyond the violence and the brutality. He keeps up appearances. He does not really suffer. Accordingly, he resembles Dane's tenants who have "sinned not; yet their merit lacked its chiefest / Fulfillment, lacking
baptism, which is / The gateway to the faith which thou believest/ The accountant belongs in Limbo.

From the coast up the river to the second station the characters in the story closely resemble the inhabitants of Upper Hell. Conrad does not follow Dante’s eschatology strictly, but certainly the ivory traders belong with the lustful, glutonious, wrathful. The second station is the abode of the fraudulent, through which blows, appropriately, “a taint of imbecile raptacity... like a whiff from some corpse.” The idea is Dante’s. ... [In] terms that would be appropriate for Dante’s City of Dis, that domain in the Inferno of those whose aims of violence and fraud involve exercise of the will.

From the second station up, the river to Kurzt’s outpost, Conrad carefully draws his characters as if they now inhabited Nether Hell. Nevertheless there is a fundamental difference between The Heart of Darkness and the Inferno at this stage. The inhabitants of Conrad’s City of Dis actually travel further into the underworld; Dante’s damned are fixed. I think this is an essential part of Conrad’s solution to the problem of making Hell real though not actual. Moreover, the geography of Hell is, naturally, somewhat altered. As Marlow travels up the river on the steam launch, the natives are literally downtrodden blacks, but they resemble those who are violent against their neighbors. In fact, violence is one of their few distinguishing characteristics. The traders, now called Pilgrims primarily because they move about in Hell, take on the attributes of the circles they have entered. They too become violent, firing wickedly if ineffectually into the underbrush. The Russian trader that Marlow and his company encounter does seem slightly out of place in terms of Dante’s scheme, for he appears to be a heretic. Conrad actually calls him a “harlequin,” a verbal resemblance that is perhaps more than coincidental. He is not himself one of the violent; his real sin is accepting Kurzt as a false god. Their relationship is also in the foreground, though Conrad does not enlarge upon it. The trader merely remarks of Kurzt, “This man has enlarged my mind,” suggesting intellectual sin, which heresy is. Conrad leaves little doubt about their relations in the readers’ minds. The trader has not meditated about his connection with Kurzt; “it came to him, and he accepted it with a sort of eager fatalism,” Marlow explains. ... Kurzt fits Dante’s scheme perfectly, as traitor to kindred, having put behind him all relations with Europe, to country, having abandoned even the platitudinous lip-service to the civilizing ideal upheld by the others, to guests, having turned upon the trader who nursed him, to God, having set himself up as a “graven image” in the center of Hades. In short Kurzt is the living Lucifer even without the unspeakable rites mentioned by Marlow.

His native queen, on the other hand, is an emendation to the complicated Dante-like system, though she completes Kurzt’s degradation. In a sense she is not materially different from the aunt and the fiancée. In her ambitious dreams, which differ from theirs only because she is more primitive, she is out of touch with the real world. Another structural difference between the two works seems to lie in the fact that Conrad neglected the final circle of Dante’s Hell, the frozen Lake of Cocytus. But Conrad’s Hell is mythical. Literally Kurzt was alive when Marlow reached him. Death was still his immediate future, and perhaps he is not symbolically fixed in ice, like the Alberti brothers, because Conrad wished to suggest that evil as he was a still worse fate awaited him. His final words, “the horror, the horror,” may not only refer back to his Satanic service but may also look ahead to an everlasting horror. (pp. 60-1)

As Marlow descends deeper into Hades, he meets characters whose sins loosely correspond with those in the Italian epic. But Conrad by no means runs through the list of the seven deadly sins with their numerous subdivisions. In fact he does not conceive evil dialectically, but he roughly follows a tripartite division of sin of his own making, materially different from but not certainly related to the commonplace medieval conception. At the first station is the accountant, doomed but not suffering, in Limbo; at the next, the City of Dis, the ivory traders much as Dante would have treated them; finally, Kurzt, Lucifer himself, taking on the attributes of all the sins in which he has participated. Such a conception would be familiar to Dante, for superimposed on the complicated structure of his Hell is the threefold machinery of Vestiuble, Upper Hell, Nether Hell. Conrad’s structure is epic; he was not writing the usual sort of short story. As Miss Feder recognizes, he was heroically depicting “Marlow’s discovery of evil and the responsibilities to himself and to others which this knowledge places upon him.”

On the other hand, Miss Feder contends that Conrad employed the descent into Hell theme, at least to some extent, in order to “build up suspense, to tell the reader indirectly that this is no ordinary voyage.” The voyage is certainly extraordinary, but, as I have pointed out, Conrad does not impart this information through implication. He states it so plainly and so often that the reader can scarcely mistake his meaning. Nor can I agree that the epic theme is employed to develop suspense. As I have shown, Conrad takes pains to adhere to epic structure, patterned after that of the Inferno. Suspense is a very slight element in both the classical epic and in Dante and of minor importance in The Heart of Darkness. Conrad’s goal, as Schiller said of Homer, is “already present in every point of his progress.” ... The initial action is connected chronologically, through the epic list of ships, with heroic actions of the past. The Thames is geographically connected with all the other waters of the world and mythologically with the underworld. The preliminary scene, no mere enveloping action calculated to add verisimilitude, tends to do away with suspense.

In a geographical sense as well the story progresses from incident through journey to further incident, avoiding climax by diversions of great intrinsic value, much as Dante progresses through the various circles of Hell. And because of this technique few experienced readers are likely to find themselves breathless as they journey with Conrad into the dark continent. The strength of the story lies not in the suspense it develops but in the power of its clear moral insight and in the readers’ realization that they, too, could perhaps follow in Marlow’s footsteps. (pp. 61-2)

For the development of Conrad’s purpose, the promotion of ethical insight, the reader must be left emotionally so [free] that he can judge not only Kurzt’s action but Marlow’s as well, and draw the right conclusions from them. I contend that Conrad was fully aware of this problem and realized that a solution in modern, prose form was extremely difficult. Throughout his career he struggled towards an answer. The Shadow Line and “The Secret Sharer” are attempts in the same direction, but it was only with the happy adoption of epic technique in The Heart of Darkness, based largely on the descent into Hell theme which Conrad borrowed from Dante and Virgil, that he achieved complete success. (p. 62)
THOMAS MOSER (essay date 1957)

[In the following excerpt, Moser discusses the role of sexuality in Heart of Darkness. Moser finds that Conrad had difficulty writing about sex or love, and that he could not create realistic dialogues between men and women. Therefore, what F. R. Leavis (1941) terms a “bad patch” of writing in the final interview between Marlow and Kurtz’s Intended, Moser sees as Conrad’s inability to depict a conversation between a man and a woman. Moser also discusses Marlow’s lies to the intended, concluding that it has a weakening effect on the conclusion because the importance of truth is pervasive in the novel and makes it difficult for the reader to accept falsehood as salvation. For other interpretations of Marlow’s lie, see the excerpts by F. R. Leavis (1941), W. Y. Tindall (1958), Kenneth A. Bruhfe (1964), John W. Canario (1967), and Ian Watt (1979), and the entry by Frederick Crews in the Additional Bibliography.]

There is something about the theme of love that elicits only bad writing from Conrad, something that frustrated his most strenuous efforts to create. (p. 69)

[All] the principal characters [in “Heart of Darkness”] are male. But Marlow, the narrator, makes some interesting comments on women; the last scene, between Marlow and Kurtz’s Intended has considerable significance; and the jungle imagery raises some interesting problems. Marlow’s most extended comment on women comes out apropos of his aunt’s exposés on the great missionary work of the Congo trading company. Marlow ventures to remind her that the company is run for profit, and then says in an aside to his male audience on board the yawl in the Thames estuary:

It’s queer how out of touch with truth women are. They live in a world of their own, and there has 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 confounded fact we men have been living contentedly with ever since the day of creation would start up and knock the whole thing over.

In the context of “Heart of Darkness,” with its theme of self-discovery, Marlow’s assertion that women can take no part in the same thing for truth is severe criticism indeed. Marlow says the same thing in his Intended: “Oh, she is out of it—completely. They—the women I mean—are out of it—should be out of it. We must help them to stay in that beautiful world of their own.”

Though “Heart of Darkness” does not hint that Marlow has any sexual interest in the Intended, their scene together at the end certainly recalls in some respects scenes between the Herzogs in “The Return” [which depicts the menacing force of female sexuality in the eyes of an inadequate male]. For instance, though Marlow has been eager to meet her, he is filled with horror when he reaches her door. The fireplace in her drawing room has a “cold and monumental whiteness.” Marlow looks at the woman and wonders what he is doing there, “with a sensation of panic in my heart as though I had blundered into a place of cruel and absurd mysteries not fit for a human being to behold.” Their ensuing dialogue is halting and wooden, a “bad patch” of prose. F. R. Leavis calls it [see excerpt above, 1941]. Marlow has come there hoping to surrender to her the memory of Kurtz. She instead maneuvers him into telling her a lie: that Kurtz’s last words were not, “The horror,” but her name: “I heard a light sigh and then my heart stood still, stopped dead short by an exulting and terrible cry, by the cry of inconceivable triumph and of unspeakable pain.” Marlow’s lie certainly weakens the scene; he has made truth seem too important throughout the novel to persuade the reader now to accept falsehood as salvation.

The extended descriptions of the jungle remind us, not unnaturally, of the vegetation imagery of Almayer’s Folly and An Outcast of the Islands. Here, too, the “vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings”; the reader finds himself in a “strange world of plants, water, and silence.” Yet “Heart of Darkness” does not stress so heavily as the earlier works the strangling effects of tendrils and creepers. At one point, Marlow does mention the “living trees, lashed together by the creepers,” and at another he equates vegetation with woman just as he does not only in the Malay stories but also in The Sisters. The jungle woman is, of course, Kurtz’s native mistress, “savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent.” Marlow comments:

And in the hush that had fallen suddenly upon the whole sorrowful land, the immense wilderness, the colossal body of the fucund and mysterious life seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul.

Any reader of “Heart of Darkness” must recognize that our analysis of it in terms of sexual love hardly scratches the surface. It means far more than this, and herein lies its significance. For the first time Conrad has been able to use material potentially related to sex in such a way as not to ruin his story and, in fact, in some respects to strengthen it. Our account of the imagery of the Congo jungle far from exhausts its meanings; rather, this imagery has the richness and tonality of the true symbol. The jungle stands for “truth,” for an “amazing reality.” Conrad equates it with the African natives who alone are full of vitality; the whites are but hollow men. Yet the jungle also means the “lurking death,” “profound darkness,” and “evil,” which belong to the prehistoric life of man, our heritage. We cannot escape this heritage; going into the jungle seems to Marlow like traveling into one’s own past, into the world of one’s dreams, into the subconscious. Thus the vegetation imagery means much more than female menace; it means the truth, the darkness, the evil, the death which lie within us, which we must recognize in order to be truly alive. In the same way, while the scene between Marlow and Kurtz’s Intended is imperfect, and while it does show the “inconceivable triumph” of woman over man, it has other, more important functions in the story. The scene can be read, for example, as an indictment of this woman, safe and ignorant in her complacent, Belgian bourgeois existence; she does not deserve to hear the truth. The scene can also be read as Marlow’s reaffirmation of fellowship with Kurtz. To accept Kurtz’s pronouncement, “The horror,” means accepting damnation; Marlow’s sin, the lie, serves to confirm this. (pp. 78-81)

[When] Conrad writes about love he does not understand his subject. Conrad is very honest in his preface to The Arrow of Gold: “what is lacking in the facts is simply what I did not know, and what is not explained is what I did not understand myself, and what seems inadequate is the fault of my imperfect insight.”
Conrad differs radically from other great modern novelists in his lack of understanding, in his almost belligerent lack of genuine, dramatic interest in sexual problems. Although the Conradian villains could be labeled neurotic, exhibitionist, and unconsciously homosexual, they are really just cardboard figures plucked from nowhere and thrown up as obstacles to sexual consummation. (p. 128)


ALBERT J. GUERARD (essay date 1958)

[In the following excerpt, Guerard examines in detail Marlow's growth toward self-awareness and a knowledge of evil in Heart of Darkness. In addition to Marlow's journey of discovery, Guerard finds that a primary concern of the novel is the effect that colonialism has on the colonizers. Guerard also believes that, in Marlow's attempts to describe Kurtz and his "unspeakable" behavior, Conrad successfully illustrates the narrator's inability to describe in concrete terms the immense truths he has discovered about his own subconscious; Guerard thus concludes that Conrad chose correctly in not trying to disclose the unspeakable acts but succeeding in suggesting an indefinable capacity for evil in human beings. For contrasting interpretations of Conrad's ambiguity, see the excerpts by F. R. Leavis (1941), Thomas Moser (1957), Marvin Mudrick (1958-59), and Frederick R. Karl (1969), and the entry by Frederick Crews in the Additional Bibliography.]

Joseph Conrad was one of the most subjective and most personal of English novelists. And his best work makes its calculated appeal to the living sensibilities and commitments of readers; it is a deliberate invasion of our lives, and deliberately manipulates our responses. (p. 1)

[We] cannot ignore the personality and temperament that pervade the best writings (and some of the worst) and largely determine their form. For we are concerned with a style that is unmistakably a speaking voice; with a certain way of constructing novels that may derive from temeramental evasiveness; above all with an intense conflict of novelistic judgment and sympathy presumably reflecting divisions in Conrad himself. (pp. 1-2)

"Heart of Darkness" is the most famous of [Conrad's] personal short novels: a Pilgrim's Progress for our pessimistic and psychologizing age. . . . The living nightmare of 1890 seems to have affected Conrad quite as importantly as did Gide's Congo experience thirty-six years later. The autobiographical basis of the narrative is well known, and its retrospective bias obvious; this is Conrad's longest journey into self. But it is well to remember that "Heart of Darkness" is also other if more superficial things: a sensitive and vivid travelogue, and a comment on "the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration." (pp. 33-4)

"Heart of Darkness" thus has its important public side, as an angry document on absurd and brutal exploitation. Marlow is treated to the spectacle of a French man-of-war shelling an unseen "enemy" village in the bush, and presently he will wander into the grove at the first company station where the starving and sick Negroes withdraw to die. It is one of the greatest of Conrad's many moments of compassionate rendering. The compassion extends even to the cannibal crew of the Roi des Belges. Deprived of the rotten hippo meat they had brought along for food, and paid three nine-inch pieces of brass wire a week, they appear to subsist on "lumps of some stuff like half-cooked dough, of a dirty lavender color" which they keep wrapped in leaves. Conrad here operates through ambiguous suggestion (are the lumps human flesh?) but elsewhere he wants, like Gide after him, to make his complacent European reader see: see, for instance, the drunken unkempt official met on the road and three miles farther on the body of the Negro with a bullet hole in his forehead. "Heart of Darkness" is a record of things seen and done. But also Conrad was reacting to the humanitarian pretenses of some of the looters precisely as the novelist today reacts to the moralisms of cold-war propaganda. Then it was ivory that poured from the heart of darkness; now it is uranium. Conrad shrewdly recognized—an intuition amply developed in Nostromo—that deception is most sinister when it becomes self-deception, and the propagandist takes seriously his own fictions. Kurtz "could get himself to believe anything—anything." The benevolent rhetoric of his seventeen-page report for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs was meant sincerely enough. But a deeper sincerity spoke through his scrawled postscript: "Exterminate all the brutes!" The conservative Conrad . . . speaks through the journalist who says that "Kurtz's proper sphere ought to have been politics 'on the popular side.'"
Conrad, again like many novelists today, was both drawn to idealism and repelled by its hypocritical abuse. “The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea...” Marlow commits himself to the yet unseen agent partly because Kurtz “had come out equipped with moral ideas of some sort.” Anything would seem preferable to the demoralized greed and total cynicism of the others, “the flabby devil” of the Central Station. Later, when he discovers what has happened to Kurtz’s moral ideas, he remains faithful to the “nightmare of my choice.” . . . The Kurtz who had made himself literally one of the devils of the land, and who in solitude had kicked himself loose of the earth, burns while the others rot. Through violent not flabby evil he exists in the moral universe even before pronouncing judgment on himself with his dying breath. A little too much has been made, I think, of the redemptive value of those two words—“The horror!” But none of the company “pilgrims” could have uttered them.

The redemptive view is Catholic, of course, though no priest was in attendance, Kurtz can repent as the gunman of The Power and the Glory cannot. “Heart of Darkness” (still at this public and wholly conscious level) combines a Victorian ethic and late Victorian fear of the white man’s deterioration with a distinctly Catholic psychology. We are protected from ourselves by society with its laws and its watchful neighbors, Marlow observes. And we are protected by work. But when the external restraints of society and work are removed, we must meet the challenge and temptation of savage reversion with our “inborn strength. Principles won’t do.” This inborn strength appears to include restraint—the restraint that Kurtz lacked and the cannibal crew of the Roi des Belges surprisingly possessed. The hollow man, whose evil is the evil of vacancy, succumbs. And in their different degrees the pilgrims and Kurtz share this hollowness. (pp. 34-6)

As for Kurtz, the wilderness “echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core,” Perhaps the chief contradiction of “Heart of Darkness” is that it suggests and dramatizes evil as an active energy (Kurtz and his unspokenable lusts) but defines evil as vacancy. The primitive (and here the contradiction is only verbal) is compact of passion and apathy. “I was struck by the fire of his eyes and the composed languor of his expression . . . This shadow looked satiated and calm, as though for the moment it had had its fill of all the emotions.” Of the two menaces—the unspokenable desires and the apathy—apathy surely seemed the greater to Conrad. Hence we cannot quite believe the response of Marlow’s heart to the beating of the tom-toms. This is, I think, the story’s minor but central flaw, and the source of an unfruitful ambiguity: that it slightly overdoes the kinship with the “passionate uproar,” slightly undervalues the temptation of inertia.

In any event, it is time to recognize that the story is not primarily about Kurtz or about the brutality of Belgian officials but about Marlow its narrator. (p. 37)

Substantially and in its central emphasis “Heart of Darkness” concerns Marlow (projection to whatever great or small degree of a more irrecoverable Conrad) and his journey toward and through certain facets or potentialities of self. F. R. Leavis [see excerpt above, 1941] seems to regard him as a narrator only, providing a “specific and concretely realized point of view.” But Marlow reiterates often enough that he is recounting a spiritual voyage of self-discovery. He remarks casually but crucially that he did not know himself before setting out, and that he likes work for the chance it provides to “find yourself . . . what no other man can ever know.” The Inner Station “was the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience.” At a material and rather superficial level, the journey is through the temptation of atavism. It is a record of “remote kinship” with the “wild and passionate uproar,” of a “trace of a response” to it, of a final rejection of the “fascination of the abomination.” And why should there not be the trace of a response? “The mind of man is capable of anything—because everything is in it, in all the past as well as all the future.” Marlow’s temptation is made concrete through his exposure to Kurtz, a white man and sometime idealist who had fully responded to the wilderness: a potential and fallen self. (p. 38)

On this literal plane, and when the events are so abstracted from the dream-sensation conveying them, it is hard to take Marlow’s plight very seriously. Will he, the busy captain and moralizing narrator, also revert to savagery, go ashore for a howl and a dance, indulge unspokenable lusts? The late Victorian reader (and possibly Conrad himself) could take this more seriously than we; could literally believe not merely in a Kurtz’s deterioration through months of solitude but also in the sudden reveries to the “beast” of naturalistic fiction. Insofar as Conrad does want us to take it seriously and literally, we must admit the nominal triumph of a currently accepted but false psychology over his own truer intuitions. But the triumph is only nominal. For the personal narrative is unmistakably authentic, which means that it explores something truer, more fundamental, and distinctly less material: the night journey into the unconscious, and confrontation of an entity within the self. . . . It little matters what, in terms of psychological symbolism, we call this double or say he represents: whether the Freudian id or the Jungian shadow or more vaguely the outlaw. And I am afraid it is impossible to say where Conrad’s conscious understanding of his story began and ended. The important thing is that the introspective plunge and powerful dream seem true; and are therefore inevitably moving.

Certain circumstances of Marlow’s voyage, looked at in these terms, take on a new importance. The true night journey can occur (except during analysis) only in sleep or in the waking dream of a profoundly intuitive mind. Marlow insists more than is necessary on the dreamlike quality of his narrative. . . . Even before leaving Brussels Marlow felt as though he “were about to set off for the center of the earth,” not the center of a continent. The introspective voyager leaves his familiar rational world, is “cut off from the comprehension” of his surroundings; his steamer toils “along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy.” As the crisis approaches, the dreamer and his ship move through a silence that “seemed unnatural, like a state of trance”; then enter (a few miles below the Inner Station) a deep fog. “The approach to this Kurtz grubbing for ivory in the wretched bush was beset by as many dangers as though he had been an enchanted princess sleeping in a fabulous castle.” Later, Marlow’s task is to try “to break the spell” of the wilderness that holds Kurtz entranced.

The approach to the unconscious and primitive may be aided by a savage or half-savage guide, and may require the token removal of civilized trappings or aids. . . . In “Heart of Darkness” the token “relinquishment” and the death of the half-savage guide are connected. The helmsman falling at Marlow’s feet casts blood on his shoes, which he is “morbidly anxious”
to change and in fact throws overboard. . . . Here we have presumably entered an area of unconscious creation; the dream is true but the teller may have no idea why it is. So too, possibly, a psychic need as well as literary tact compelled Conrad to defer the meeting between Marlow and Kurtz for some three thousand words after announcing that it took place. We think we are about to meet Kurtz at last. But instead Marlow leaps ahead to his meeting with the "Intended." . . . This is the "evasive" Conrad in full play, deferring what we most want to know and see; perhaps compelled to defer climax in this way. The tactic is dramatically effective, though possibly carried to excess: we are told on the authority of completed knowledge certain things we would have found hard to believe had they been presented through a slow consecutive realistic discovery. But also it can be argued that it was psychologically impossible for Marlow to go at once to Kurtz's house with the others. The double must be brought on board the ship, and the first confrontation must occur there. (pp. 39-41)

Hence the shock Marlow experiences when he discovers that Kurtz's cabin is empty and his secret sharer gone; a part of himself has vanished. . . . And now he must risk the ultimate confrontation in a true solitude and must do so on shore. "I was anxious to deal with this shadow by myself alone—and to this day I don't know why I was so jealous of sharing with anyone the peculiar blackness of that experience." . . . We are told very little of what Kurtz said in the moments that follow; and little of his incoherent discourses after he is brought back to the ship. "His was an impenetrable darkness. I looked at him as you peer down at a man who is lying at the bottom of a precipice where the sun never shines"—"a comment less vague and rhetorical, in terms of psychic geography, than it may seem at a first reading. And then Kurtz is dead, taken off the ship, his body buried in a "muddy hole." With the confrontation over, Marlow must still emerge from enrobing darkness, and does so through that other deep fog of sickness. The identification is not yet completely broken. "And it is not my own extremity I remember best—a vision of grayness without form filled with physical pain, and a careless contempt for the evanescence of all things—even of this pain itself. No! It is his extremity that I seem to have lived through." Only in the atonement of his lie to Kurtz's "Intended," back in the sepulchral city, does the experience come truly to an end. "I laid the ghost of his gifts at last with a lie . . ."

Such seems to be the content of the dream. If my summary has even a partial validity it should explain and to an extent justify some of the "adjectival and worse than supererogatory insistence" to which F. R. Leavis (who sees only the travelogue and the portrait of Kurtz) objects. I am willing to grant that the unspeakable rites and unspeakable secrets become wearisome, but the fact—at once literary and psychological—is that they must remain unsoken. A confrontation with such a double and facet of the unconscious cannot be reported through realistic dialogue; the conversations must remain as shadowy as the narrator’s conversations with Leggatt. So too when Marlow finds it hard to define the moral shock he received on seeing the empty cabin, or when he says he doesn’t know why he was jealous of sharing his experience, I think we can take him literally . . . and in a sense even be thankful for his uncertainty. . . . [It] may be the groping, fumbling "Heart of Darkness" takes us into a deeper region of the mind. If the story is not about this deeper region, and not about Marlow himself, its length is quite indefensible. But even if one were to allow that the final section is about Kurtz (which I think simply absurd), a vivid pictorial record of his unspeakable lusts and gratifications would surely have been ludicrous. I share Mr. Leavis’ admiration for the heads on the stakes. But not even Kurtz could have supported many such particulars.

"I listened on the watch for the sentence, for the word, that would give me the clue to the faint uneasiness inspired by this narrative that seemed to shape itself without human lips in the heavy night air of the river." Thus one of Marlow’s listeners, the original "I" who frames the story, comments on its initial effect. He has discovered how alert one must be to the ebb and flow of Marlow’s narrative, and here warns the reader. But there is no single word; not even the word trane will do. For the shifting play of thought and feeling and image and event is very intricate. It is not vivid detail alone, the heads on stakes or the bloody shoes; nor only the dark mass of moralizing abstraction; nor the dramatized psychological intuitions apart from their context that give "Heart of Darkness" its brooding weight. The impressionist method—one cannot leave this story without subscribing to the obvious—finds here one of its great triumphs of tone. The random movement of the nightmare is also the controlled movement of a poem, in which a quality of feeling may be stated or suggested and only much later justified. But it is justified at last. (pp. 41-4)

[The] narrative advances and withdraws as in a succession of long dark waves borne by an incoming tide. The waves enroach fairly evenly on the shore, and presently a few more feet of sand have been won. But an occasional wave thrusts up unexpectedly, much farther than the others: even as far, say, as Kurtz and his Inner Station. Or, to take the other figure: the flashlight is held firmly; there are no whimsical jerrings from side to side. But now and then it is raised higher, and for a brief moment in a sudden clear light we discern enigmatic matters to be explored much later. Thus the movement of the story is sinuously progressive, with much incremental repetition. The intent is not to subject the reader to multiple strains and ambiguities, but rather to throw over him a brooding gloom, such a warm pall as those two Fates in the home office might knit, back in the sepulchral city.

Yet no figure can convey "Heart of Darkness" in all its resonance and tenebrous atmosphere. The movement is not one of penetration and withdrawal only; it is also the tracing of a large grand circle of awareness. It begins with the friends on the yacht under the dark above Gravesend and at last returns to them, to the tranquil waterway that "leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky—seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness." (pp. 44-5)

The travelogue as travelogue is not to be ignored. . . . Presently Marlow will discover a scar in the hillside into which drainage pipes for the settlement had been tumbled; then will walk into the grove where the Negroes are free to die in a "greenish gloom." The sharply visualized particulars suddenly intrude on the somber intellectual flow of Marlow’s meditation: magnified, arresting. The boilermaker who "had to crawl in the mud under the bottom of the steamboat...would tie up that beard of his in a kind of white serviette he brought for the purpose. It had loops to go over his ears." The papier-maché Mephistopheles is as vivid, with his delicate hooked nose and glittering mica eyes. So too is Kurtz’s harlequin companion and admirer, humbly dissociating himself from the master’s lusts and gratifications. . . . And even Kurtz, shadow and symbol though he be, the man of eloquence who in this story is almost voiceless, and necessarily so—even Kurtz is sharply visualized, an "animated image of death," a skull and body.
emerging as from a wingding sheet, "the cage of his ribs all astir, the bones of his arm waving."

This is Africa and its flabby inhabitants; Conrad did indeed have a "feel for the country." Yet the dark tonalities and final brooding impression derive as much from rhythm and rhetoric as from such visual details; derive from the high aloof ironies and from a prose that itself advances and recedes in waves. (pp. 45-6)

The insistence on darkness, finally, and quite apart from ethical or mythical overtones, seems a right one for this extremely personal statement. There is a darkness of passivity, paralysis, immobilization; it is from the state of entranced languor rather than from the monstrous desires that the double Kurtz, this shadow, must be saved. In Freudian theory, we are told, such preoccupation may indicate fear of the feminine and passive. But may it not also be connected, through one of the spirit's multiple disguises, with a radical fear of death, that other darkness? . . .

It would be folly to try to limit the menace of vegetation in the restless life of Conradian image and symbol. But [it] . . . reminds us again of the story's reflexive references, and its images of deathly immobilization in grass. Most striking are the black shadows dying in the greenish gloom of the grove at the first station. But grass sprouts between the stones of the European city, a "whited sepulcher," and on the same page Marlow anticipates coming upon the remains of his predecessor: "the grass growing through his ribs was tall enough to hide his bones." The critical meeting with Kurtz occurs on a trail through the grass. Is there not perhaps an intense horror behind the casualness with which Marlow reports his discoveries, say of the Negro with the bullet in his forehead? (p. 47)

"Heart of Darkness" . . . remains one of the great dark meditations in literature, and one of the purest expressions of a melancholy temperament. (p. 48)


W. Y. TINDALL  
(essay date 1958)

[Tindall has written extensively on the works of twentieth-century English and Irish authors, and is a widely recognized authority on the work of James Joyce. In the following excerpt, Tindall argues that F. R. Leavis and other critics have erroneously interpreted Marlow's voice as that of Conrad. While the character and author share similar qualities, Tindall contends that Marlow is a fully autonomous character manipulated by Conrad to achieve his ends. In addition to a discussion of Marlow's character, Tindall also examines Marlow's lie to Kurtz's Intended, concluding that Marlow tells "a white lie to keep the Intended in the dark by preserving her light." Kenneth A. Bruffee (1964) sharply disagrees with this interpretation of the lie. For other discussions of Marlow's lie, see the excerpts by F. R. Leavis (1941), Thomas Moser (1957), Kenneth A. Bruffee (1964), John W. Canario (1967), and Ian Watt (1979), and the entry by Frederick Crews in the Additional Bibliography.]

The trouble with Conrad, indeed, the only trouble, says F. R. Leavis, is Marlow. "Heart of Darkness," found good by some good critics, is so generally "marred" by Marlow's adjectives that it sinks into place beside Lord Jim among minor works. In "Youth," a "cheap insistence" on glamor makes Conrad seem a Kipling of the South Seas, if not worse. It may be that in Chance Conrad-Marlow rises above such "shockingly bad magazine stuff" to a kind of technical respectability, but, save for that, stories in which Marlow figures cannot be counted among the major works: Nostromo, Under Western Eyes, The Secret Agent, and some others in a hierarchy of values, unsupported but proclaimed. Abandoning the "objective correlative" when Marlow is around, Leavis continues, Conrad becomes "intention on making a virtue out of not knowing what he means. The vague and unrealizable, he asserts with a strained impressiveness, is the profoundly and tremendously significant." The trouble with Leavis seems failure to read the text or else to understand it. (p. 274)

Other critics besides Leavis have confused Marlow with his creator. When Marlow speaks they think it Conrad; and one must admit some reason for this confusion. As Conrad's other writings prove, Marlow shares some of Conrad's ideas, his moral concerns, and his delight in irony. It requires little critical awareness, however, to discover that Marlow, in spite of monacle and beard (if, indeed, he wears them), is a creature distinct from his creator. Conrad, who appears at the beginning and end and sometimes in the middle of the Marlow books, listens to Marlow and tells us what he tells him. To Conrad, Marlow is the object as Jim or Kurtz seems Marlow's. Marlow may owe something to Conrad's desire for a mask in Yeats's sense of the word, but a mask is a device for achieving impersonality, drama, and distance. No longer subject but object, Marlow has been distanced to the point where Conrad can regard him as another and use him not with the warm concern we devote to ourselves but with aesthetic detachment as an artist should. Marlow is matter to be handled and shaped. Maybe his closest parallel is Stephen Dedalus, who, although resembling his creator in many ways, is nonetheless someone else. Like Stephen, Marlow often exposes his imperfections to the mocking eye. (pp. 274-75)

Conrad seems during this time to have approximated Henry James's ideas of reality. For that reason many critics have traced Marlow's origin to the master, who invented his observer several years before the emergence of Marlow. Seeing him as a development of the Jamesian observer, they have found him a kind of bearded Maisie or a monocalced anticipation of Sticher. Of their family maybe, Marlow differs nevertheless in so many particulars from his assumed prototype and successor that it is likely he owes Maisie no more than a possible hint. James, looking into the head of his observer, presents a selection of what goes on there. His role is that of interpreter, Conrad's of reporter. Maisie receives impressions which James attends to; Marlow, an amateur philosopher, a compulsive talker, and a kind of artist, considers, colors, and shapes his impressions by himself, while Conrad, aloof, scribbles in his notebook. Maisie's experience is immediate and current, whereas Marlow's, dependent upon memory where it receives further refraction, is distant in time and place. These differences make it clear that if, indifferent to fallacies, we allow genesis, we should look elsewhere for Marlow's.

I think that the idea of Marlow can be traced back to the inner demands of Conrad's work, immediately to The Nigger of the Narcissus, of which the Marlow stories seem natural developments—in several ways; but let us limit ourselves for the moment to . . . point of view. Since Marlow among other things is an embodied point of view, that limitation is suitable. The story of James Wait and the ship Narcissus is told by someone who, like the narrator of the Cyclops episode of Ulys-
It is plain that this concerned yet ghostly voice is an experiment, an unsuccessful experiment perhaps, marking a transition between omniscience and a personified observer. Marlow, developing from this voice, improves it. Equipped with personality, character, limits, attitude, and tone — in a word, with body — Charlie Marlow and his conspiring voice become authentic. More than observant, he not only plays his part in the action but subsumes it, leaving that ancestral voice neither here nor there.

Not Conrad's occasional description, then, but this voice determines Marlow, who, far from Polish, emerges as the Victorian gentleman, the embodiment maybe of Conrad's aspiration. ... In love with conscious order and light, he detests disorder and darkness. Devoted to duty, fidelity, and prudence as a navigator and master must be, he observes in "Heart of Darkness," as at a moment of savage and commercial confusion: "I looked ahead — piloting." As he proceeds, he ruminates in the manner of the popular philosopher on the nature of things.

Their nature, we discover, is not altogether different from that observed by Hardy or, indeed, by Conrad — if we may trust his letters. Marlow shares with his creator the all but existentialist conviction that however meaningless and hopeless things are, we must cherish ideals and by their aid change necessary defeat to a kind of futile victory. Such human victories, general defeats, and all things else are mixed and dubious. For this reason too Marlow is obsessed with enigmas and uncertainties. They are part of the nature of things. We can never be sure in this uncertain place, but we must try.

As for attitude: at once cynical and sentimental, Marlow is given to pity and impatience. Maybe his term "romantic" describes him best. Although he fails to define it, this term, as he uses it, seems to include imagination, illusion, anxiety, and concern with self. Marlow has little humor, though he laughs once or twice. ... If little humor and less wit, there is plenty of irony; and that provides his common tone. Like many ironists, Marlow is committed, engaged. All this is apparent enough; but Marlow, changing with the years, reveals new aspects in each story. ... (pp. 275-77)

Searching possibilities of Marlow as subject and object, Conrad followed [the] simple tale ["Youth"] with one of greater density or specific gravity, which may be signs or at least metaphors of value. A tale at once complex and ambiguous, "Heart of Darkness" is ostensibly the story of Marlow's quest for Kurtz. Actually Marlow is questing for himself: "The most you can hope," he says, "is some knowledge of yourself." While seeking assurance and knowledge, he exposes himself once more to Conrad's distant eye. But Marlow has developed.

Not only a discursive commentator, he has become an imagist as well; and developing in other directions, he has acquired moral concerns. That love of mystery which appears now and again in "Youth," emerges here as one of Marlow's obsessions.

"Image" and "symbol," terms used by Marlow, indicate his new method of presentation — at least in part. By "image," a term he applies to Kurtz and the wild woman, he seems to mean a significant but more or less limited conception; and by "symbol," a term he applies to skulls on posts, he seems to mean a less definite, more generally suggestive conception. Rusting machinery in the Belgian wasteland and the gunboat shelling the forest are images in his sense; whereas the enigmatic forest is a symbol. As if familiar with the Preface to The

"Nigger of the Narcissus" [see TCLC, Vol. 6, p. 112], Marlow sometimes presents his vision in plastic, sensuous forms that seem designed to "reveal" or "disclose" embodied meaning to an audience that must take these offerings as it can. ... We have no assurance that Marlow has read Conrad or Yeats on symbolism, but as he tells us in "Youth," he has read Carlyle's Sartor Resartus with its famous chapter on symbol, and it seems likely from the text that he knows Baudelaire — as Conrad did. In "Heart of Darkness" Marlow's childish interest in the "delightful mystery" of maps and his consequent journey to the "unknown" suggest Baudelaire's "Le Voyage" as Marlow's dandy at the trading post suggests Baudelaire's ideal man. Comparing his forest to a "temple," Marlow calls to mind the forest of Baudelaire's "Correspondences," which also allows obscure, confusing intimations to emerge.

In the prelude to "Heart of Darkness" Conrad tells us that for Marlow "the meaning of an episode was not inside it like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze." This "misty halo" (not unlike the white fog encountered on the Congo) seems to have little in common with the inner truth, lying deep below the surface, that Marlow seeks; but only a difference of metaphor separates these attempts to fix the meaning of symbol. Wherever its meaning lies — whether in halo, fog, or kernel — Marlow's principal symbol, aside from the forest, is the voyage. ... (pp. 278-79)

Like Baudelaire, Marlow is seldom content to let his concrections alone. Sometimes he tries to explain them and almost always, driven by anxiety, he anticipates our reaction by stating his own. Marlow, after all, is not early T. S. Eliot. Adjectives and similes, not unlike the eager nouns by which the captain of "The Secret Sharer" tries to fix his delusions, are Marlow's attempts to give his response to halo or kernel and to fix his impression of the images he picks as subjective correlatives. He finds the women knitting black wool "fateful," and the "expressive and puzzling" skulls indicative of moral deficiency. Even the forest is restricted by Marlow's guesses to our primitive, repressed, and hidden desires, below "permitted aspirations." Such discursive limitations, however, are legitimate in this context; for the story is not about knitting women, forests, or even Kurtz, but about Marlow's response to them.

Trying to explain his dark forest, Marlow commonly finds it enigmatic, its darkness properly shrouded in white fog. In this respect Marlow resembles the crew of the Narcissus, who, like critics confronted by a text, find Wait, another dark thing, ambiguous. Far from implying certainty, Marlow's comments celebrate uncertainty, as if to support Carlyle's idea of symbol, which conceals as it reveals. The emphasis upon enigma that Leavis finds lamentable is not there to make a virtue of ignorance. Not only the heart of Marlow's darkness, it is also a consequence of his symbolist position. For romantic symbolists there can be no definite conclusions; and however certain Marlow may be about some images, his tale, as listening Conrad says, is "inconclusive."

Imagery of dark and light, by which the voice of the Narcissus expresses his uncertainties, is also useful to Marlow. Civilization is light and the forest dark; but darkness and light are always shifting and ambiguous. What seems dark may prove light, and what seems light, dark; or else, mixed, they may compose the universal "grayness" that he dreads. Acclaiming light, he faces darkness; but a growing conviction that the darkness of Kurtz and the forest may be his own or that in their internal and external confusion he can no longer tell light
from dark is cause for anxiety and a further cause of uncertainty. Howling natives correspond to something within himself; and at the end, still professing light, he is loyal to Kurtz’s darkness.

The conflict or confusion of light and dark, inviting irony, allows morality. Marlow’s moral posture, though seeming plainer than it is, is emphatic. Approving fidelity, duty, discipline, and order, of which rivets, navigation, and light seem symbolic, he abhors dark disorder. Morality involves choice; Marlow’s, however, is not between light and dark but between kinds of dark. Forced to choose between “nightmares,” that of the rapacious Belgians and that of Kurtz, Marlow chooses the latter; for to him that ultimate explanation seems “moral victory.” Not only proving Kurtz’s awareness of his “degradation,” his “horror,” agreeably corroborating Marlow’s own convictions, seems also to imply the “immense darkness” of all things.

As for the ironies: ironic Marlow seems their main and their all but unconscious object. It is ironic that one so vocal should call Kurtz “a voice.” There is irony (of which Marlow is also innocent) in his unquestioning acceptance of Kurtz’s “horror” as a sign of grace and moral illumination. Marlow’s character compels that view of it; but for all we know Kurtz is horrified because his rituals and ivory-gathering have been cut short—or he may be looking at Marlow. The principal irony in Marlow’s interview with Kurtz’s Intended does not consist, as Leavis thought, in Marlow’s attitude toward her or in the discrepancy between her view of Kurtz and the actuality (whatever that is) but rather in the acceptance of darkness by an apostle of light. As Marlow, that apostle, enters the house of this lover of a darkness mistaken for light, darkness enters with him and grows deeper as he talks. His defense of Kurtz out of loyalty to what is perhaps his own mistaken idea of light amounts to defense of darkness and identification with Kurtz. Marlow tells a white lie to keep the Intended in the dark by preserving her light. But even this light is uncertain—as her black dress implies; and Marlow may be right in seeing her momentarily not as a creature of light and of his chivalric expectations but as the wild woman of the Congo. An irony of which Marlow is only half aware is the terrible confusion of light and dark that he reveals within himself. Darkness in white fog seems a fitting symbol. (pp. 280-81)


MARVIN MUDRICK (essay date 1958-59)

[In the following excerpt, Mudrick discusses Conrad’s verbal and structural techniques. Mudrick considers Conrad’s short works his most original, for in them he most effectively utilized what Mudrick terms the double plot, an innovative intertwining of realistic and symbolic action and description. However, Mudrick believes that Conrad is a writer with two styles, one founded upon precise description of vivid detail, the other and more inferior relying upon abstractions, partial ironies, and indirectness, a style Conrad uses when he has no faith in his ability to let details and symbols suggest their intended meanings. Specifically, in the depiction of Kurtz. Mudrick contends that Conrad exploits melodrama and the stock tricks of slick magazine fiction that would be unacceptable in the work of a lesser writer. Mudrick believes that this stems from Conrad’s inability to fully imagine the evil he wished to depict. For further discussion of Conrad’s depiction of evil, see the excerpts by F. R. Leavis (1941), Albert J. Guerard (1958), Frederic R. Karl (1969), and the entry by Frederick Crews in the Additional Bibliography.]

Everything Conrad wrote recalls everything else he wrote, in a pervasive melancholy of outlook, a persistency of theme (“the plight of the man on whom life closes down inexorably, divesting him of the supports and illusory protection of friendship, social privilege, or love”), and a conscientious manipulation of innovational method; yet what marks Conrad as not a mere experimentalist or entertainer but a genuine innovator occurs only sporadically in his full-length novels, with discretion and sustained impulse only in several long stories or short novels: in The Nigger of the Narcissus, in Typhoon, in Part I of Under Western Eyes, and—with most impressive rich immediacy—in Heart of Darkness.

Conrad’s innovation—or, in any case, the fictional technique that he exploited with unprecedented thoroughness—is the double-plot: neither allegory (where surface is something teasing, to be got through), nor catch-all symbolism (where every knowing particular signifies some universal or other), but a developing order of actions so lucidly symbolic of a developing state of spirit—from moment to moment, so morally identifiable—as to suggest the conditions of allegory without forfeiting or even subordinating the realistic “superficial” claim of the actions and their actors.

Heart of Darkness—at least until we reach Kurtz and the end of the journey—is a remarkable instance of such order: details intensely present, evocatively characteristic of the situations in which they happen, and prefiguring from moment to moment an unavoidable moral reality. The equatorial incubus of inefficiency, for example, is created and consolidated by a set of details memorable in their direct sensuous impact, almost farcical in the situations whose absurd disproportions they discover, and wholly dreadful as a cumulative cosmic denial of mind: the warship (“It appears the French had one of their wars going on thereabouts”), its men dying of fever at the rate of three a day, “‘firing into a continent’”; the forsaken railway track, looking “‘as dead as the carcass of some animal,’ rusting in the grass” “‘on its back with its wheels in the air’”; the fat man with the moustaches trying to put out a blaze in a grass shed with a quart of water in a leaking pail, the brickmaker idling for a year with no bricks and no hope of materials for making them; the “‘wanton smashup’” of drainage pipes abandoned in a ravine; burst, piled-up cases of rivets at the Outer Station, and no way of getting them to the damaged steamboat at the Central Station; the “‘vast artificial hole somebody had been digging on the slope, the purpose of which I found it impossible to divine. It wasn’t a quarry or a sandpit, anyhow. It was just a hole.’” (pp. 545-47)

In this world of the fortuitous, acutely realized details of nightmare, such efficiency as can survive will be of a very special kind, like the accountant’s—

Hair parted, brushed, oiled, under a green-lined parasol held in a big white hand. He was amazing, and had a penholder behind his ear. . . . 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. . . .
In this climate, where life for a clot of exasperated foreigners contracts itself to the exploitation of the hopelessly alien, it is also difficult to guard against certain explicit moral errors; among them, a cruelty as ordained and unimpasioned as in "the gloomy circle of some inferno." . . . (p. 547)

[Work] defines and embodies itself in its resistant functionaries, starched accountant as well as dying natives; it has its particular countersign and gleaming fakirism ("The word 'ivory' rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed. You would think they were prying to it. A taint of imbecile rapacity blew through it all, like a whiff from some corpse"); in its tangible promise of easy gratifications, it indifferentizes victimizes both the unwilling natives and their incompetent overseers, it prescribes the tableau of cruelty in the grove of death, it provides its own corresponding niche for every stage of opportunism from the novice exploiter (weight 224 pounds) who keeps fainting, to the manager of the Central Station. . . . (p. 547-48)

The general blight and demoralization are inextricable, they do not detach themselves for scrutiny, from the developing order of actions that intensively brings them to mind; they have no independent symbolic existence, nor do any other of the spreading abstractions and big ideas in the narrative. Even the journey into the heart of darkness—the more obvious broad symbolic provocations of which have given joy to so many literary amateurs—insofar as it has artistic (rather than merely psychoanalytic) force, is finely coincident with its network of details; its moral nature steadily reveals itself not in the rather predictable grand gestures of Conradian rhetoric ("Going upriver was like going back to beginnings, when vegetation rioted and the big trees were kings"), but in the unavoidable facts of suspense, strangeness, vigilance, danger, and fear: the difficulties of piloting the patched fragile steamer past hidden banks, snags, sunken stones upriver; the sudden "glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass roofs, a burst of yeils, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the drop of heavy and motionless foliage"; the honest, "unmistakably real" book mysteriously discovered in the abandoned hut; the terrified savage tending the boiler, who "'squatted at the steam gauge with an evident effort of intrepidity'; the arrows from nowhere; the death of the black helmsman . . . . and, most shocking of all in its evocation of mind at an intolerable extremity, the climactic farcical detail of Marlow's panic to get rid of his shoes and socks overflowing with a dead man's blood . . . (p. 548-49)

When Conrad is called, with a clear confidence that the judgment is general and will not be challenged, "perhaps the finest prose stylist" among the English novelists, it is doubtful such passages as these that the critic has in mind. . . . Qualifying his account of Conrad as one of the four masters of English fiction, Dr. Leavis [see excerpt above, 1941] makes the definitive comment on this sort of thing: "Conrad must here stand convicted of borrowing the arts of the magazine-writer (who has borrowed his, shall we say, from Kipling and Poe) in order to impose on his readers and on himself, for thrilled response, a 'significance' that is merely an emotional insistence on the presence of what he can't produce. The insistence betrays the absence, the willed 'intensity' the nullity. He is intent on making a virtue out of not knowing what he means."

Qualification, however, is not enough. Conrad's lapses of this sort are not rare or incidental, they do not merely weaken his master style but schismatically parallel it in a style of their own. The "finest prose stylist" in English fiction has in fact two styles: the narrative-descriptive, in which explicit details triumphantly cohere with implicit moral moments in an accumulating point-to-point correspondence (a style whose purest, if not most imposingly complex, manifestation may be examined in Typhoon); and the oracular-umnivative, which dozes on abstractions, exclamations, unexpressive indirections, patronies ("the arts of the magazine-writer"), a style which takes over, especially in the large-scale works, whenever Conrad loses faith in the power of his details to enforce both their own reality and the symbolic substructure whose contours they are intended to suggest—so Marlow cries out as he and his author signalize, in a joint loss of faith, their drift from master to meretricious style, "I've been telling you what we said—repeating the phrases we pronounced—but what's the good?"

Conrad's symbolism, and his moral imagination, are, after all, as unallegorical as possible. When they function and have effect they are severely realistic: they nourish themselves on voices heard and solid objects seen and touched in the natural world, they contract into rhetoric as soon as the voices and objects begin to appear less than independently present; when Conrad is not describing, with direct sensuous impact, a developing sequence of distinct actions, he is liable to drift into the mooning or glooming that for some critics passes as Conrad's "philosophy" and for others as his style in its full tropical luxuriance.

Moreover, to assume, as Dr. Leavis seems to assume, that all symbolism works only as it is anchored to a record of immediate sensations, that it must totally coincide with the "concrete presentment of incident, setting and image," is to transform Conrad's limitation (and gift) into a condition of fiction. To compare Conrad's symbolic method, his two-ply plot, with the methods of, say, Dostoevsky and Kafka is to become aware of radically different possibilities: on the one hand, Conrad's realistic mode; on the other, moral imaginations not necessarily anchored to objects and places, symbolic means capable of producing, for example, those vibrations of clairvoyant hallucination in Dostoevsky, and of meaningful enigma in Kafka, which move through and beyond immediate sensations into a world of moral meanings almost as independent as, and far more densely populated than, the other side of the mirror of traditional allegory. Of such effects, beyond the capacities of even the most evocative realism, Conrad is innocent; yet when, in Heart of Darkness, he approaches the center of a difficult moral situation (desperately more troublesome than the simple choices permitted the characters in Typhoon), when facts and details begin to appear inadequate as figurations of the moral problem, it is just such effects that he is at length driven to attempt.

The problem is, of course, Kurtz. It is when we are on the verge of meeting Kurtz that Marlow's "inconceivables" and "impenetrables" begin to multiply at an alarming rate; it is when we have already met him that we are urged to observe "smiles of indefinable meaning" and to hear about "unspeakable rites" and "gratified and monstrous passions" and "subtle horrors"—words to hound the reader into a sense of enigmatic awfulness that he would somehow be the better for not trying to find a way through. . . . (pp. 549-51)

The problem, as Conrad sets it up, is to persuade the reader—by epithets, exclamations, ironies, by every technical obliquity—into an hallucinated awareness of the unplumbable depravity, the primal unanalyzable evil, implicit in Kurtz's reversion to the jungle from the high moral sentiments of his report. . . . Unhappily, though, the effect of even this minor
irony is to bring to mind and penetrate Conrad's magazine-writer style as well as the hollowness of Kurtz's sentiments. Besides, Kurtz's sentiments must, to help justify the fuses Conrad makes about their author, radiate at least a rhetorical energy; yet all Conrad gives us of the report is a phrase or two of mealy-mouthed reformist exhortation that would not do credit to a Maugham missionary let alone the "extraordinary man" Kurtz is supposed by all accounts to be, so that the "irony" of the scrawled outcry at the end of the report—"Exterminate the brutes!"—is about as subtle and unexpected as the missionary's falling for the local call-girl.

In the effort to establish for Kurtz an opaque and terrifying magnitude, Conrad tends to rely more and more oppressively on these pat ironies. The very existence of the incredibly naïve young Russian is another such irony: the disciple who responds to Kurtz's abundant proofs of cruelty and mean obsession with the steadfast conviction—and no evidence for the reader—that Kurtz is a great man ("he's enlarged my mind")—another irony that cuts more ways than Conrad must have intended. And if the culminating irony of the narrative, Marlow's interview with Kurtz's Intended, is expertly anticipated long before . . .—it is all the more disheartening, after such anticipation, to encounter in that interview sighs, heart stoppings, chill grips in the chest, exultations, the cheaply ironic double-talk ("She said suddenly very low, "He died as he lived." "His end," said I, with dull anger stirring in me, "was in every way worthy of his life."") as well as the sentimental lie that provokes not only her ---"cry of inconceivable triumph and of unspeakable pain" but the final cheap irony ("I knew it—I was sure!" She knew. She was sure ---)—a jumble of melodramatic tricks so unabashed and so strategic that in any less reputable writer they might well be critically regarded as earning for the work an instant oblivion.

Still, in Heart of Darkness at least, Conrad is neither cynical nor laxly sentimental in his failure of imagination and corresponding failure of technique. The theme itself is too much for him, too much for perhaps any but the very greatest dramatists and novelists. The sense of evil he must somehow project exceeds his capacity for imagining it; he strains into badness while reaching for verifications of a great and somber theme that is beyond his own very considerable powers. (p. 551-52)

[Heart of Darkness] is in fact one of those mixed structures whose partial success (not so neatly separable as, for example, Part I of Under Western Eyes) is so profound, so unprecedented, and so strikingly irreplaceable as to survive a proportion and gravity of failure that would sink forever any other work.

It is one of the great originals of literature. After Heart of Darkness the craftsman in fiction could never again be unaware of the moral resources inherent in every recorded sensation, or insensitive to the need of making the most precise record possible of every sensation: what now appears an immemorial cliché of the craft of fiction has a date as recent as the turn of the century. If Conrad was never quite equal to his own originality, he was at least the first to designate it as a new province of possibilities for the novelist; and, in Heart of Darkness, the first to suggest, by large and compelling partial proof, the intensity of moral illumination that a devoted attention to its demands might generate. The suggestion was an historical event: for good and bad novelists alike, irreversible. After Heart of Darkness, the recorded moment—the word—was irrecoverably symbol. (p. 553)
credible accoutrement ("bright patches, blue, red, and yellow—patches on the back, patches on the front, patches on elbows, on knees; coloured binding round his jacket, scarlet edging on the bottom of his trousers") is somehow "extremely gay and wonderfully neat within." In other words, all the Russian needs to make his costume complete for the role he plays is the cap and bells. With this single exception, he is perfectly drawn in the trappings of the Fool, the royal jester, the court buffoon.

He is, by his own admission, "a simple man. I have no great thoughts." He is completely adaptable, thoroughly malleable, and, as Marlow says, "uncalculating, unpractical, improbable, inexplicable." Like Marlow, he is one of those "curious men" who, Conrad tells us, "go prying into all sorts of places where they have no business." There is, in fact, a direct analogy, intentional on Conrad's part I feel certain, between the Russian's and Marlow's reasons for being in the Congo. The Russian's badgering of old Van Shuyten until "he gave me some cheap things and a few guns, and told me he hoped he would never see my face again," is reminiscent of Charlie Marlow's harrassment of his relatives on the Continent to procure for him the command of the steamboat. The difference, of course, is that Marlow has his "influential friend"—the steamboat—with him always whereas the Russian misplaces, or abandons, his hold on reality, "the simple old sailor, Trowser or Towson."

The Russian's moods range from frenetic exuberance to agitated uncertainty. . . . Above all, he is completely selfless. . . . He is pathetically anxious to please, almost childlike in his desire to be understood and accepted. (pp. 190-91)

The story he tells of his relationship with Kurtz, wavering (as he speaks) between enthusiasm and bewilderment, makes the wretchedness of his state all too clear to Marlow. But the Russian gives no evidence of a psychic scar; he has rolled with the punches magnificently. His only concern is for Kurtz's reputation, which he consigns to the hands of the unwilling Marlow. He goes off, rolling his eyes characteristically at the recollection of the "delights" he has encountered and innocently grateful for the enlargement of his mind. Marlow, groggy at the impact of this jumble who has tumbled across the stage before him, can only shake his head in disbelief.

The Russian, thus, is ideally equipped in appearance and in temperament for his role as Fool. But when and where does he function in this capacity? During his meeting with Marlow, the Russian is much like the performer in the dressing room. He is still in the costume of the clown, his make-up intact, but the performance is over. He has already played his role as Fool.

It has been played, of course, in the court of Kurtz—king, god, journalist, ivory hunter, hollow man, what-have-you. Kurtz had an empire, a court, a consort, why not a Fool to complete the assemblage? The Russian played his role well—the fact that he had stayed alive is perhaps the best testimony to the quality of his performance. He was available at all times, in the best tradition of the jester, to amuse Kurtz when in an expansive mood, to nurse him when ill, and to stay out of his way when dangerous. The Russian reveals the whole sordid saga to Marlow while remaining himself completely unaware of its full implications. "Very often coming to this station, I had to wait days and days before he would turn up. Ah, it was worth waiting for!—sometimes." The tentative note struck by the word "sometimes" should not be overlooked. It suggests, of course, the measure of the Russian's dependence on the capricious temperament of Kurtz. The same note, again implying the necessity for the Russian to play fool to Kurtz's fancy, is heard again. . . . One is reminded of Lear's Fool who, despite his jauntiness, is still aware of the whip.

Marlow sums up the Russian as follows: "If it had come to crawling before Mr. Kurtz, he crawled as much as the veriest savage of them all." With a kind of fascinated revulsion, Marlow now sees that Kurtz's peculiar "gifts" are fatal alike to ignorant savage and educated white man. This commingling of disgust and awe on Marlow's part toward Kurtz's treatment of the Russian prepares Marlow's final judgment of Kurtz. The Kurtz who was apparently gratified at the spectacle of the Russian playing Fool for him is indeed an "atrocity of phantom." At the same time, the Kurtz who could secure the Fool's willing acquiescence is also something of a "remarkable man." (pp. 191-93)

KENNETH A. BRUFFEE. (essay date 1964)

[In the following excerpt, Bruffee compares the actions of Kurtz and Marlow to those of Faust in his pursuit of forbidden knowledge. The nature of truth and the function of lies in the novel is a crucial element in Bruffee's argument. Unlike Thomas Moser (1957) and others, who view Marlow's lie to Kurtz's fiancée as a sign of his weakness, Bruffee believes that Marlow's lies function as a godlike act in which conventional truth is sacrificed for a higher principle. Bruffee also disagrees with W. Y. Tindall (1958), who calls it a "white lie" told in inappropriate defense of the woman's illusions, an avoidance of truth that Tindall likens to Kurtz's corruption. Bruffee believes that Marlow's lie is not an evasion, but a heroic attempt to defend a weak civilization from the horrendous truth of the power of evil. For further discussions of Marlow's lie, see the excerpts by F. R. Leavis (1941), Thomas Moser (1957), John W. Canario (1967), and Ian Watt (1979), and the entry by Frederick Crews in the Additional Bibliography.]

Late in Conrad's story Heart of Darkness, Marlow expresses the belief that "some knowledge of yourself" is the only reward life offers. . . . Thus the story implies that the self-knowledge Kurtz gains—his revelation of man's deficiency—is both a reward and a penalty, although obviously a vision of horror is no reward in the usual sense of the word. Furthermore, Marlow believes that this one reward which life offers is unique for each individual, that self-knowledge is a solitary knowledge which "no other man can ever know." . . . Contrary to this belief, Marlow soon finds himself participating in Kurtz's self-revelation; and, sharing as he does in another man's experience, he is liable in some way to share the reward—and the penalty, the burden of the reward. His reward is to see and know, but not to die in terror; his penalty seems to come at the end of the story when, in telling Kurtz's intended that the last word Kurtz spoke was her name, he sacrifices his integrity by lying. Two paradoxes, then, seem fundamental to the story. First, a man participates in another man's self-revelation and both men profit by it. Second, the "profit" is an ironic one—that is, the original insight (Kurtz's) is both a reward of life and a terrible penalty for it, and the further insight (Marlow's), engendered by the first, is at the same time illuminating and apparently corrupting. These two paradoxes resolve themselves into one paradoxical action: a lie which establishes a condition of truth.
This paradox, too, can be resolved in several ways. The resolution I suggest here depends first of all on seeing the experience described in the story as a peculiarly twentieth-century kind of Faustian experience.

That Kurtz’s experience is Faustian is quite clear. His “universal genius” . . . his godlike power over the natives, his “forbidden knowledge” gained in the wilderness of the self—all suggest a parallel with Faust. More specifically, the wilderness of the jungle, Marlow says, had “sealed [Kurtz’s] soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation.” . . . Once initiated, Kurtz takes to calling everything his own: “My Intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my— everything belong to him.” And yet, Marlow says, “the thing was to know what he belonged to, how many powers of darkness claimed him for their own.” After establishing that Kurtz is “no fool,” Marlow implies just who it is Kurtz does belong to: “I take it, no fool ever made a bargain for his soul with the devil.” . . . Finally, after describing Kurtz’s state of mind to be one of “exalted and incredible degradation,” Marlow says, in language typical of descriptions of traditional Faustian characters, “the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts . . . had beguiled his unlawful soul beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations.” (pp. 322-23)

At the moment of self-revelation, however, Kurtz’s Faustian experience initiates and begins to give way to an extension of that experience which is to be carried through and fulfilled by Marlow. It is to that extension that the story subordinates Kurtz’s Faustian nature. Thus Heart of Darkness is not just a story in which a soul is sold and lost; the combined experience of Kurtz and Marlow represents a considerable departure from the “traditional” (that is, medieval and Renaissance) Faustian experience. But neither is this story one in which a soul is saved by outwitting the devil or by overcoming his evil with the powers of light. (p. 323)

Conrad’s motive . . . seems to be redemption, even though he does follow the earlier tradition in that in his story the pursuit of forbidden knowledge remains an evil pursuit which does not ultimately ennable man, but degrades him. Conrad departs from tradition in another way. Whereas Goethe and Lessing saved Faust by altering the story’s assumptions, Conrad maintains the original assumptions (that there are such things in the world as forbidden knowledge and power), but alters the outcome of the experience by extending its effects. Once it is granted that the experience can be projected vicariously beyond the limits of one individual’s soul to another’s, it must be agreed that the benefits and penalties of the experience might project even further. Thus, through Marlow, the saving virtue brought to light by the experience he shares with Kurtz can be, and is, extended to their whole civilization—which includes, through Marlow’s narration, his audience on the yawl and us, the readers. An important question arises, however, concerning the form of the extension: what, exactly, must the saving virtue be that results from their experience?

It is, of course, restraint, a virtue so simple and fundamental to humanity that the cannibal workmen on the riverboat under the pressure of extreme hunger incredibly and inexplicably exhibit it. . . . It is exactly the virtue which Kurtz lacks, but which in Marlow is reinforced by vicarious revelation of “The Horror” until it becomes the most important, conscious, and compelling force in his character.

Restraint expresses itself, however, in a most peculiar way. Marlow confesses early in the story that “there is” for him “a taint of death, a flavour of mortality in lies” which makes him “miserable and sick, like biting something rotten would do.” And yet in the end, Marlow lies. The fact of the lie, it would seem, is absolutely crucial to the meaning of the story. . . . It is this [final] scene, however, which so often seems to miss being understood. (pp. 324-25)

Marlow has certainly made a kind of truth seem extremely important throughout the story. Despite this, however, the lie weakens neither the final scene nor the story. It is not that the woman does not deserve to hear the truth, but rather that she does deserve not to hear the truth. In the course of the story, Marlow’s lie is inevitable once his anger—frustrations and indignation caused by the girl’s persistent illusions—“subsided before a feeling of infinite pity.” . . . This pity is Marlow’s compassion for the fragility of the woman’s illusions and the conventional “surface truth” upon which they are founded—for the fragility of the civilization, that is, however corrupt and hollow, the best of which the girl represents. Of course she is safe, complacent, and bourgeois. But she is also a “soul as translucently pure as a cliff of crystal,” her “pure brow” is “illumined by the unextinguishable light of belief and love,” and the “halo” she seems surrounded with, however “ashy,” is still a halo. . . . To alleviate this woman’s immediate grief is the first purpose of the lie. But more importantly, Marlow lies to relieve the suffering that she does not know she suffers. However hollow or dead the civilization she stands for may be, however ash her halo, Marlow comes to believe in the last scene of the story that Kurtz’s Intended is nevertheless worthy, does nevertheless deserve not to have to face the truth about Kurtz.

This conviction shows how thoroughly Marlow, in spite of himself, has become identified with Kurtz. The girl represents all the best of Kurtz’s ideals—all the best of what he had “intended” for the world as well as for himself. She is the medium through which the world has seen and will see what was best in him. Since by lying Marlow protects those intentions, he thereby reaffirms his fellowship with Kurtz. But he does not thereby accept damnation; on the contrary, he rejects it. Since Kurtz has taken a step that few are willing or able to take, offering himself up to be “rent”—“For nothing can be sole or whole / That has not been rent”—his final revelation of truth, which Marlow calls “an affiliation, a moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats,” . . . achieves for him at last a kind of wholeness—and after achieving this, he dies. Marlow achieves the same wholeness through self-revelation, but vicariously—and he does not die but, significantly, lives on to act upon what he has learned.

To make such an affiliation, Marlow has been thoroughly prepared. Earlier, he sided with Kurtz and was excluded from the society of pilgrims because of it. He found himself being “lumped along with Kurtz as a partisan of methods for which the time was not ripe: I was unsound! Ah! but it was something to have at least a choice of nightmares.” . . . In the corruption of the “pilgrims,” who represent the worst of that safe, complacent, bourgeois civilization, Marlow has found something with a stronger “flavour of mortality,” something more rotten to bite into than a lie. And after having himself experienced “all the wisdom, and all truth, and all sincerity” . . . vicariously through Kurtz, when the choice comes again, he determines to choose the lesser nightmare. (pp. 325-26)

To fulfill his destiny he must act positively, because to act negatively would be to “accept damnation” passively. Marlow’s positive act, then, is to place himself as an artificial
barrier between the degraded and the exalted, between the degraded and the ideal (or what passes for the ideal), that is, between Kurtz and his Intended. By the end of the story, Marlow alone bears that responsibility. All that falls between these contraries is Marlow and his lie. When the lily grows on the dunghill, only illusion, appearance, artifice, that is, only the lie, keeps us from seeing the dung. Marlow's destiny is to maintain that separation just because he has seen that, in reality, no separation exists.

It may still be difficult to see how we can be persuaded "to accept falsehood as salvation," because . . . there is an insistence on truth throughout this story. Marlow, however, makes a careful distinction between "surface truth" and "inner truth." As a result, it might be expected that the story's resolution would not be in terms of mere verbal truth. Furthermore, there are distinct signs of Marlow's disillusionment with words. Words first lead him to Kurtz: "I . . . became aware," he says, "that was exactly what I had been looking forward to—a talk with Kurtz." But in the days after the rescue, he begins to hear "more than enough" of Kurtz's talk. He becomes less and less enamored of words as the verbose Kurtz talks, contradicts, effuses, and rambles, until "the memory of that time" lingers with him "like a dying vibration of one immense jabber, silly, atrocious, sordid, savage, or simply mean, without any kind of sense." . . . After this, Marlow is only mildly astonished at the ease with which he can himself use words as the occasion demands. "It seemed to me," he says, after he lies to the girl, "that the house would collapse before I could escape, that the heavens would fall upon my head. But nothing happened." He discovers that "the heavens do not fall for such a trifle." . . . (p. 327)

Marlow has discovered, then, a larger standard of truth, a standard according to which the lie, the ethically repulsive, dishonorable act, turns out to be a kind of honorable restraint. By lying, he affirms the artificiality of restraint at the same time as he affirms the necessity of restraint in maintaining the part of civilization worth saving. Unlike Kurtz, whose mission fails as his excessive aspiration fails, Marlow, by not denying that both the light and the dark exist, but by affirming that they must be carefully distinguished, represents his, the girl's, and all society's only salvation. The story's meaning, it finally appears, is a function not of the "surface truth" of a mere articulated falsehood, but of a man's seeing beyond a conventional "principle" to a necessity which demands of him a singularly unconventional act, an "unsound" act, the time for which, however, is all too ripe. (pp. 327-28)

Analogously, Conrad's hero, after his journey into the dark regions of the mind, after his insight, after participating vicariously in a kind of Faustian experience, chooses to mock truth. Preferring artifice to veracity, he establishes an ethic of his own according to which man, having been made aware of the truth, discovers also the necessity to cloak and conceal it for the sake of humanity. The traditional Faustian experience, which itself reaches "beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations," is thus pushed even further by an act which is godlike, and by a creative act which ignores conventional principles and establishes its own. (p. 329)


Next to Marlow and Kurtz, the most important character in Conrad's Heart of Darkness is the young Russian who meets the steamboat at Kurtz's station and soon thereafter is persuaded by Marlow to talk at some length about his life and his admiration for Kurtz. Marlow first describes this Russian as a harlequin, and he later reveals through frequent observation of harlequinesque qualities in the youth that this first impression was progressively strengthened during their conversation. Gauging the importance of the Russian's role in the novel by Marlow's description of his motley appearance, clownish mannerisms, and conspicuous gullibility, most interpreters have seen the Russian as one of several minor characters who serve chiefly to exemplify the extreme susceptibility of civilized Europeans to the corrupting influences of the Congo. However, there is considerable evidence in the story to show that this
view misrepresents the Russian's thematic function. This view slights the fact that Marlow's insight into the youth's harlequinesque character moves from superficial matters to a discovery that has a crucial bearing on his initiation. The Russian, as Marlow comes to see, is not simply an irresponsible, light-headed buffoon, but rather, like the harlequin of the theatre, a modern representative of the European aborigine. When the harlequin is viewed in the light of this discovery, he assumes his true dimensions as one of the most important characters in the novel.

Although the Russian is twice mentioned by Marlow in the narrative of the journey up the river, . . . it is significant that Marlow does not meet the youth until he has traveled, figuratively speaking, back to the beginning of time. It is not until he is steering the steamboat into Kurtz's landing that Marlow sees on the river bank "a white man under a hat like a cart-wheel beckoning persistently with his whole arm." . . . [The] observations of the Russian's physical appearance establish that Marlow first saw the man as simply a goodnatured but scat-teredbrainendnce.

That this condescending view of the Russian continues for a time to be uppermost in Marlow's mind is revealed by his comments on the childlike chatter, volatile temperament, and acrobatic agility displayed by the youth during his visit on the steamboat. Marlow notices that the Russian talks at a breathless rate, that he jumps abruptly from one subject to another, that his countenance changes mercurially "like the autumn sky, overcast one moment and bright the next," . . . and that he gestures extravagantly, even leaping up at one point to grab both of his host's hands in his by way of showing gratitude for the offer of a pipeful of tobacco. (pp. 225-26)

However, despite these evidences of amused condescension in Marlow's initial impressions of the Russian, it becomes clear as Marlow continues his relation of their conversation that his opinion of his visitor grew increasingly favorable as he learned more about him. One cause of this rise in Marlow's opinion is shown to be his appreciation of the Russian's loyalty to Kurtz and of his humane concern for the safety of both the white men and the natives. Marlow is favorably impressed, for example, by the Russian's urgent assurances that the natives are simple people who can be more effecttively frightened away in case of trouble by a blowing of the boat's whistle than by firing rifles at them. A second cause is shown to be Marlow's respect for the Russian's devotion to doing a good job in his regular vocation as a sailor. When Marlow returns Towsn's An Inquiry into Some Points of Seamanship to the Russian, he perceives that the man is ecstatically happy. But a third and clearly the dominant cause of Marlow's adoption of a more favorable view of his visitor is shown to be an awakening in him of an admiration for the Russian's reckless courage and adventurous spirit.

Marlow emphasizes the moment he first began to see the harlequin in a new light by interrupting his story to describe his fresh impressions. "I looked at him, lost in astonishment," Marlow exclaims. . . . He then goes on to identify the Russian as an embodiment of the "glamour of youth," a person "gallantly, thoughtlessly alive, to all appearances indestruc-tible solely by virtue of his few years and his unreflecting audacity." . . . Summing up these impressions, Marlow con-tinues, "If the absolutely pure, uncalculating, impractical spirit of adventure had ever ruled a human being, it ruled this be-patched youth. I almost envied him the possession of this modest and clear flame." . . . Finally, Marlow defines a limit to this newly discovered admiration by adding, "I did not envy him his devotion to Kurtz, though. He had not meditated over it. It came to him, and he accepted it with a sort of eager fatalism. I must say that to me it appeared about the most dangerous thing in every way he had come upon so far." . . .

The intensity of feeling Marlow exhibits in this reassessment of the Russian reveals that his change of attitude towards the youth was not inspired merely by a desire to correct an unfair bias in his initial judgment of him. Instead, the degree of Marlow's astonishment, his admiration, and his envy establish that the traits of character he praises in the Russian were traits that he himself possessed and valued. Thus in essence Marlow's exclamations are an expression of his surprised recognition that he and the young vagabond were much alike.

The similarity between himself and the Russian that is obvi-ously uppermost in Marlow's mind at this juncture is that they are both persons whose lives have been directed chiefly by a reckless hunger for adventure and by a rash self-confidence in the invulnerability of their youthful vitality. For Marlow's confession of envy is a reminder that his decision to command a steamboat on the Congo River was inspired by little more than boyish curiosity and a love of adventure. But Marlow's reporting of the conversation that led up to this recognition reveals that it was not the only similarity he had become aware of. A second point of resemblance between the two men is set forth in Marlow's earlier commentary on the Russian's joy at recovering Towsn's book on seamanship. The reverence that the Russian exhibits toward this technical manual calls to mind Marlow's earlier remarks on his own single-minded devotion to the mechanical problems of getting his steamboat in operating condition and safely up the river. The point suggested by the parallel is Marlow's becoming aware that both his life and the Russian's were largely confined to surface reality, to the limited aspiration of skillfully and conscientiously performing the mechanical duties of their occupation. Still a third point or resemblance that Marlow is shown to have become aware of is that both men shared a tendency to regard intel-lectuals with awe. Marlow conveys his recognition of this like-ness between himself and the Russian in the similarity that he reveals between the youth's adulation of Kurtz and his own early development of an intense curiosity about the man.

However, at the same time that Marlow reveals that he sees something of himself in the harlequin's enthusiastic and unsophisticated outlook, he also makes it a point to introduce the reservation that he does not envy the Russian his naive devotion to Kurtz. This reservation serves two important purposes. First, it makes absolutely clear that Marlow's attitude towards Kurtz, which was strongly inclined toward approbation when he first heard of the man, had become seriously qualified by the time he met Kurtz's disciple. Secondly, it establishes that the like-nesses Marlow observes between himself and the Russian no longer existed by the time of his encounter with the youth because of the maturing effect on Marlow of his experiences in the Congo. Consequently, what Marlow is conveying in his praise of the Russian is more, finally, than the discovery that the harlequin had a youthful glamour that he admired; he is simultaneously expressing a regretful realization that his own adventures in the Congo had taught him, beyond any possibility of a return to a light-hearted view of life, a dark truth about man's potentialities for evil.

The truth that had robbed Marlow of his own harlequinesque innocence only shortly before he met the Russian is shown in his earlier descriptions of the white colonials in Africa; it is
his discovery that Europeans who lack self-discipline and a strong commitment to unselish life goals quickly degenerate to a level of brutality below that of an aborigine when their fortunes place them in an environment where there are no external checks on their behavior. . . . Marlow's reservation about the Russian's devotion to Kurt suggests it is because Marlow had only recently learned this lesson himself that he could be both envious of the youth's innocence and apprehensive about his adulation of Kurt.

But the growth of Marlow's insight into the harlequinesque character of the Russian does not end with his discovery that the youth personified his own lost innocence and boyish love of adventure. In his account of the remainder of his conversation with the Russian, Marlow reveals that he continued to gain new insight into the youth's character until he arrived finally at the essence of his clownlike nature. Marlow makes clear that this ultimate revelation came to him only after he at last succeeded in getting the Russian to tell him something of his life with Kurtz. In the middle of his retelling of the youth's story, Marlow digresses to comment, "... never, never before, did this land, this river, this jungle, the very arch of this blazing sky, appear to me so hopeless and so dark, so impenetrable to human thought, so pitiless to human weakness." . . . And at the end of the story, when the youth tries to impress Marlow with a description of how the natives had to crawl when they approached Kurtz, Marlow reflects, "I suppose that it did not occur to him that Kurtz was no idol of mine. He forgot I hadn't heard any of these splendid monologues on, what was it? on love, justice, conduct of life—or what not. If it had come to crawling before Mr. Kurtz, he crawled as much as the veriest savage of them all." (pp. 226-30)

In this equation of the Russian with the black followers of Kurtz, Marlow is pointing back to his own earlier reported impressions of the interior of the Congo and revealing in the light of these his discovery at the end of the youth's story of a fundamental harmony between the harlequin's character and his environment. . . . Marlow's statement equating the Russian with the savages becomes recognizable as a revelation that his curiosity about the youth led him ultimately to see that he was confronted with a white aborigine, a living example of the atavistic European from which the harlequin of the theatre evolved. (p. 230)

[It] becomes evident that Marlow's recognition that the Russian was a white aborigine brought with it a profound realization that aboriginal man possesses a capacity for humane behavior and a primitive sense of honor that makes him impervious to the greed that corrupts civilized Europeans. From the moment of this discovery onward, Marlow emphasizes by mentioning several acts of friendly assistance to the harlequin that he thereafter allied himself with the aboriginal humanity of the youth against the greed and cruelty of the company manager and the pilgrims of the Eldorado Exploring Expedition.

However, it is not the contrast between the harlequin and the pilgrims, but a contrast between the harlequin as aborigine and Kurtz as a representative of man in his most civilized state that leads Marlow to his fullest understanding of the human potential for good and evil. Marlow first suggests the importance of this contrast when he is on the threshold of describing his experiences at Kurtz's station. It is then that he makes his statement that fools and saints are impervious to the powers of darkness, but that most men do not fall into these extreme categories. (p. 232)

Through this portrayal of two men representing opposite ends of the scale of human development, Marlow makes clear that the capstone of his initiation is the realization that there are two kinds of darkness in the world: the darkness of ignorance represented by the primeval environment and aboriginal inhabitants of the Congo and a greater darkness of undisciplined greed and vanity represented by the city of the whitened sepulcher in Europe.

The last section of the story reveals Marlow's belief that against these two kinds of darkness man has ultimately only the defense of a steadfast faith in the essential goodness of human nature and in the ultimate potential of civilization to make this goodness prevail. It is a recovery of this faith, objectified in the flame of a single candle produced by Marlow in an otherwise pitch-black cabin, that motivates the dying Kurtz, looking back on his corrupted life, to whisper, "The horror! The horror!" It is also Marlow's understanding that these words express Kurtz's final victory over the loss of faith that had undermined his youthful idealism that explains Marlow's lie to Kurtz's betrothed. For it is in women—in the aunt who obtained Marlow's job, in Kurtz's black mistress, and in Kurtz's betrothed—that Marlow shows the most enduring faith in man's goodness to reside. In telling the young woman that Kurtz died pronouncing her name, Marlow merely chose to adhere to vital truth rather than to literal accuracy. (pp. 232-33)


FREDERICK R. KARL (essay date 1969)

[Karl is one of the foremost authorities on Conrad. In addition to A Reader's Guide to Joseph Conrad, from which the following excerpt is taken, Karl is also the author of Joseph Conrad: The Three Lives, the most thorough biography of the author. In the following excerpt Karl, who calls Heart of Darkness one of the world's greatest novels, discusses the work as a quintessentially modern depiction of the absurdity of experience and equates Conrad's exploration of the mind with the work of Sigmund Freud, finding Marlow's story to be a form of self-psychoanalysis. Karl believes that this interpretation accounts for the dreamlike, existentially absurd nature of the tale as well as Marlow's inability to succinctly and straightforwardly describe anything having to do with Kurtz. For other discussions of the import of Marlow's lapses in descriptive power, see the excerpts by F. R. Leavis (1941), Albert J. Guerard (1958), and Marvin Mudrick (1958-59), and the entry by Frederick Crews in the Additional Bibliography.]

Conrad himself recognized that [Heart of Darkness] penetrated to those areas of darkness, dream, indeed nightmare with which he tried to define the substance of his world. Written when he was still a fledgling novelist, Heart of Darkness helped solidify a vision that rarely wavered in Conrad's later work, and one we now accept as uniquely modern. Here he limned the images one usually encounters in dreams or in war, and here he found that discontinuous, inexplicable, existentially absurd experience which was to haunt his letters and his work.

Based on personal impressions, his own Congo journey, Heart of Darkness welled out. As he wrote apologetically and hesitatingly to Elsa Martindale (Mrs. Ford Madox Ford):

What I distinctly admit is the fault of having made Kurtz too symbolic or rather symbolic at
all. But the story being mainly a vehicle for conveying a batch of personal impressions I gave the rein to my mental laziness and took the line of least resistance. This is then the whole Apologia pro Vita Kurtzi—or rather for the taudiness of his vitality. (unpublished letter, December 3, 1902)

The novella, then, contains a vision so powerful that Conrad excuses himself for being unable (he thought) to control it. It was also, as Freud wrote of his own Interpretation of Dreams, an insight that falls to one but once in a lifetime. The reference to Freud and to Dreams is not fortuitous. It was of course chance that Freud and Conrad were contemporaries; but chance ends when we note the extraordinary parallelism of their achievements. (pp. 136-37)

Chance is further reduced when we recognize that literature and a new style of psychological exploration have been first cousins for the last hundred years, that both Conrad and Freud were pioneers in stressing the irrational elements in man's behavior which resisted orthodox interpretation. Conrad's great contribution to political thought is his insight into the irrationality of politics, its nightmarish qualities which depend on the neurosis of a leader, in turn upon the collective neuroses of a people. Such an insight is timeless, but particularly appropriate for developments since 1900. For when has man tried so carelessly to preserve life while also squandering it so carelessly? Conrad caught not only hypocrisy (an old-fashioned value), but the illogic of human behavior which tries to justify itself with precision, only to surrender to explosive inner needs. "Exterminate all the brutes," Kurtz scrawled at the bottom of his report. This is the politics of personal disintegration, uncontrollable personal needs, ultimately paranoia.

Confronting similar material, the scientist Freud was concerned with a logical analysis of seeming illogic—the apparent irrationality of dreams, on occasion of nightmares. Both he and Conrad penetrated into the darkness—when men sleep, or when their consciences sleep, when such men are free to pursue secret wishes, whether in dreams, like Freud's analysands, or in actuality, like Kurtz and his followers. The key word is darkness; the black of the jungle for Conrad is the dark of the sleeping consciousness for Freud.

In still another sense, Marlow, in his trip up the Congo, has suffered through a nightmare, an experience that sends him back a different man, now aware of depths in himself that he cannot hide. The tale he narrates on the Nellie is one he is unable to suppress; a modern Ancient Mariner, he has discovered a new world and must relate his story to regain stability. The account is a form of analysis—for him and for Conrad. In a way, it provides a defense against Kurtz's vision. (pp. 137-38)

[Freud's] great discovery, like Conrad's, was surely that dreams, despite the various barriers the conscious mind erects, are wishfulfillments of the hidden self. This sense of wish-fulfillment is evidently never far from Marlow—for the very qualities in Kurtz that horrify him are those he finds masked in himself. Kurtz's great will to power, Nietzschean and ruthless in its thrust, is also Marlow's. The latter, however, can hold back, his restraint, for Conrad, a mark of his Englishness. Marlow, however, only barely restrains himself, for, irresistibly, he is drawn toward Kurtz, readily accepting the latter's ruthlessness as preferable to the bland hypocrisy of the station manager. Even Marlow is seduced—he, too, hides secret wishes and desires, his dreams curiously close to Kurtz's; and so are the dreams of us all, Conrad suggests. Kurtz's savage career is every man's wish-fulfillment, although by dying he conveniently disappears before we all become his disciples.

The secret longing, the hidden desire, the hypocritical defense, the hate covered superficially by love, the artfully contrived lie—all of these are intertwined in dreams. In this sense, Marlow's experience is a nightmare for creator, narrator, and reader. The jungle, that thick verdant cover, disguises all, but most of all hides a man's real existence from himself.

As a connoisseur of dreams, Conrad is a "dark" writer in the sense Rembrandt was a dark painter, Milton a dark poet. They begrudged the light, hustled it, squeezed it out in minute quantities, as if it were filtered from between densely packed trees in a jungle setting. So the light in Kurtz's heart barely appears, overwhelmed as it is by the darkness of his needs, the exigencies of his situation. Light and dark, in this vision, are polarized; their antagonism runs parallel to the struggle for life in nature itself, a Darwinian battle for growth, power, supremacy.

The yellowish, wispy light, indeed the white of the ivory, later of Kurtz's very bald skull, exists against the fragmented darkness of the jungle—the contrast of colors giving Conrad a vast symbol for moral, political, and social values. And yet such is the knottiness and ambiguity of his symbol that the result is blurred, filled artfully with the illusions and deceptions that Conrad makes us accept as the pathos of existence. (pp. 138-39)

To create order from such shards of nihilism, negativism, distortion, deception, savagery, and, ultimately, fear, Conrad offered a dubious restraint. Somehow, one must find it within. It is an individual matter, and evidently either one has it or one doesn't. It is not solely a European quality by any means, since Kurtz, that pan-European, lacks it, and the Congolese tribal natives have it. Restraint—a kind of muscular courage not to do—marks the difference between civilization and capitulation to savagery. Yet where does it come from? How does one obtain it? Does the lack of it always brutalize? Such mysterious reckonings make it impossible for us to see Conrad as a melodist. Society as constituted means little—only the responsible individual counts. Possibly one acquires restraint as the sum total of what he is. Yet decency, indeed the future of civilized society, hangs in the balance. (pp. 139-40)

[The] gnarled seaman [Marlow] is surely one of the keys to the story, and much has been written about him, including much nonsense. He is, at least here, Conrad's Everyman, Bunyan's Christian updated. What he suffers and experiences is analogous to what we as judicious democrats would feel. Conrad made Marlow sentient, somewhat intelligent, but, most of all, courageous—about himself, about life, about man's social responsibilities—yet at the same time sufficiently cynical; in brief, very much like Conrad himself. But the two are not congruent; among other things, Conrad possessed a literary intelligence that his narrator did not. He surrounds Marlow as well as enters him. But even if he is foremost a man of action, Marlow should not be taken too lightly. His intelligence is displayed in his moral sensibility. With a certain dogged charm, reminiscent of many American presidents and statesmen, he wishes to see the world based on English (or American) democracy. He accepts private enterprise—with personal restraints. He believes that imperialism must justify itself with good deeds. He expects all men to be fair and decent. Such
are Marlow’s preoccupations, and here Conrad demonstrated to good purpose the contradictions and rifts between modern belief and modern practice. And here also is the source of Conrad’s irony—a quality that gives him considerable advantage over Marlow. (pp. 140-41)

Like Conrad, he accepts the status quo, but one maintained, he trusts, by just men. For both, this is the sole basis of the human contract—one does things in an enlightened manner and develops his moral sensitivities. This is a solid nineteenth-century philosophy, although for us somewhat naïve. Marlow rarely questions whether particular work is necessary; for example, he never asks whether white men should be in the Congo—for whatever reason. Rather, he assumes they should be—since they are—but they must come as friends, as helpers, and bring enlightenment. Even while they rape, they must be benevolent. He sees them as solid, progressive Englishmen, who helped to develop countries the better to plunder them, nineteenth-century “ugly Americans.” (pp. 141-42)

The long river that informs this world is described, like the Styx, in treacherous, serpentine terms—“deadly—like a snake,” “resembling an immense snake uncouled.” ‘The river is essentially a woman: dangerous, dark, mysterious, concealed, with the jungle also feminine, personified by Kurtz’s savage mistress. Marlow is overwhelmed; his ideal of womanhood is clearly the girl back in Brussels, or his aunt—the brainwashed public—that naïve woman who believes “the labourer is worthy of his hire.” Such womanly illusions Marlow wishes to preserve. But his experience includes a treacherous, feminine river, an equally perfidious jungle that conceals its terrors, and, finally, a savage mistress—in all, an unspeakable sexual experience. Though the reticent, chivalrous Marlow never speaks directly of sex, it lies heavily on the story, in every aspect of nature—in his fears, in its demands. As much as Marlow fears the attraction of power, he shies away from the temptation of orgiastic, uncontrollable sex. He retreats into neutral shock. (pp. 142-43)

Heart of Darkness . . . is concerned with moral issues in their most troubling sense: not only as philosophical imperatives, but practically as they work out in human behavior. In a mechanical universe—“evolved out of a chaos of scraps of iron”—what is flesh? The profusion of metallic and mechanical images indicates that resistant objects have superseded softness, flexibility, humanity itself; that, clearly, one must become an object, tough and durable, in order to survive. (p. 144)

The sense of human waste that pervades the story is best unfolded in the ivory itself. It is an object for the rich—in decorations, for piano keys, for bibelots—hardly necessary for physical or mental survival. In a way, it is like art, a social luxury, and it is for art that the Congo is plundered and untold numbers slaughtered brutally, or casually. This view of ivory as art was surely part of Conrad’s conception; a utilitarian object would have had its own raison d’être. A relatively useless item or one selective in its market only points up the horror; surely this, too, is part of Kurtz’s vision. Possibly Kurtz’s artistic propensities (he paints, he collects human heads, he seeks ivory) make him so contemptuous of individual lives; for art and life have always warred. In the name of art (pyramids, churches, tombs, monuments, palaces), how many have died, gone without, worked as slaves? Traditionally, beauty for the few is gained with blood of the many.

Where art rules, artifacts are a form of power. The art object takes on magical significance, becoming a kind of totem, the fairytale golden egg. Knowing this, Kurtz gains his power, indeed his identity and being, from the ivory he covets. In a world of art, the most greedy collector is often supreme; matter, not manner, counts. One source of Kurtz’s fascination for Marlow is the former’s will to power, Nietzschean, superhuman, and brutal. Kurtz has risen above the masses—of natives, station managers, even of directors back in Brussels. He must continue to assert himself, a megalomaniac in search of further power. Marlow has never met anyone like him, this Kurtz who represents all of Europe. The insulated Englishman now faces east, toward the continent . . . “All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz,” we read.

He is indeed Europe, searching for power, maneuvering for advantage; and he finds the lever in the colonial adventure of ivory. No wonder, then, that his hunger for acquisition is so overwhelming. Having gratified forbidden desires, he is free of civilized taboos. In the Congo, where the white man—the civilized Belgian—ruled, he could do anything. His only prescription: produce results, send back ivory. Indeed, his very will to power, his confident brutality made him appear a kind of god—to the natives and other agents who feared him, to the Russian sailor who believed in him.

The ultimate corruption is that Kurtz can go his way without restraint. All human barriers are down. Only power counts—no matter whether political or economic. In the jungle, as in enterprise, only the strong survive, and Kurtz obviously is one of the strong. He brings European power—all of Europe—into the jungle; his weapons encompass 2000 years of Western civilization. And the consequence: corruption of self and death to “inferiors” on a monumental scale.

When a journalist informs Marlow that Kurtz would have been a “splendid leader of an extreme party,” Marlow understandably asks, “What party?” “Any party,” his visitor answers, “he was an—an extremist.” With that Conrad presents his grandest insight into the politics of our time—superficially totalitarian, but extending also to democratic powers. (pp. 144-144b)

In this conception of Kurtz, Conrad’s powers as an artistic thinker were at their strongest. . . . As an artistic thinker . . . he was at once caustic, subtle, broad. His conception of Kurtz, slim on the surface, broadening beneath, is a Cassandra’s view of European progress, a view both realistic and ironic. (pp. 144b-144c)

The Congo had been, since 1875, the private preserve of Leopold II of Belgium . . . Kurtz, or his type of exploiters, was the rule, not the exception. . . . Conrad’s journey, as he relates in his Congo diary, was real, Kurtz and his type prevailed, the land and the natives existed, the facts are undisputed. Even if Conrad used symbols to excess, as he feared, each symbol is solidly grounded in fact. Here is white against black, entrenched against primitive, have against have-not, machine against spear, civilization against tribe.

If Conrad’s novella is to have artistic as well as political significance, it must make broad reference to human motivation and behavior. One evident part of the application comes with Kurtz’s double shriek of “The horror! The horror!” The cry is far richer and more ambiguous than most readers make it. We must remember that Marlow is reporting, and Marlow has a particular view and need of Kurtz. As Marlow understands the scream, it represents a moral victory; that is, on the threshold of death, Kurtz has reviewed his life with all its horror and
in some dying part of him has repented. Marlow hears the words as a victory of moral sensibility over a life of brutality and prostituted ideals. This "Christian" reading of the words is, of course, what Marlow himself wishes to hear; he is a moral man, and he believes, with this kind of bourgeois religiosity, that all men ultimately repent when confronted by the great unknown. Kurtz’s cry, in this interpretation, fits in with what Marlow wants to know of human nature.

We are not all Marrows, however, and we should not be seduced into agreeing with him, even if he is partially right. More ambiguously and ironically, Kurtz’s cry might be a shriek of despair that after having accomplished so little he must now perish. His horror is the anguish of one who dies with his work incomplete. In this view, Kurtz does not repent; rather, he bewails a fate which frustrates his plans. Indeed, at the very moment of death, he challenges life and death and tries to make his baffled will prevail. (pp. 144c-144d)

The irony of the story comes full turn. Returning from the world of the dead, Marlow—our twentieth-century Everyman—cannot admit the full impact of the indecency he has witnessed, of the feelings he has experienced. Even this most honest of men must disguise what he has seen and felt. Like a politician he must bed down with lies. Only Conrad, who is outside both Marlow and Kurtz, can admit the truth, can limn the lie and see it as a lie. (pp. 144d-144e)

In this and other respects, Heart of Darkness is a masterpiece of concealment. Just as Marlow has concealed from himself the true nature of his own needs, so too we can find concealment—in art, in nature, in people—in virtually every other aspect of the novella. The jungle itself, that vast protective camouflage barring the light of sun and sky, masks and hides, becoming part of the psychological as well as physical landscape. Like the dream content, it forms itself around distortion, condensation, and displacement.

Post-Darwinian and overpowering, the jungle is not Wordsworth’s gentle landscape, by no means the type of nature which gives strength and support in our darkest hours. Rather, it runs parallel to our anxieties, becomes the repository of our fears. The darkness of the jungle approximates darkness everywhere, adumbrating the blackness of Conrad’s humor, the despair of his irony.

The persistence of the color sets the tone and elicits our response. (p. 144e)

Kurtz’s final words, his death, the report by the manager’s boy, the darkness surrounding all, the frantic run out of the Congo, the meeting with Kurtz’s Brussel’s fiancée—connected to all such events is the shimmer and nightmare of dream, Conrad’s definition of modern life. No less than Kafka, he saw existence as forms of unreality studded with real events. And no little part of the dream-like substance of the tale is the Russian follower of Kurtz, like Marlow a mariner. Dressed in motley, he seems a figure from another world, and yet with his ludicrous appearance he is a perfect symbol for Marlow’s Congo experience. Befitting someone who worships Kurtz like a god, the Russian forgives his worst behavior and argues that a common man like himself needs someone to follow. He is persuaded that Kurtz’s will to power draws in all those less capable, conveys hope and substance to them.

There is, in his view, a void in every man that only someone like Kurtz can fill. Without Kurtz, the sailor says, he is nothing. "He made me see things—things." His ordinariness is balanced by Kurtz’s superiority—every disciple needs a god. Like the natives, like the superbe native mistress who forgives Kurtz everything, the sailor follows power. Conrad’s prescience was never more trenchant.

To Marlow’s accusation that Kurtz is insane, simply mad, the Russian offers Kurtz’s great intelligence, his ability to talk brilliantly, his charismatic qualities. To our objection that the sailor himself is mad, Conrad offers his influence upon Marlow—he strikes in Marlow precisely the note of love-hate that Conrad’s narrator has come to feel for Kurtz. Although Marlow would like to anchor himself solidly in the Russian’s sea manual and reject the vacuity of the Russian, he too is drawn into Kurtz’s orbit. He senses what the sailor voices.

In this strangely insane world, all alignments defy logic. Loyalties, beliefs, love, women themselves take on new shapes and attractions. Marlow, that neuter bachelor, is fascinated by the jungle woman, by her wanton, demanding display of sex, by the "feudal and mysterious life" she embodies, by the deliberate provocation of her measured walk. He is further drawn to her sense of reality; without illusion, without question, she accepts Kurtz for what he is, as integrated with the very savagery which enfolds her.

For Marlow the pull of the primitive comes full circle. Again and again, he breaks off his narrative to assure his listeners that all this really happened. Even while he talks, this modern mariner, he must convey the depth of his experience, try to convince that it was as profound as he claims. Marlow knows what happened—yet to find the precise words is almost impossible. (pp. 144f-144h)

Possibly in some areas the language is too heavy, but to labor this point is to lose sight of the story as a whole. One might, in fact, argue the very opposite: that the words—adjectives and all—beat upon us, creating drum-like rhythms entirely appropriate to the thick texture of the jungle, a more sophisticated version of Vachel Lindsay’s "Congo." When one confronts the artistry of the complete piece, Conrad’s reliance on verbal embellishment appears a minor consideration.

The story in fact has form: from the opening frame, with Marlow’s somewhat ingenious listeners, to the closing sequence, with Kurtz’s innocent fiancée confirming her illusions. The use of a first person narrative, through the agency of Marlow, was necessary so that Conrad could gain aesthetic distance and the reader could identify with an average man thrown into an abnormal situation. We must, Conrad realized, go through it with him and Marlow. Lacking the narrator, the story would appear too distant from the immediate experience—as though it had happened and was now over, like ancient history. (pp. 144h-144j)

So, too, in other respects did Conrad work out the shape of the story, in large and in details: through doubling of scenes and characters, through repetition, analogy, duplicating images, through difference of tone. From the beginning, when the ancient Romans on the Thames are contrasted with the modern Europeans on the Congo, Conrad used heightening and foreshortening, contrast and comparison to give the novella form. Most obviously, Marlow’s peaceful setting on the Nellie is set off against his nightmarish Congo riverboat setting; in a different way, Kurtz’s two fiancées are contrasted, each one standing for certain values, indeed for entire cultures, in conflict; further, the jungle is set off against the river, with jungle as death, river as possible relief; in another way, Kurtz is
Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* . . . better than any other work that I know displays that Western desire and need. . . . Of course, there are whole libraries of books devoted to the same purpose, but most of them are so obvious and so crude that few people worry about them today. Conrad, on the other hand, is undoubtedly one of the great stylists of modern fiction and a good storyteller in the bargain. His contribution, therefore, falls automatically into a different class—permanent literature—read and taught and constantly evaluated by serious academics. *Heart of Darkness* is indeed so secure today that a leading Conrad scholar has numbered it “among the half-dozen greatest short novels in the English language” [see excerpt above by Albert J. Guerard, 1950]. (pp. 2-3)

*Heart of Darkness* projects the image of Africa as “the other world,” the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man’s vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality. The book opens on the River Thames, tranquil, resting peacefully “at the decline of day after ages of good service done to the race that people its banks.” But the actual story takes place on the River Congo, the very antithesis of the Thames. The River Congo is quite decidedly not a River Emeritus. It has rendered no service and enjoys no old-age pension. We are told that “going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world.”

Is Conrad saying, then, that these two rivers are very different, one good, the other bad? Yes, but that is not the real point. It is not the differentness that worries Conrad but the lurking hint of kinship, of common ancestry. For the Thames too “has been one of the dark places of the earth.” It conquered its darkness, of course, and is now at peace. But if it were to visit its primordial relative, the Congo, it would run the terrible risk of hearing grotesque, suggestive echoes of its own forgotten darkness, and falling victim to an avenging recrudescence of the mindless frenzy of the first beginnings.

I am not going to waste your time with examples of Conrad’s famed evocation of the African atmosphere in *Heart of Darkness*. In the final consideration it amounts to no more than a steady, ponderous, fake-ritualistic repetition of two sentences, one about silence and the other about frenzy. (p. 3)

The eagle-eyed English critic, F. R. Leavis [see excerpt above, 1941], drew attention nearly thirty years ago to Conrad’s “adjectival insistence upon inexpressible and incomprehensible mystery.” That insistence must not be dismissed lightly, as many Conrad critics have tended to do, as a mere stylistic flaw. For it raises serious questions of artistic good faith. When a writer while pretending to record scenes, incidents, and their impact is in reality engaged in inducing hypnotic stupor in his readers through a bombardment of emotive words and other forms of trickery, much more has to be at stake than stylistic felicity. Generally, normal readers are well armed to detect and resist such underhand activity. But Conrad chose his subject well—one which was guaranteed not to put him in conflict with the psychological predisposition of his readers or raise the need for him to contend with their resistance. He chose the role of purveyor of comforting myths.

The most interesting and revealing passages in *Heart of Darkness* are, however, about people. . . . Herein lies the meaning of *Heart of Darkness* and the fascination it holds over the Western mind: “‘What thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours . . . Ugly.’”

Chinua Achebe (essay date 1977)

[Achebe is a Nigerian novelist, short story writer, and poet. His first novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is one of the most famous works written in English by an African author. In this and his second novel, *No Longer at Ease* (1960), Achebe examined the tragic effects of colonialism on traditional African ways. In later works, including *Arrow of God* (1964) and *A Man of the People* (1966), he satirized African urbanization and political corruption, blaming the resulting problems on the indifference of the people. In the following excerpt from the transcript of a lecture, Achebe argues that Westerners have traditionally viewed Africa as a foil and antithesis for European civilization. Achebe believes that Heart of Darkness reflects this tradition, and he characterizes Conrad as a racist for his dehumanizing portrayals of Africans. For further discussions of the role of Africans in Heart of Darkness, see the excerpts by Harold R. Collins (1954), Cedric Watts (1977), Ian Watt (1979), and C. P. Sarvan (1980), and the entry by Hunt Hawkins in the Additional Bibliography.]

[It] is the desire—one might indeed say the need—in Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe, a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar in comparison with which Europe’s own state of spiritual grace will be manifest. (p. 2)
Having shown us Africa in the mass, Conrad then zeroes in, as you would say, half a page later, on a specific example, giving us one of his rare descriptions of an African who is not just limbs or rolling eyes:

And between whiles I had to look after the savage who was fireman. He was an improved specimen; he could fire up a vertical boiler. He was there below me, and, upon my word, to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind legs. A few months of training had done for that really fine chap. He squinted at the steam gauge and at the water gauge with an evident effort of intrepidity—and he had filed his teeth, too, the poor devil, and the wool of his pate shaved into queer patterns, and three ornamental scars on each of his cheeks. . . .

As everybody knows, Conrad is a romantic on the side. He might not exactly admire savages clapping their hands and stamping their feet, but they have at least the merit of being in their place, unlike this dog in a parody of breeches. For Conrad, things being in their place is of the utmost importance.

"Fine fellows—cannibals—in their place," he tell us pointedly. Tragedy begins when things leave their accustomed place, like Europe leaving its safe stronghold between the policeman and the baker to take a peep into the heart of darkness. (pp. 3-5)

Towards the end of the story, Conrad lavishes a whole page quite unexpectedly on an African woman who has obviously been some kind of mistress to Mr. Kurtz and now presides (if I may be permitted a little imitation of Conrad) like a formidable mystery over the inexorable imminence of his departure. . . .

This Amazon is drawn in considerable detail, albeit of a predictable nature, for two reasons. First, she is in her place and can win Conrad's special brand of approval; and, second, she fulfills a structural requirement of the story: a savage counterpart to the refined, European woman with whom the story will end. . . .

The difference in the attitude of the novelist to these two women is conveyed in too many direct and subtle ways to need elaboration. But perhaps the most significant difference is the one implied in the author's bestowal of human expression to the one and the withholding of it from the other. It is clearly not part of Conrad's purpose to confer language on the "rudimentary souls" of Africa. They only "exchanged short grunting phrases" even among themselves, but mostly they were too busy with their frenzy. There are two occasions in the book, however, when Conrad departs somewhat from his practice and confers speech, even English speech, on the savages. The first occurs when cannibalism gets the better of them:

"Catch 'im,", he snapped, with a bloodshot widening of his eyes and a flash of sharp white teeth—"catch 'im. Give 'im to us." "To you, eh?" I asked; "what would you do with them?"

"Eat 'im!" he said curtly.

(p. 6)

The other occasion was the famous announcement:

Mistah Kurtz—be dead. . . .

At first sight these instances might be mistaken for unexpected acts of generosity from Conrad. In reality they constitute some of his best assaults. In the case of the cannibals the incomprehensible grunts that had thus far served them for speech suddenly proved inadequate for Conrad's purpose of letting the European glimpse the unspeakable craving in their hearts. Weighing the necessity for consistency in the portrayal of the dumb brutes against the sensational advantages of securing their conviction by clear, unambiguous evidence issuing out of their own mouth, Conrad chose the latter. As for the announcement of Mr. Kurtz's death by the "insolent black head in the doorway," what better or more appropriate finis could be written to the horror story of that wayward child of civilization who wilfully had given his soul to the powers of darkness and "taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land" than the proclamation of his physical death by the forces he had joined?

It might be contended, of course, that the attitude to the African in Heart of Darkness is not Conrad's but that of his fictional narrator, Marlow, and that far from endorsing it Conrad might indeed be holding it up to irony and criticism. Certainly Conrad appears to go to considerable pains to set up layers of insulation between himself and the moral universe of his story. He has, for example, a narrator behind a narrator. . . . But if Conrad's intention is to draw a cordon sanitaire between himself and the moral and psychological malaise of his narrator, his care seems to me totally wasted because he neglects to hint however subtly or tentatively at an alternative frame of reference by which we may judge the actions and opinions of his characters. It would not have been beyond Conrad's power to make that provision if he had thought it necessary. Marlow seems to me to enjoy Conrad's complete confidence—a feeling reinforced by the close similarities between their two careers.

Marlow comes through to us not only as a witness of truth, but one holding those advanced and humane views appropriate to the English liberal tradition which required all Englishmen of decency to be deeply shocked by atrocities in Bulgaria or the Congo of King Leopold of the Belgians or whatever. (p. 7)

The kind of liberalism espoused here by Marlow/Conrad touched all the best minds of the age in England, Europe, and America. It took different forms in the minds of different people but almost always managed to sidestep the ultimate question of equality between white people and black people. . . .

[Conrad] would not use the word brother however qualified; the farthest he would go was kinship. (p. 8)

It is important to note that Conrad, careful as ever with his words, is not talking so much about distant kinship as about someone laying a claim on it. The black man lays a claim on the white man which is well-nigh intolerable. It is the laying of this claim which frightens and at the same time fascinates Conrad, "the thought of their humanity—like yours. . . . Ugly."

The point of my observations should be quite clear by now, namely that Conrad was a bloody racist. That this simple truth is glossed over in criticisms of his work is due to the fact that white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely undetected. Students of Heart of Darkness will often tell you that Conrad is concerned not so much with Africa as with the deterioration of one European mind caused by solitude and sickness. They will point out to you that Conrad is, if anything, less charitable to the Europeans in the story than he is to the natives. A Conrad
student told me in Scotland last year that Africa is merely a setting for the disintegration of the mind of Mr. Kurtz.

Which is partly the point. Africa as setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor. Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril. Of course, there is a preposterous and perverse kind of arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the breakup of one petty European mind. But that is not even the point. The real question is the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world. And the question is whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art. My answer is: No, it cannot. I would not call that man an artist, for example, who composes an eloquent instigation to one people to fall upon another and destroy them. No matter how striking his imagery or how beautiful his cadences fall, such a man is no more a great artist than another may be called a priest who reads the mass backwards or a physician who poisons his patients. (pp. 8-9)

Naturally, Conrad is a dream for psychoanalytic critics. Perhaps the most detailed study of him in this direction is by Bernard C. Meyer, M.D. [see Additional Bibliography]. In his lengthy book, Dr. Meyer follows every conceivable lead (and sometimes inconceivable ones) to explain Conrad. As an example, he gives us long disquisitions on the significance of hair and haircutting in Conrad. And yet not even one word is spared for his attitude to black people. Not even the discussion of Conrad's anti-semitism was enough to spark off in Dr. Meyer's mind those other dark and explosive thoughts. Which only leads one to surmise that Western psychoanalysts must regard the kind of racism displayed by Conrad as absolutely normal despite the profoundly important work done by Franz Fanon in the psychiatric hospitals in French Algeria. (pp. 10-11)

There are two probable grounds on which what I have said so far may be contested. The first is that it is no concern of fiction to please people about whom it is written. I will go along with that. But I am not talking about pleasing people. I am talking about a book which parades in the most vulgar fashion prejudices and insults from which a section of mankind has suffered untold agonies and atrocities in the past and continues to do so in many ways and many places today. I am talking about a story in which the very humanity of black people is called in question. It seems to me totally inconceivable that great art or even good art could possibly reside in such unwholesome surroundings.

Secondly, I may be challenged on the grounds of actuality. Conrad, after all, sailed down the Congo in 1890 when my own father was still a babe in arms, and recorded what he saw. How could I stand up in 1975, fifty years after his death, and purport to contradict him? My answer is that as a sensible man I will not accept just any traveller's tales solely on the grounds that I have not made the journey myself. I will not trust the evidence even of a man's very eyes when I suspect them to be as jaundiced as Conrad's. And we also happen to know that Conrad was, in the words of his biographer, Bernard C. Meyer, 'notoriously inaccurate in the rendering of his own history.'

But more important by far is the abundant testimony about Conrad's savages which we could gather if we were so inclined from other sources and which might lead us to think that these people must have had other occupations besides merging into the evil forest or materializing out of it simply to plague Marlow and his dispirited band. (pp. 11-12)

Conrad did not originate the image of Africa which we find in his book. It was and is the dominant image of Africa in the Western imagination, and Conrad merely brought the peculiar gifts of his own mind to bear on it. . . . Africa is to Europe as the picture is to Dorian Gray—a carrier onto whom the master unloads his physical and moral deformities so that he may go forward, erect and immaculate. Consequently, Africa is something to be avoided, just as the picture has to be hidden away to safeguard the man's jeopardised integrity. Keep away from Africa, or else! Mr. Kurtz of Heart of Darkness should have heeded that warning, and the prowling horror in his heart would have kept its place, chained to its lair. But he foolishly exposed himself to the wild irresistible allure of the jungle, and lo! the darkness found him out. (p. 13)

Ultimately, the abandonment of unwholesome thoughts must be its own and only reward. Although I have used the word wifail a few times in this talk to characterize the West's view of Africa, it may well be that what is happening at this stage is more akin to reflex action than calculated rancid. Which does not make the situation more but less hopeful. . . .

[Although] the work which needs to be done may appear too daunting, I believe that it is not one day too soon to begin. (p. 14)


CEDRIC WATTS (essay date 1977)

[Conrad's "Heart of Darkness," from which the following excerpt is taken, is among the most important critical examinations of this work. In the following excerpt from his study, Watts demonstrates that Heart of Darkness anticipates the verbal and intellectual ambiguity of much twentieth-century fiction, and that the complex narrative structure further the pervasive sense of indeterminacy. Watts also discusses the novella as an attack on the nineteenth-century work ethic and prevailing versions of social Darwinism.]

To begin with an immediate declaration of interest: Heart of Darkness is the best short novel I know, and in my opinion it is the finest and richest of Conrad's works. The tale is exciting and profound, lucid and bewildering; it is highly compressed, rich in texture and implication; it has a recessive adroitness, constantly ambushing the conceptualising reader; and thematically it has a remarkable range of reference to problems of politics and psychology, morality and religion, social order and evolution. In embodying a critical summary of some important nineteenth-century preoccupations, Conrad has critically anticipated some equally important twentieth-century preoccupations. Furthermore, Heart of Darkness can be related to a diversity of "traditions", generic and technical, including political satire, traveller's tale, psychological odyssey, mediated autobiography, and isolation fable; while to those readers who seek prophetic premises, it speaks eloquently of the brutalities and follies of subsequent history.

It has long been recognised as one of Conrad's major works, and has evoked a wealth of exegetic writing. . . . (p. 1)
One reason for [Heart of Darkness's] enduring force is its critical anticipation of twentieth-century preoccupations; and one such preoccupation is ambiguity itself. In no previous century has linguistic ambiguity as a topic approached the importance which it now holds. (p. 7)

[The] title Heart of Darkness offers not simply alternative readings in retrospect, but also, from the start, a certain disturbing mysteriousness through the immediate possibility of alternative glosses: we sense ambiguity even before consciously analysing the components of the phrase. And, throughout the tale, ambiguities proliferate in the areas of semantics (as when Marlow plays upon the different meanings of "absurd"), of association or connotation of imagery . . . and of character, motive and action. The tale that strikes the keynote, resonant, mysterious and equivocal, for one of the most intensely orchestrated works of fiction. "Dark", "darkness": the words re-echo to the very last paragraph, in which "the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky—seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness".

In Heart of Darkness, corruption and evil are subversive and tentacular: they send out tentacles which entwine themselves about and amongst the seemingly sound and good. (pp. 9-10)

"Light" has the most ancient of associations with Godhead, sanctity and truth ("enlightenment"); and "darkness" has long conned evil, death, the sinister, ignorance, error, and the oppressively mysterious. "White" has associations with holiness, purity, chastity; and "black" with evil, damnation, sin. Thus is formed a reassuringly simplistic balance of primary connotations which Conrad repeatedly evokes and upsets: sets by intermittently exploiting secondary connotations. St. Matthew (chapter 23, verse 27) had likened hypocrites to "whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness"; and in the tale, white is the colour of Fleslev's bleached bones, of the skulls round Kurtz's but, of Kurtz's bald head, of the ivory which elicits the pilgrims' avarice; and the city which contains the company's headquarters reminds Marlow of "a whited sepulchre". The signal examples of corruption are not among the blacks but among the white men, who are responsible for colouring-in the "white patch" that once, Marlow reminds us, filled the map of the dark continent. (p. 10)

Although "darkness" has many and varied connotations in the tale, its main connotation, gradually established, is the mysteriously or indeterminately sinister; and through repetition of the term in a variety of contexts, Conrad conveys the impression that this sinister force has an irresistible dynamism. (p. 11)

Heart of Darkness exploits the oblique narrative convention. Firstly, there is use of the familiar principle that the bizarre events recounted gain vividness through the apparently respectable and sociable normality of the contrasting outer narrative. Secondly, there is a tentacular effect: the initial impression of contrast is disturbed by the implication that there may be some complicity between the apparently respectable "outer" group [the audience of Marlow's tale] and the brutalities of the "inner" narrative [Marlow's tale itself]. Thirdly, and related to the last factor, is the handling of the convention that the characters of the outer group are known to us by vocational titles. . . . In Heart of Darkness . . . subtle use is made of the "vocational" convention, largely through its initiation of a critical discussion of the "work ethic". Fourthly, . . . the intermittent references to the outer group during the presentation of the inner narrative have incisive functions: sometimes, for example, they will be used to suggest an alarming gulf in comprehension between those who hear of nightmare and the man who has undergone it. Fifthly (and this, in turn, relates to the previous point), the handling of the inter-action between the two narratives [Marlow's narrative and the narrator's depiction of that narrative]—and between the characters of the two narrators—sometimes converts into a surprising strength that weakness noted in 'Youth', that attraction to the incantatory eloquent: indeed, an important thematic concern is with the blandishments of high-flown eloquence and with the value of reticence. Sixthly, Conrad now surpasses Maupassant in the ability to make the final outer scene shed a retrospectively transforming light over the preceding narrative. Finally, when a man is extemporising a yarn, the narration does naturally tend to veer about temporally and spatially, glancing ahead, darting here and there, sliding and eliding. In letting the Marlow of Heart of Darkness thus veer about, Conrad is not only developing the convention naturalistically but also increasing suspense, multiplying ironies, and offering generally a more kaleidoscopic and problematic presentation than the direct "omniscient author" technique customarily permits. (p. 27)

One important source of complexity in Heart of Darkness is that when Conrad came to analyse "the vilest scramble for loot" he was inevitably obliged to make a critical analysis of the Victorian work ethic. . . . (pp. 61-2)

Carlyle's "to let light on chaos . . . is beyond all other greatness, work for a God!" has its echo in Kurtz's report: and the hubris of Carlyle's claim is exposed not only by the eventual form of Kurtz's divinity (and the worshippers of this hero include a representative of civilisation, the Russian, as well as the savages), but also by Conrad's reminder that if the light-bringing task is "work for a God", it is certainly beyond the capacities of the mass of men. The "yours not to reason why" aspect of the ethic is undermined by Conrad's emphasis on the fact that in the Congo there is ample dying but little "doing" little in the way of constructive achievement; and among the Europeans there is altogether too little "reasoning why", too little reflection about the moral implications of their actions. Where there is an appearance of collaborative endeavour among the Europeans, it is so often shown to be constructive, rapacious or absurd pursuit; . . . the work of the company's accountant, and even, sometimes, of Marlow himself, is presented as a refuge from moral awareness rather than as a means of moral fulfilment. (pp. 63-4)

So in Heart of Darkness, Conrad not only shows how far the company's activities fall short of the demands of the work ethic; he also looks very closely into the possible dangers of that ethic; and on the rare occasions when good work is being done, Conrad will sometimes, by psychological notation, weaken the Carlylean sense that this particularly characterises a civilised nature. He certainly amplifies the Carlylean argument that working, rather than reflecting, saves man from a paralysing sense of his littleness in the face of Nature; but while Carlyle had asserted that "Doubt, of whatever kind, can be ended by Action alone", Conrad chooses to emphasise the validity of "Doubt". Above all, . . . he interminably but forcefully levels against the work ethic the "argument from ultimates". What, he asks, comes ultimately of any man's labours?

A critic with a literal cast of mind could find many apparent lies of omission in Heart of Darkness. He could claim that Conrad, unhistorically, takes too disparaging a view of Congolese activities by omitting any suggestion of durable and
valuable achievement, any hint that the great cities and industries of modern Africa could result from the pioneering endeavours of the late nineteenth century. He could cite the searches of Norman Sherry, which show conclusively that even at the time of Conrad's journey there, trading and colonisation were far more organised than we might infer from the tale. The fictional Inner Station is a solitary decaying house; the corresponding Inner Station on Conrad's journey was Stanley Falls, a thriving settlement whose many buildings included such civilised establishments as a hospital and a stone-built prison. (p. 65)

The answer to those accusations of "lying by omission" is that Heart of Darkness is a fertile mixture of modes, among them the naturalistic, the satiric and the symbolic, and we are offered the various ways to truth which are appropriate to those modes. . . . [The] atrocities and rapacities described in the tale were historically to be found in the Congo. In terms of bricks and mortar, railways and timetables, there was more construction than the tale suggests; but given the propaganda of the time which so often exaggerated the merits of such material "progress", Conrad's partly-satiric emphasis on wasteful futility still serves the cause of truth dialectically, by offering a sceptical questioning of the inner nature and ultimate results of European imperialism. By a variety of devices, Conrad increases the range of implications of the narrative so that it offers symbolic commentary on events far beyond the local. The terrain includes the mind and the heart. (p. 67)

Conrad is Darwinian and anti-Darwinian: he uses Darwinian findings not only to combat the optimism that Darwin himself, and many of those who were later influenced by him, illicitly tried to distil from evolutionary theory, but also to combat imperialist ideologies that attempted to derive support from Darwinism.

Even when Hardy's novels are taken into account, Heart of Darkness has a more potent Darwinian atmosphere than any other major work of fiction. Insistently, Conrad raises questions about man's evolution, about the relationship between the civilised and the savage, about the relationship between the human realm and the natural environment, and about the continuity between the present age and the remote past. (p. 85)

Darwin says: "From the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. . . . Whether Conrad did or did not have the ending of The Origin of Species specifically in mind, Heart of Darkness does in practice drive a further wedge between the confused elements by showing a "war of nature" in Africa—humans competing with each other for survival and furthance, and competing for life with the natural environment—and by asking the reader whether that battle appears to be producing anything morally "higher". (p. 88)

In the late nineteenth century, many apologists for aggressive imperialism proped their arguments with illicit inferences from Darwinian principles—illicit, because Darwin was dealing with competition between species and species, or between species and environment, but not between nations and races. . . . [Conrad] retorts in Heart of Darkness by turning Darwinism against the political Darwinsians. If a goal of the evolutionary processes is an equilibrium between the creature and its environment, that goal has in Africa been reached by the natives whom Marlow observes on the coast, who "wanted no excuse for being there" and who blend with their setting, rather than by the Europeans, who appear absurdly anomalous and perish rapidly there or survive as grotesques or brutal automata. This retort is augmented . . . by Conrad's post-Darwinian emphasis on the continuity in instincts, customs, fetishes and taboos between the savages and the Europeans. (pp. 91-2)


Ian Watt (essay date 1979)

[Watt is one of the most significant contributors to the study of the novel form in the twentieth century. In his seminal work, The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding, he argues that the novel is above all a realistic genre and that its unique appearance in the eighteenth century, specifically in the works of Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, and Henry Fielding, was influenced by, as well as contributed to, the general movement towards "philosophical realism" in Western civilization after the Renaissance. For Watt, two characteristics define the novel in its complete form: one is "presentational realism"—the technique of rendering particular moments and events believeable to the reader; the other is what he calls "realism of assessment," which consists in the kind of moral authority and control the author exercises over his or her narrative. In the following excerpt, taken from his Conrad in the Nineteenth Century, the first of a two-volume biographical, historical, and interpretive study of Conrad, Watt discusses Conrad's impressionistic prose style and provides a detailed reading of Heart of Darkness, concentrating most forcefully on Marlow's growth to self-discovery, Kurtz's degeneration, and Marlow's lie.]

In the tradition of what we are still calling modern literature, the classic status of Heart of Darkness probably depends less on the prophetic nature of Conrad's ideas than on its new formal elements. These new narrative elements reflect both the general ideological crisis of the late nineteenth century and the literary innovations which accompanied it; but there are other and more direct reasons for considering them. Many readers of Heart of Darkness have found it rather obscure, and in particular, obscure in its answer to questions that would have been normal to ask, and easy to answer, in the case of most nineteenth-century fiction; questions such as: What is the heart of darkness? What does Kurtz actually do and why don't we see him doing it? What does it matter to Marlow, and why doesn't he tell the Intended? These questions about Heart of Darkness all receive answers, but only in terms of its own formal presuppositions. This qualification would actually apply to almost any literary work, but the terms of Heart of Darkness are especially difficult to decipher.

Conrad provides us with very little critical guidance. This is no doubt partly because of the intuitive way he wrote. (p. 168)

Mist or haze is a very persistent image in Conrad. . . . In Heart of Darkness the fugitive nature and indefinite contours of haze are given a special significance by the primary narrator; he warns us that Marlow's tale will be not centered on, but surrounded by, its meaning; and this meaning will be only as fitfully and tenuously visible as a hitherto unnoticed presence of dust particles are visible to your eye in a room that clinically looks dark and void. This in turn reminds us that one of the most characteristic objections to Impressionist painting was that the artist's ostensive "subject" was obscured by his representation of the atmospheric conditions through which it was observed. (p. 169)
Heart of Darkness is essentially impressionist in one very special and yet general way: it accepts, and indeed in its very form asserts, the bounded and ambiguous nature of individual understanding; and because the understanding sought is of an inward and experiential kind, we can describe the basis of its narrative method as subjective moral impressionism. Marlow's story explores how one individual's knowledge of another can mysteriously change the way in which he sees the world as a whole, and the form of Heart of Darkness proposes that so ambitious an enterprise can only be begun through one man trying to express his most inward impressions of how deeply problematic is the quest for—to use Pater's terms—"an outer world, and of other minds." . . . Heart of Darkness embodies more thoroughly than any previous fiction the posture of uncertainty and doubt; one of Marlow's functions is to represent how much a man cannot know; and he assumes that reality is essentially private and individual—work, he comments, gives you "the chance to find yourself. Your own reality—for yourself, not for others—what no other man can ever know. They can only see the mere show, and never can tell what it really means." . . . (p. 174)

The other most distinctively impressionist aspect of Conrad's narrative method concerns his approach to visual description; and this preoccupation with the problematic relation of individual sense impressions to meaning is shown most clearly in one of the minor innovations of his narrative technique.

Long before Heart of Darkness Conrad seems to have been trying to find ways of giving direct narrative expression to the way in which the consciousness elicits meaning from its perceptions. One of the devices that he hit on was to present a sense impression and to withhold naming it or explaining its meaning until later; as readers we witness every step by which the gap between the individual perception and its cause is belatedly closed within the consciousness of the protagonist. (pp. 174-75)

This narrative device may be termed delayed decoding, since it combines the forward temporal progression of the mind, as it receives messages from the outside world, with the much slower reflexive process of making out their meaning. (p. 175)

By the time Conrad came to write Heart of Darkness, then, he had developed one narrative technique which was the verbal equivalent of the impressionist painter's attempt to render visual sensation directly. Conrad presented the protagonist's immediate sensations, and thus made the reader aware of the gap between impression and understanding; the delay in bridging the gap enacts the disjunction between the event and the observer's trailing understanding of it. In Heart of Darkness Conrad uses the method for the most dramatic action of the story, when Marlow's boat is attacked, just below Kurtz's station. (pp. 176-77)

Conrad's main objective is to put us into intense sensory contact with the events; and this objective means that the physical impression must precede the understanding of cause. Literary impressionism implies a field of vision which is not merely limited to the individual observer, but is also controlled by whatever conditions—internal and external—prevail at the moment of observation. In narration the main equivalents to atmospheric interference in painting are the various factors which normally distort human perception, or which delay its recognition of what is most relevant and important. First of all, our minds are usually busy with other things—Marlow has a lot to do just then, and it is only natural that he should be annoyed by being faced with these three new interferences with his task of keeping the boat from disaster. Secondly, our interpretations of impressions are normally distorted by habitual expectations—Marlow perceives the unfamiliar arrows as familiar sticks. Lastly, we always have many more things in our range of vision than we can pay attention to, so that in a crisis we may miss the most important ones—in this case that the helmsman has been killed. Conrad's method reflects all these difficulties in translating perceptions into causal or conceptual terms. This takes us deeply into the connection between delayed decoding and impressionism; it reminds us, as Michael Levenson has said, of the precarious nature of the process of interpretation in general; and since this precariousness is particularly evident when the individual's situation or his state of mind is abnormal, the device of delayed decoding simultaneously enacts the objective and the subjective aspects of moments of crisis. The method also has the more obvious advantage of convincing us of the reality of the experience which is being described; there is nothing suspiciously selective about the way it is narrated; while we read we are, as in life, fully engaged in trying to decipher a meaning out of a random and pell-mell bombardment of sense impressions. (pp. 178-79)

Conrad's retreat from the omniscient author is applied much more radically to his characterisation and his mode of narration, and through them to the meaning of the story as a whole. As several critics have noted, Marlow's role turns Heart of Darkness into a story about—among other things—the difficulty of telling the "full story." . . . Marlow is obsessively aware of it. "No, not very clear," . . . he ruminates aloud as he begins to recall his experience, and later he is driven to conclude that it is "impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence—that which makes its truth, its meaning—its subtle and penetrating essence." . . . Marlow's ironic consciousness of how far he is from being able to tell "the full story," and the overt enactment of this within the novel, are two of the ways in which Heart of Darkness anticipates the unauthoritative, self-reflexive, and problematic nature of such later fiction as Kafka's novels and Gide's Les Faux-Monnayeurs.

These comparisons, however, are themselves reminders of how far scepticism is from being the only or even the main burden of meaning in Heart of Darkness; Marlow is also the means whereby Conrad incorporates three of the oldest, and predominantly affirmative, elements in storytelling: the narrator as a remembering eyewitness; the narrator as the voice of his author's opinions; and the narrator as a friendly personal presence. (pp. 210-11)

The fact that Marlow is not the primary narrator, however, has the effect of giving him an objective status that is in accord with more recent modes of storytelling. It can, indeed, be argued that retrospection does not in fact involve a breach with the relativism of the more typically impressionist modes of modern fiction. Neither the immediate verbal rendering of sense impressions, nor the later development of the stream-of-consciousness novel, has any certain basis in experience; after all, no one has ever seen an impression, let alone a stream of them, and life offers no model for putting them into words. Memory is somewhat closer to our consciousness; and the act of putting memories into words is a common and observed phenomenon. Retrospective narration, then, though one of the oldest forms of narrative, has as good a claim to represent actual experience as more modern methods; and the way Conrad uses Marlow
is peculiarly adapted to showing the individual engaged in trying to understand what has happened to him.

Conrad’s use of Marlow as the voice of retrospection, then, combines old and new narrative methods. Marlow’s memories of his lonely experiences on the Congo, and his sense of the impossibility of fully communicating their meaning, would in themselves assign Heart of Darkness to the literature of modern solipsism; but the fact that Marlow, like Conrad, is speaking to a particular audience makes all the difference; it enacts the process whereby the solitary individual discovers a way out into the world of others. One can surmise that Conrad found the narrative posture of moral and social neutrality intolerable; and so under cover of Marlow’s probing of the meaning of the past, Conrad smuggled in the ancient privilege of the narrator by the backdoor, and surreptitiously reclaimed some of the omniscient author’s ancient rights to the direct expression of the wisdom of hindsight. (pp. 211-12)

Through Marlow, Conrad can unobjectionably express the sort of moral commentary on the action which had been proscribed by Flaubert and the purists of the art of the novel, and which had seemed somewhat obtrusive when Conrad did it directly, as he had occasionally in The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’, for instance. But Marlow is much more than a device for circumventing the modern taboo on authorial moralising; he is also a means of allowing his author to express himself more completely than ever before; through Marlow Conrad discovered a new kind of relation to his audience, and one which enabled him to be more fully himself. (p. 212)

The primary narrator first gives a low-keyed description of the Nellie’s coming to anchor, and of the five men aboard settling down to await the ebb of the tide; then he slowly modulates into an increasingly fixed absorption on the gathering gloom and what it suggests. Almost imperceptibly, this evocation of the time and the place sets up the novel’s basic symbolic dualism; the light in the sky and the luminous estuary are contrasted with the darkness along the banks of the Thames and over London. (pp. 214-15)

[Our] attention has been alerted against assuming that the narrative depends exclusively on the symbolic meanings traditionally attributed to the contrast of black as bad and white as good: for instance, the two opposites are intermingled in the case of the “torch” of civilisation, since it came from “within the land,” which we have just seen as dark. . . .

Characteristically, Marlow’s opening remark both reverses and expands the general meditative direction: it reverses it because Marlow is thinking, not about the light of British civilisation, but about the darkness out of which it arose; and it amplifies it because the historical perspective becomes much longer when Marlow invokes the first Roman settlers on the Thames in “very old times.” This idea is developed in a long paragraph which begins by making us see civilisation, not as the established norm, but as a brief interruption of the normal order of darkness, an interruption which is as brief and unsubstantial as “a flash of lightning in the clouds.”

Marlow’s backward plunge into England’s remoter past soon proves to be an indirect approach to a much more immediate and personal preoccupation—the moral and psychological conflict between light and darkness which goes on inside the individual. (p. 215)

The rest of the first section is mainly concerned with recounting a series of Marlow’s progressive initiatives. Freed from the priorities of conventional autobiography, each incident is selected and treated for its larger implications. . . . (pp. 217-18)

The four other main stages of the first section deal with Marlow’s voyage out, the company station, the overland journey, and the central station. They are arranged in chronological order, with occasional flashbacks and anticipatory parentheses; and within each stage, the particular episodes which are given the greatest emphasis seem selected to amplify or complicate Marlow’s internal process of moral discovery, rather than to recount his journey.

During the voyage out most of the episodes serve to reverse the conventional application of light and darkness to the colonial-savagery dichotomy. This reversal had already been suggested when Marlow says of the unnamed city from which he sets out that it “always makes me think of a whitened sepulchre.” . . . So Marlow leaves a white civilisation which masks death and darkness to confront the Dark Continent; and this will bring about a complementary transvaluation of the habitual assumptions which he initially shared with his society. (p. 218)

Until now Marlow has seen the waste, ineffectiveness and cruelty of the colonial presence only at a distance, and from the outside; when he arrives at the company station he is forced to confront their human consequences at close quarters. A file of six emaciated blacks balancing baskets of earth on their heads slowly passes Marlow, “with that complete, deathlike indifference of unhappy savages.” . . . (p. 219)

To shield himself from seeing any more of the lacerating results of “these high and just proceedings,” of which he is “after all . . . a part,” Marlow turns off the path into the shade of a grove, only to discover that “I had stepped into the gloomy circle of some Inferno.” . . . As soon as his eyes have become used to the deep shade, Marlow discovers that he has taken refuge in a place “where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die.” These labourers on the railway are essentially the victims, not of calculated brutality, but of the blindness to their needs of an alien and more powerful order; they have been “brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts” by the rationality of a capitalist order based on legal agreements and chronometric time, an order which is wholly incomprehensible to the blacks; they are being mercilessly destroyed by a system which is administered by whites who make a point of not noticing what they are really doing. (p. 220)

By now the reversal of the symbolic associations of black and white has gone very far; it is soon given a further range of thematic complication. When Marlow gets to the company station, the first sight that meets his eye is a man who proves to be a very problematic representative of Marlow’s other moral positive—work and efficiency. The “white cuffs” and “snowy trousers” of the company’s chief accountant look dazzling; and Marlow at first reflects, only half ironically, that “in the great demoralization of the land he kept up his appearance. That’s backbone.” . . . So far, so good, perhaps; especially when it appears that the accountant is also “devoted to his books, which were in apple-pie order.” This devotion, however, excludes all other human values. There is a sick company agent dying in his office, and the accountant comments: “The groans of this sick person . . . distract my attention.” The cold bureaucratic attitude, Marlow later discovers, does more than atrophy natural sympathy; it incites the accountant to positive inhumanity. . . . (pp. 220-21)
The episodes of the accountant and the dying African enact a symbolic confrontation of the most absolute kind between two world views. This confrontation exists at many levels; at the most abstract of them it opposes magic to mathematics. The thematic direction of these two episodes prepares us for another metaphysical question: Can any more valid faith be found in Africa than those of the accountant and the dying black?

The overland journey to the central station supplies some negative answers. All that Marlow sees of the original native life are the deserted villages with their ruined grass walls; but he hears "the tremor of far-off drums, sinking, swelling, a tremor vast, faint; a sound weird, appealing, suggestive, and wild—and perhaps with as profound a meaning as the sound of bells in a Christian country." The meanings of the Christian conquerors, however, are only represented by a drunken white man supposed to be in charge of the upkeep of the road; when Marlow asks him why he came out, he replies scornfully: "To make money, of course. What do you think?"

When Marlow arrives at the central station he soon learns that this is indeed the only faith to be found among the colonisers.

(p. 221)

Marlow has learned as many negative truths as he can bear; they add up to the discovery that the "white patch" on the map which he dreamed about as a boy has indeed become "a place of darkness," . . . and that it is his fellow whites who have made it so. (p. 223)

During the first part [the colonial theme] is developed very largely as an implicit opposition between the public pretences in Europe and the contrary realities which Marlow discovers in Africa; but then this opposition becomes part of a more general dualism of progress versus atavism, until finally both dualisms collapse when Marlow discovers that Kurtz, the highest representative of European colonial progress, has been transformed into its opposite.

Two other persistent thematic dualisms offer themselves as possible "secondary notions," although, of course, there is no reason to believe that Conrad conceived them in these abstract terms. The first is that of work versus words; work receives considerable emphasis in the first part, while the theme of words is developed only in the last two. As to the second dualism, that of restraint versus liberation, both ideas surface only towards the end of the second part. (pp. 224-25)

The idea of atavistic reversion emerges in Marlow's imagination at the central station; and then, as the little steamboat plunges deeper into the jungle, its manifestations find a deeper resonance as his previous assumptions about the place of man in the continuum of space and time are irresistibly undermined. . . .

As they go deeper inland Marlow gradually comes to feel "cut off for ever from everything you had known once—some-where—far away—in another existence perhaps." . . . His old familiar world is disappearing, and Marlow contemplates the new in a spirit akin to that of Baudelaire's "Correspondences": the forest seems to have meanings and intentions; Marlow continually senses its "mysterious stillness watching me" in silent interrogation. The mute immensity of the primeval jungle makes him feel that he and his civilisation are insignificant and temporary intruders. (p. 225)

Just as the paddlers off the African coast had seemed a touchstone that exposed the unnatural and hypocritical sickness of Western civilisation, so Marlow now finds a similar appeal in his occasional glimpses of the tribal life along the river banks. Nothing he hears or sees—an occasional "roll of drums behind the curtain of trees," or "a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying"—has a clear meaning; he does not know if "the prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us—who could tell?". . . . Still, something is communicated which is vitally human: "What thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly, yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise." Marlow comes to believe that his subliminal responsiveness is an echo of the primitive residues in his own being; he has a "dim suspicion" that there was "a meaning" in that noise which his listeners—"you—you so remote from the night of first ages—could comprehend. And why not? The mind of man is capable of anything—because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future."

Kurtz's mind is to prove as capable of a fearless acting out of the whole past of human barbarism, as of propounding its verbal opposite in eloquent platitudes about boundless progress in the future.

As for Marlow, he immunes himself against both barbarism and the ugliness of progress through work, as he twice explains to his listeners. (pp. 225-26)

Marlow is implicitly dividing civilised man into three categories: those who respond to savagery and succumb, like Kurtz; those who respond but possess "a deliberate belief" which enables them to resist; and the fools who do not respond at all because they do not notice. (p. 226)

Surface truths imply deeper truths; and Marlow soon finds himself needing to posit one which introduces a new dualism. Just below Kurtz's station, when an attack is imminent, the headman of Marlow's cannibal crew puts in a claim for any edible enemy carcasses that may become available. This suddenly makes Marlow realise that, as a result of the blindness of the trading company to their needs, the crew have long been on the verge of starvation: their pay—three pieces of brass wire a week—does not buy the food it is supposed to, mainly because the villages along the river are deserted or hostile. So the cannibal crew had every reason to eat the whites on board, and being "thirty to five," . . . they could easily have done it. The crew had "no earthly reason for any kind of scruple." "What possible restraint?" then, can have checked them, Marlow wonders: "Was it superstition, disgust, patience, fear—or some kind of primitive honour?" He finds no answer, but the overwhelming fact of their restraint remains.

Restraint is tangentially related to the atavism-civilisation dual ity because it is a quality which is not usually needed in modern society, where all necessary sanctions on conduct are supplied externally. . . . Kurtz [is] an example of the destructive effects of first having lost inherent moral restraints through exposure to another culture, and then being removed from external restraints by circumstances. . . . (pp. 226-27)

The thematic opposite to restraint, liberation, is established as soon as the steamboat arrives off the inner station. The first man Marlow sees is not Kurtz, but the beckoning figure of the
young Russian sailor, whose patched clothes make him look like a harlequin. (p. 227)

The Russian’s youthful innocence is apparent from his “beardless, boyish face” with “smiles and frowns chasing each other over that open countenance like sunshine and shadow”; ... and this betokens both the spontaneity and the self-doubt of youth, a combination which makes him the natural prey of Kurtz’s malignant self-assurance. ...

The second part ends on this note. “I tell you,” the Russian cries, “this man has enlarged my mind.” ... Romantic individualism had set up the ideal of absolute liberation from religious, social, and ethical norms; and this ideal, later reinforced by many other forces of nineteenth-century history, made the spread of freedom and progress depend on the removal of all “restraints.” The Russian harlequin thus represents his century’s innocent but fateful surrender to that total Faustian unenchantment which believes that everything is justified if it “enlarges the mind.” (p. 228)

Marlow’s personal attitude to Kurtz is from the beginning largely dictated by particular external circumstances that make Kurtz seem the lesser of two evils. On his way up, Marlow has felt a growing need to dissociate himself from all the doings of his fellow whites; and at the central station this motive is reinforced when it becomes apparent both that Kurtz is the spearhead of the reform party in the trading company, and that Marlow is regarded as his ally. The obscure machinations of the manager of the central station and his cronies against Kurtz and Marlow remain vestigial as far as the plot is concerned; but they channel Marlow’s disgusted bewilderment at everything he has seen into a deeper intellectual and moral identification with his imaginary picture of Kurtz. He believes, for instance, that Kurtz shares his devotion to the work ethic, because he has heard the manager talking about how Kurtz had sent back his last load of ivory with his clerk, and had then paddled back alone to his station, some three hundred miles upriver. On this Marlow comments: “I did not know the motive”; but he imagines that “perhaps [Kurtz] was just simply a fine fellow who stuck to his work for its own sake.” ... (p. 229)

It is, then, a combination of the accidents of circumstance, a reliance on out-of-date reports, and the pressures of personal need, which give Marlow a vague sense of being captured by Kurtz’s mysterious power. (pp. 229-30)

Marlow’s first great disillusionment comes when he arrives at the inner station and learns from the Russian that, as he surmised, the attack on the steamboat was not really an attack, or at least was only “undertaken under the stress of desperation, and in its essence was purely protective.” ... Protective of what? Of Kurtz, Marlow is surprised to discover. And why? Because, the Russian explains, they adore him, and “they don’t want him to go.” ... The Russian further reveals that it was actually “Kurtz who had ordered the attack.” ... Not only is Kurtz adored; he apparently adores it.

While the Russian is still talking about Kurtz, Marlow accidentally gets visual confirmation of his tale. Being unable to go ashore, he is trying to satisfy his curiosity by looking at Kurtz’s ruined house, with its fence now broken down and offering no protection from the wilderness and its denizens. Suddenly, in “a brusque movement” of Marlow’s field glasses “one of the remaining posts . . . leaped up”; it bears, “black, dried, sunken, with closed eyelids,—a head that seemed to sleep at the top of that pole, and, with the shrunken dry lips showing a narrow white line of the teeth, was smiling, too.” ... Marlow discovers that there are other heads on the stakes, and that they are “turned to the house.” Their function is clearly not, like those on the palisades of Arab forts, or on Traitor’s Gate, to warn beholders against offending the rulers of the land; nor is their function merely aesthetic, like those which one official at Stanley Falls disposed as “a decoration around a flower bed in front of his house.” In Kurtz’s case the heads, as Marlow puts it, are “not ornamental but symbolic.” ... For Marlow, however, their thematic meaning is summed up in saying that “they only showed that Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts.”

Marlow’s horror is soon turned in another direction. Kurtz’s long, emaciated body is carried on board; and when Marlow hears the now triumphant manager describe Kurtz’s methods as “unsound” because “the time was not ripe for vigorous action,” ... he finds it so vile in its amoral hypocrisy that, despite what he now knows, he “turn[s] mentally to Kurtz for relief.” Finding a bitter comfort in the reflection that “it was something to have at least a choice of nightmares,” Marlow formally aligns himself with Kurtz by refusing to discuss the matter in the manager’s terms. He commits himself only to the ambiguous judgment that “Mr. Kurtz is a remarkable man”; and to appease the Russian’s fear that his idol’s glory will suffer if he leaves him in enemy hands, Marlow assures him that “I am Mr. Kurtz’s friend—in a way,” and that “Mr. Kurtz’s reputation is safe with me.” ... (pp. 230-31)

That night Marlow is awakened by the sound of native drums and frenzied yells; he happens to glance casually into Kurtz’s cabin; it is empty. Earlier, Kurtz’s adoring tribesmen had tried to prevent his being taken away from them onto the steamboat; but now it appears that Kurtz’s need for his tribesmen is equally imperious. He has gone back on his own. ... [Marlow] quietly goes ashore to bring Kurtz back again; and he finds him crawling “on all-fours” towards the ritual fires, and the nearest black sorcerer with antelope horns on his head. Atavistic regression could hardly go further; a man crawling like an animal to be worshipped by followers in the ceremonial guise of animals.

The issue is clear. Marlow must determine whether wilderness and darkness have an invincible power over man’s moral being; and so he begins to struggle for Kurtz’s soul. Believing that Kurtz could only have been lured back by “the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts, by the memory of gratified and monstrous passions,” ... Marlow tries to counter them. When he tells Kurtz that unless he comes back “You will be lost ... utterly lost,” it is “a flash of inspiration”—presumably because Kurtz cannot bear to lose the other glories that he imagines he can still win at home; and so, believing that he can still add to his triumphs, Kurtz allows himself to be supported quietly back to the steamboat. (pp. 231-32)

In addition to Kurtz’s main thematic importance as the supreme exhibit of the dialectic between progress and atavism, he also represents the extreme position in several other dualities. Two have already been taken up: Kurtz stands for liberation as opposed to restraint, and for words as opposed to work. Another polarity, that which opposes belief to hollowness, is perhaps to be regarded as a corollary of the work/words dualism; in any case Kurtz is obviously intended as the climactic example of the inner moral void which Marlow has found in all the representatives of Western progress. (p. 233)
Kurtz is essentially one vast indiscriminate appetite, and his greed does not allow him to face the contradiction between the atavistic desires he has appeased in the wilderness and those with which he had set out from Europe—his dreams "of lying fame, of sham distinction, of all the appearances of success and power." ... It is almost entirely of these last—the rewards of civilisation and progress—that Kurtz talks to Marlow. ... Even in his final twilight Kurtz mouths the moral platitudes of his civilisation like an automaton; but they remain totally unconnected with the realities of his life. (pp. 234-35)

The final gasping anaphora of "The horror! The horror!" strains rather hard for its effect; but it embodies three effective ironies. First, that on the only occasion that Kurtz’s voice loses its preternatural resonance, it should also express the truth about his deeds; second, that Kurtz should so neatly exemplify in this drastic stylistic simplification the utter contradiction between the rhetoric and the reality of progress; and lastly, that this simplification should also break so completely with the note of consolatory serenity which is traditional for deathbed utterances in fiction. (p. 236)

But the main object of Kurtz’s condemnation is surely himself, and what he has done; his dying whisper pronounces rejection of the Faustian compact with the wilderness which had "sealed his soul to its own." ... His final cry can only be judged, as Marlow judges it, "an affirmation, a moral victory," ... if it constitutes an acknowledgment of the horror of his former deeds. Even so, that Kurtz’s "judgment upon the adventures of his soul on this earth" should be presented by Marlow as a significant moral victory seems a little unconvincing today, and its force largely depends on the intellectual atmosphere of the late nineteenth century. The question had been raised, in many forms, whether the universe is, as Dostoevsky’s Ivan Karamazov thinks, a fabric of meaningless cruelty in which "everything is lawful." Kurtz’s whole career seemed to support this view: he acknowledged no internal or external restraint; but Marlow’s worst doubts are set at rest when this "being to whom I could not appeal in the name of anything high or low" ... makes a final judgment which is "the expression of some sort of belief"; ... and without some ethical belief, Kurtz’s judgment would have no logical basis. (pp. 236-37)

The most consistent clue to Marlow’s psychological state during his journey up the river is probably the way he often recalls it in terms of dream and nightmare. The journey surely was, for Marlow as it had been for Conrad, a nightmare in a common usage of the term: an experience in which the individual’s thoughts and actions are dominated by a terrifying and inexplicable sense of personal helplessness. Marlow also expresses the main content of his experience in the traditional terms of a fairy-tale hero’s arduous, dangerous, and mysterious quest. ... The analogies of nightmare and fairy tale suggest two traditional metaphors for the process whereby Marlow is unconsciously impelled to create a fantasy Kurtz: he needs a magic helper or at least a secret sharer, in any case a person who will fill the need that isolated adults as well as solitary children can feel for someone who will give them unconditional help or total personal reciprocity.

These unspoken hopes are dashed as soon as Marlow arrives at the inner station. Kurtz has not been able to deal with isolation in the wilderness; his artlessness and his claims to virtue are shams; and his behaviour to others has not been better than that of the pilgrims, but much worse. The "universal genius" has turned into an inflated version of their greedy and callous egoism. The only problem, then, is to explain why, despite his total disillusionment, Marlow’s "loyalty" to Kurtz continues until, and beyond, his death.

Outwardly, Marlow’s behaviour is still constrained by the fact that everyone else identifies him with Kurtz; and once he has pledged his word first to the Russian, and then to the dying man himself, he is forced to defend Kurtz’s memory. His own feelings are no doubt mixed and unclear even to himself; but the evidence is consistent in showing that as soon as Marlow has come into contact with Kurtz, his behaviour can reasonably be explained primarily as the result of commitments over which he had little control. (pp. 240-41)

The Kurtz-Marlow relationship is certainly anomalous, but it is distinctly less so in the context of Conrad’s own characteristics as a novelist. He usually sees relationships between individuals not as essentially personal, but as parts of a larger structure in which—as is surely true of Heart of Darkness—chance, occasion, occupational activities, and general attitudes toward the physical and moral world, have enormous determining power, and allow very little autonomy to the wishes of the individual concerned. There is great psychological truth in the way that Conrad shows how the autonomy of one individual’s actions can be unexpectedly, involuntarily, and yet imperatively, preempted by the contingencies imposed by the larger forces in which his personal relationships are set. This psychological truth, in turn, reflects Conrad’s larger aim, which is to make Marlow enact both the ambiguities and the defeats which attend the individual’s effort to build up, live by, and share with others, his vision of good and evil. ... After Kurtz’s death, two-thirds of the way through the last section, Marlow’s narrative moves very rapidly through his illness, his return to Europe, and the settlement of his various affairs concerning Kurtz. Only one episode is given in any detail, that of the lie to Kurtz’s Intended. It is very widely agreed that the scene is treated in a rather strained, melodramatic, and repetitive way, with little of the convincing detail which had generated the evocative power of the earlier major scenes. ... (p. 241)

[When] Marlow finally sees the Intended, he senses her "mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering," ... and realises once again he is being confronted with a constrained choice.

At first Marlow allows the Intended’s praises of Kurtz to run on, with guarded silence or ambiguous assent his only reaction. For instance, when she says, "it was impossible to know him and not to admire him," Marlow merely answers, "unsteadily," that "he was a remarkable man." At one point the Intended’s confident and self-flattering delusions about Kurtz anger Marlow, but the feeling soon subsides "before a feeling of infinite pity." ... Finally, the Intended asks Marlow for "His last word—to live with." There is a pause, in which Marlow hears the whisper of "The horror! The horror!" ringing in his ears; and then he controls himself and slowly gives the Intended a version of Kurtz’s last oral performance of the kind she expects: "The last word he pronounced was—your name." (p. 243)

There are, then, all kinds of particular pressures, none of them difficult to explain, which cause Marlow’s "lie"; and he can hardly be blamed for it, especially if one considers how universally the world is pervaded by customary practices such as Marlow here follows. That they are, incidentally, practices
which society has sound reason to exonerate from reprobation, is suggested by the hallowed metaphor—itself highly appropriate to Conrad’s main symbolic polarity—of the white lie. (pp. 243-44)

Many other themes of *Heart of Darkness* are also “locked in” to the climactic scene with the Intended. Marlow, for instance, exhibits his much-taxed restraint when he masters his anger at the delusions of the Intended; hollowness is present in the Intended’s posture of faithfulness to the memory of a sham whom she never really knew; and the dualism of atavism and progress is very obviously emphasised when memories of Kurtz’s savage rites and his native mistress penetrate Marlow’s mind while the Intended talks on “as thirsty men drink”... about the loss to humanity of Kurtz’s “generous mind.” In effect, the final scene locks in all the earlier “secondary notions” except that of work, under the large general conception of the lie. (p. 246)

He lies for many reasons: to honour his commitment to the nightmare of his choice by preserving the decency of Kurtz’s memory; to spare the Intended’s feelings, and therefore his own; but also because whatever system of belief he may have attained has too dubious and private a status in his own thoughts to be presented as an effective alternative to the illusions of the Intended. Marlow never feels certain that his own truth is not an illusion; and in this he reflects Conrad, who was always prone to refer to most abstract philosophical terms—like truth, ideals, principles, reality—as illusions. He used the term in a rather wide and undefined sense to assert, not so much that they are untrue as that they are unfounded, impermanent, unprovable, or uncertain. (pp. 247-48)

Conrad’s frequent use of the word illusion is a sign of a philosophical scepticism which would obviously inhibit him from attempting to define the intellectual basis of his own practical human commitments; but this does not undermine, and indeed it may even strengthen, the conviction that although the sceptical mind knows that all ideological structures are really illusions, they may in practice be necessary restraints upon human egoism, laziness, or despair.

Marlow’s behaviour in *Heart of Darkness* reflects this dual attitude. His awareness of the fragility and the intellectual hollowness of civilisation inhibits him in his dealings with others; his usual comportment is one of sceptical passivity; even his sympathy is uneasy and reserved, as in the scene with the Intended. Her grandiose illusions about Kurtz gradually force Marlow to go from taut acquiescence to more positive violation of the truth. Thus when the Intended stops her eulogy of Kurtz with “But you have heard him! You know!”... Marlow replies, “Yes, I know.” Then, “with something like despair in [his] heart,” he bows his head before the Intended’s “great and saving illusion that shone with an unearthly glow in the darkness, in the triumphant darkness from which I could not have defended her—from which I could not even defend myself.”

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 had better be cherished.

At the end of the scene we are left wondering whether it is worse that the ideals of the Intended should continue in all their flagrant untruth, or that Marlow should have been unable to invoke any faith in whose name he could feel able to challenge them. To put the alternatives in terms of the main symbolic polarity of *Heart of Darkness* as a whole: which perspective is more alarming? that people such as the Intended should be so blinded by their certitude of being the bearers of light that they are quite unaware of the darkness that surrounds them? or, on the other hand, that those who, like Marlow, have been initiated into the darkness, should be unable to illumine the blindness of their fellows to its omnipresence? (pp. 248-49)

Until Marlow confronts the Intended, the general development of the ramifying symbolic contrasts between light and darkness has been fairly easy to transpose into the terms which define the intellectual perspective that he has acquired as a result of his Congo experience. It can be summarised along the following lines: the physical universe began in darkness, and will end in it; the same holds for the world of human history, which is dark in the sense of being obscure, amoral, and without purpose; and so, essentially, is man. Through some fortuitous and inexplicable development, however, men have occasionally been able to bring light to this darkness in the form of civilisation—a structure of behaviour and belief which can sometimes keep the darkness at bay. But this containing action is highly precarious, because the operations of darkness are much more active, numerous, and omnipresent, both in society and in the individual, than civilised people usually suppose. They must learn that light is not only a lesser force than darkness in power, magnitude, and duration, but is in some way subordinate to it, or included within it; in short, that the darkness which Marlow discovers in the wilderness, in Kurtz and in himself, is the primary and all-encompassing reality of the universe. (pp. 249-50)

There is nothing particularly new in the idea that darkness is the primal reality to which all else in the world is posterior in origin and subordinate in power. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, for example, the idea is embodied at the cosmic level in the book of Genesis, where “darkness was upon the face of the earth” in the beginning of things. The Western religious tradition as a whole makes light not the rule but the exception; it is the result of a beneficent divine intervention, which may be temporary and is certainly not bestowed unconditionally.

This transcendental view of the world is very difficult to embody in narrative... In *Heart of Darkness* this quasi-transcendental perspective is most obviously apparent in its language: such words as “unspeakable,” “inconceivable,” “inscrutable,” and “nameless” are really an attempt—on the whole unsuccessful—to make us go beyond the limits of ordinary cognition, to transcend what Conrad or anybody else really knows. The ensuing sense of rhetorical strain is particularly marked in the passages dealing with Kurtz, where Marlow uses the language of ethical absolutes, although there is no reason to believe that he accepts any conceptual structure on which they might depend. (pp. 250-51)

In the last pages of *Heart of Darkness* there is a final variation on the values associated with whiteness and light... In the falling dusk, the Intended, all in mourning black, dedicates her soul, “as transluently pure as a cliff of crystal,”... to the memory of Kurtz; to Marlow her “great and saving illusion” shines with “an unearthly glow”;... and, although the Intended is illumined by “the unextinguishable light of belief
and love,” Marlow tells us that “with every word spoken the room was growing darker.”

Light has been degraded to a cold and artificial brightness—it can no longer combat darkness; while whiteness has become some diseased albino mutation, capable, no doubt, of producing the cold phosphorescent glow of idealism, but sick and pallid indeed. . . . We seem to have moved from a realisation of the overwhelming power of darkness in the psychological, moral, and spiritual realm, to a larger and intangible change of a metaphysical kind, in which light seems to have a peculiar affinity with unnaturalness, hypocrisy, and delusion, and to be quite as contrary to the positive values of human life as the worst manifestations conventionally attributed to darkness. (pp. 251-52)

But these negative views are surely too absolute: Marlow’s tale, and the story as a whole, are not entirely, or even mainly, self-referential—its sepulchral city and its Africa are seen through Marlow’s eyes, but they are places full of real horrors. What makes reading Heart of Darkness so unforgettable is surely the harrowing power with which Conrad conveys us to the essential reality of everything that Marlow sees and feels at each stage of his journey. Nor can Conrad’s social and moral purport be regarded as ultimately nihilist . . . ; Marlow’s positives—work and restraint, for instance—make a less impressive appearance in the narrative than do all the negatives which he discovers; but Marlow’s defences are firmly present in the stubborn energy and responsibility of his daily activities. Of course, no very flattering or sanguine view of man’s behaviour and prospects emerges from Heart of Darkness, and it must have seemed grotesquely pessimistic to its original readers. It surely seems a good deal less so eighty years later, except to those who have had a very blinkered view of the century’s battlefields. In any case, neither Conrad nor Marlow stands for the position that darkness is irresistible; their attitude, rather, is to enjoin us to defend ourselves in full knowledge of the difficulties to which we have been blinded by the illusions of civilisation. (pp. 252-53)


C. P. SARVAN (essay date 1980)

[Sarwan believes that Chinua Achebe (1977) misinterpreted Conrad’s intentions in the depiction of Africa and Africans in Heart of Darkness. In the following excerpt, Sarvan points out that any discussion of the work must take Conrad’s use of irony into account and contends that Achebe erroneously confused the voice of Marlow with that of Conrad. While Sarvan concludes that Conrad was not free of the prejudices of his time, he nonetheless views Heart of Darkness as the earliest sincere attempt to break away from racist-imperialist beliefs. For a similar reading, see the Hunt Hawkins entry in the Additional Bibliography. The role of Africa and Africans in Heart of Darkness is also discussed in the excerpts by Harold R. Collins (1954), Cedric Watts (1977), and Ian Watt (1979).]

Conrad’s setting, themes, and his triumph in writing major literature in his third language, have won him a special admiration in the non-European world. . . . But African readers are also checked by, and disconcerted at, works such as The

Nigger of the “Narcissus” and Heart of Darkness. The case against the latter was most strongly made by Chiuua Achebe [see excerpt above, 1977]. . . . He argued that Conrad sets up Africa “as a foil to Europe, a place of negations . . . in comparison with which Europe’s own state of spiritual grace will be manifest.” . . . Africa is “the other world,” “the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man’s vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality.” . . . Achebe commented on Conrad’s comparison of the Congo and the Thames, and also alleged that the contrast made between the two women who loved Kurtz, one African, the other European, is highly prejudiced. Any sympathy expressed for the sufferings of the black African under colonialism, argued Achebe is a sympathy born of a kind of liberalism which whilst acknowledging distant kinship, repudiates equality. Conrad, continued Achebe, is a “racist” and great art can only be “on the side of man’s deliverance and not his enslavement; for the brotherhood and unity of all mankind and not for the doctrines of Hitler’s master races or Conrad’s ‘rudimentary souls.’” . . . Achebe concluded his attack on Heart of Darkness by describing it as “a book which parades in the most vulgar fashion prejudices and insults from which a section of mankind has suffered untilled agonies and atrocities in the past and continues to do so in many ways and many places today. I am talking about a story in which the very humanity of black people is called in question. It seems to me totally inconceivable that great art or even good art could possibly reside in such unworthy surroundings.” . . . (p. 6)

I shall in the following pages attempt to narrowly limit myself to an examination of the charge of racism brought against Conrad’s Heart of Darkness. Let us begin with the fictional Marlow whose story was once heard and is now related by a fictional narrator. . . . Marlow’s portrait is drawn with quiet irony and, at times, a mocking humor which denotes “distance” between creator and character. For example, he is described as resembling an idol and he sits like a European Buddha without the lotus. Marlow claims to be deeply, almost pathologically averse to telling lies but we find that he varicaties at least twice within this tale. He condemns the Roman conquerors and contrasts it with the “superior” European colonialism. . . . [However, the] story shows that the European colonial conquest, contrary to Marlow’s claims, was much worse than that of the Romans. One remembers that harrowing description of men waiting to die. . . . Immediately after this description, Marlow meets the elegant, perfumed, “hairdresser’s dummy” and confesses that he “respected his collars,” the collars of a man who comes out “to get a breath of fresh air,” indifferent to the despair and death by which he is surrounded. It may be argued that Marlow is here speaking with irony and the description “hairdresser’s dummy” may appear to make Marlow’s attitude to the dummy as clear and unequivocal. But Marlow continues with unmistakable admiration that “in the great demoralization of the land he kept up his appearance. That’s backbone.” . . . He kept up appearances, and that points to one of the important thematic significances of this work, namely, the discrepancy between appearance and reality; between assumption and fact; between illusion and truth. Thus it is not correct to say that Marlow has Conrad’s complete confidence, and even more incorrect to say that Conrad believed Europe to be in a state of grace. The glorious sailors proudly cited by Marlow were pirates and plunderers. This ironic distance between Marlow and Conrad should not be overlooked though the narrative method makes it all too easy. Nor can Conrad’s very forceful criticisms of colonialism be lightly passed over as weak liberalism. What ships unload in
Africa are soldiers and customhouse clerks: the one to conquer and the other to administer and efficiently exploit. The cannon pounds a continent and “the merry dance of death and trade goes on.” . . . This “rapacious and pitiless folly” attempts to pass itself off as philanthropy, and to hypocritically hide its true nature under words such as enemies, criminals, and rebels. . . . The counterparts of enemies, criminals, and rebels are the emissaries of light, such as KURTZ!

As a critic has pointed out, “Africa per se is not the theme of Heart of Darkness, but is used as a locale symbol for the very core of an ‘accursed inheritance.’” At the risk of oversimplification, the story may be seen as an allegory, the journey ending with the sombre realization of the darkness of man’s heart. But it may prove emotionally difficult for some to follow the allegory when it is thought that Conrad, casting about for an external parallel, for a physical setting to match the inner darkness, chose Africa. . . . When the Romans looked down upon the people of Britain, and the Europeans upon “natives,” it was because they felt they had achieved a much higher civilization than the people they were confronting and conquering. The contempt was not on grounds of race itself, and Conrad suggests that Europe’s claim to be civilized and therefore superior, needs earnest reexamination. The reference in Heart of Darkness is not to a place (Africa), but to the condition of European man; not to a black people, but to colonialism. The crucial question is whether European “barbarism” is merely a thing of the historical past. Surely the contrast between savage African and “civilized” European, in the light of that greedy and inhuman colonialism, is shown to be “appearance” rather than reality. The emphasis, the present writer would suggest, is on continuity, on persistence through time and peoples, and therefore on the fundamental oneness of man and his nature. If a judgment has to be made, then uncomplicated “savagery” is better than the “subtle horrors” manifested by almost all the Europeans Marlow met on that ironic voyage of discovery. When Marlow speaks of the African in European service as one of the “reclaimed,” it’s grim irony for he has been reclaimed to a worse state of barbarism. Left to itself, Africa has a “greatness” that went “home to one’s very heart.”

As Marlow begins his story, the light changes as though “stricken to death by the touch of that gloom brooding over a crowd of men”: . . . yet the gloom is very much over the Thames as well. The Thames as “a waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth” . . . is connected with and therefore a part of those uttermost ends. The river signifies what is abiding in nature, in man, and in the nature of man, even as “the sea is always the same” . . . and foreign shores and foreign faces are veiled not by mystery but by ignorance.

The immaculately dressed, fastidious, and sensitive hairdresser’s dummy, a representative of civilized Europe and a part of the colonial machinery, is totally insensitive to the suffering he helps to cause and by which he is surrounded. (His extreme cleanliness is perhaps to be seen as compulsive, an attempt to keep clean in the midst of that moral dirt.) Even in the case of Kurtz, one must remember that all Europe had “contributed” to his making. . . . As for pagan rites and savage dances, the Europeans with “imbecile rapacity” were “praying” to ivory, that is, to materialism, and one red-haired man “positively danced,” bloodthirsty at the thought that he and the others “must have made a glorious slaughter” of the Africans in the bush. . . . The alleged primitiveness of the boilerman only serves to show the similarity between his appearance and the actions of the “civilized.”

Achebe also noted that Kurtz’s African mistress is the “savage counterpart to the refined, European woman.” . . . But the European woman is pale and rather anemic whilst the former, to use Conrad’s words, is gorgeous, proud, superb, magnifici- trage, fierce, and filled with sorrow. . . . She is an impressive figure and, importantly, her human feelings are not denied. The contrast, however, is not simply between these two, but between Kurtz’s African mistress on the one hand, and Marlow’s aunt and Kurtz’s “Intended” on the other. The aunt glibly believes that he who goes to the Congo is “a lower sort of apostle.” . . . The hairdresser’s dummy, we recall, was first taken to be “a sort of vision.” . . . The same ignorance and the same illusions are found at the end, in Kurtz’s Intended. After all, he was also one of those apostles. The darkness which is often mentioned, refers not only to the darkness within man, to the mysterious and the unpredictable, but also to ignorance and illusions: it is significant that as Marlow talks with Kurtz’s Intended, the “darkness deepened.” . . . The African woman faces the truth and endures the pain of her dereliction, whilst the illusions of the two European women are also the fond illusions of European society.

This is not to claim that Conrad was free of all prejudice, nor to deny that he has wholly resisted the temptation to use physical appearance and setting as indicators of nonphysical qualities. Conrad reflects to some degree the attitudes of his age, and his description of the fireman as a dog in a parody of breeches, is cruel. On the one hand, in terms of technological progress, the gap between London and the Congo was immense; on the other, though it is extreme to say that Conrad called into question the very humanity of the African, one’s perspective and evaluation of this work need alteration. (pp. 7-9)

Conrad too was not entirely immune to the infection of the beliefs and attitudes of his age, but he was ahead of most in trying to break free. (p. 10)


ADDITIONAL BIBLIOGRAPHY


Biography emphasizing the ways Conrad’s life affected his works. Conrad’s literary aims, artistic and financial successes, family and personal problems, friends and collaborators, and the influence of these elements on his work are examined. Baines also includes many passages quoted from Conrad’s letters, an appendix translating letters written in French, and passages from Conrad’s diary.


Finds that Heart of Darkness demonstrates a philosophy of scientific naturalism. Benson believes Conrad depicted a universe indifferent to humans, making use of evolutionary theory to account for subhuman social and biological origins as well as the brutality of a piously blind civilization that endangered itself by “assaulting” unexplored areas.

Important early study of Conrad's literary artistry, treating all his novels as a unified artistic achievement. Crankshaw does not dwell upon isolated aspects of the works, but rather on the author as a craftsman. The book includes a discussion of Heart of Darkness.


Posits that Heart of Darkness is a form of dream narrative that conveys many of Conrad's deepest personal traumas and misgivings.


Contends that Heart of Darkness was inspired by the Congo experiences of Conrad. Curle, Conrad's longtime friend, introduces an extract from Conrad's diary illustrating the striking similarity between his real-life and fictional voyages.


Critical survey. The book includes a chapter on Heart of Darkness in which Daleski discusses Marlow as protagonist-narrator, the ambiguity of the dark and light imagery, and the meaning of Marlow's lie.


Includes the novella, historical information, extracts from Conrad's diary, and critical interpretations.


Discusses darkness, the wilderness, and death as primary images in the novel. Dudley interprets the story as a moral adventure in which each image helps convey meaning.


Discusses the innovative nature of Conrad's works and his attitude toward his creations.


Chronological survey of Conrad's career that provides thematic associations between his work and his life. The section on Heart of Darkness distinguishes the author's artistic method from his symbolic language.


Discussion of Conrad's ambiguity about imperialism. Hawkins concludes that Conrad was opposed to the cruelty of imperialism, but not the ideal.


Limited agreement with Chinua Achebe and others. While Hawkins finds derogatory references to Africans in the work, he also points out instances of complimentary remarks and contends that it is the European who is treated unsympathetically. Hawkins concludes that the liberal attitudes demonstrated in the work were much ahead of their time.


Challenges the charge that Conrad's works were without humor. In the chapter "The Whole in the Bottom of the Pail: Comedy and Theme in Heart of Darkness," Hoffman points out absurd scenes in the midst of tragedy, likening this use of comedy to the style of burlesque and farce.


Discusses the relationship between Conrad’s artistic method and his personal recollections by an early translator of Conrad's works into French. While Jean-Aubry supplies evidence to support the contention that Conrad based Heart of Darkness on actual situations and people from his Congo experience, he believes that the elevation of the facts and the human insight in the story were supplied by Conrad's "individual genius."


Detailed critical biography. This highly regarded, exhaustive study includes information regarding the milieu in which each of Conrad's works was written, the relationship between Conrad's inconsistent temperament and his production, and the influence of friends and collaborators on his production.


Includes text of Heart of Darkness, background information, extracts from Conrad's letters and diary that relate to the novella, a bibliography, and criticism.


Examines the degree to which Kurtz was or was not a true idealist before his Congo experience.


Similarities and disparities between Conrad's work and two later treatments of the same subject—Francis Ford Coppola's film Apocalypse Now and the novella *The Porcupine to San Cristobal of A.H.* by George Steiner.


Examines the success of the final scene of Heart of Darkness. McLaughlan contends that the success of the novella is dependent upon Conrad's portrayal of Marlow's meeting with Kurtz's fin'ancee. This essay also includes a discussion of previous interpretations of Marlow's lie and its success or failure.


Authoritative psychoanalytical approach to Conrad and his works. This controversial work discusses the effects of the author's physical and mental illnesses, personal relationships, and general temperament on what Meyer believes are highly autobiographical works.


Comprehensive biography. The first Conrad biography by a Pole, the book reinterprets the myths and facts about the author and discusses his works individually, without attempting to subsume them under any single theory regarding Conrad's ideas or beliefs. It is also the first work on Conrad to succinctly examine his feelings about Poles and Poland.


Discussion of how important attention to detail is in understanding the story. Ridley examines earlier criticism and demonstrates the failure of many critics to give equal emphasis to all parts and groups of characters in Heart of Darkness, a technique she believes is essential to understanding the work.


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