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**Entering *Heart of Darkness* from a
Postcolonial perspective -
Teaching Notes**

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Entering *Heart of Darkness* from a Postcolonial perspective: Teaching Notes

It is radical perversity, not sage political wisdom that drives the intriguing will to knowledge of postcolonial discourse. Why else do you think the long shadow of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* falls on so many texts of the postcolonial pedagogy?

Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*

The aim of this paper is twofold. First, it contains a description how *Heart of Darkness* can be used in the definition and discussion of the terms imperialism and civilization. Second, it describes a pattern of analysis based on the novella that is particularly relevant for postcolonial studies. Thus the novella, together with a selection of source material, serves both to give the historical and factual background necessary for the study of New Literatures in English and to provide the students with an analytical model that may be applied to other books in their reading list.

In all kinds of postcolonial studies the concepts of *Empire* and *Civilization* will necessarily be central. The fact that *Heart of Darkness* is universally considered the most powerful indictment of colonialism ever written makes it particularly valuable as an introductory text. Also, there is no other work of fiction, to my knowledge, that more efficiently brings out the allegorization of Empire. Conrad, as Edward Said puts it, "allows the reader to see that imperialism is a system" (Said xxi). What redeems "the taking /the earth/ away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves" is "the idea only," according to Marlow (140-141). The consequences of such an unconditional belief in the concept of Empire are brought to the fore, and as a whole the story demonstrates that the very idea of imperialism in itself is nothing but "the strangest of all political anomalies" (Boehmer 12, quoting Thomas Babington Macaulay). At the same time, though, as Frances B. Singh reminds us, in an essay from 1906, "The Weight of the Burden," Conrad speaks of colonialism as a religion, calling it a "sacred fire" (Singh 279). On the other hand a religious but non-literary specialist on Africa in the 1890s, General Booth of the Salvation Army, did not hesitate to draw the parallel with his own country, a comment that must have been shocking at the time:

[w]hile brooding over the awful presentation of life as it exists in the vast African forest, it seemed to me only too vivid a picture of many parts of our own land. As there is a darkest Africa, is there not a darkest England? Civilization, which can breed its own barbarians, does it not also breed its own pygmies? May we not find a parallel at our own doors, and discover within a stone's throw of our cathedrals and palaces similar horrors to those which Stanley found existing in the great Equatorial forest (Booth 11-12).

Thanks to its historical and thematic focus, Conrad's novella makes an excellent textual reference for a wide range of postcolonial novels. J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*, André Brink's *An Instant in the Wind*, David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* and *An Imaginary Life*, Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, Patrick White's *Voss* and *A Fringe of Leaves*, or Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* are just a few examples of titles suitable for this kind of approach. Despite their literary, geographical and cultural diversity, these authors, like Conrad, emphasize the importance of constructing anti-imperialist attitudes within a personal, particular and culturally specific context – a process which involves the experience of alien territory on home ground in order to question, analyse, negotiate and re-define assumptions about identity. Just as in these texts, and General Booth's statement above, *Heart of Darkness* presents the double-frontier dilemma, the issues of alienship and otherness in conflict with a sense of individual, political or national identity and responsibility. Marlow's sense of double loyalties to his country on the one hand and to his idealistic credo on the other is, as in a number of postcolonial texts, illustrated by geographical symbols of nationhood, maps, frontiers, fences and borderlines connected with an unspecified sense of lethal threat.

The notion of empire is also the focus of Richard Waswo's recently published study, *The Founding Legend of Western Civilization*. He argues that the legend of colonisation with its presumed facts and acknowledged fiction, from the siege of Troy to the 20th century is continually being retold in new versions and also, regrettably, re-enacted. Like *Heart of Darkness*, Waswo's book can be read as an impeachment of all Western civilization from the Romans onwards. It can actually serve as a non-fiction companion-piece, excellent as a running commentary to *Heart of Darkness*. Just as Waswo's study is subtitled "From Virgil to Vietnam," modern Conradian criticism might adequately be summarized "From the *Aeneid* to *Apocalypse Now*."

Waswo's message is that, obviously, mankind is unable to learn from historical experience. In the Swedish media we have recently had a heated debate initiated by the fact that politicians, journalists and school authorities are appalled by the poor knowledge among present-day school children about the Holocaust. The Prime Minister has personally emphasised that there is no excuse for their ignorance. A number of concrete measures are now taken to teach Swedish children more about the outrages of the thirties and forties. A pertinent, or maybe impertinent, question to ask our undergraduates would be: How much do young people in general reflect on events that took place fifty years ago? How much did today's politicians who went to school in the 40s and 50s learn at school about atrocities that took place half a century before? What did they know about racism, massacres, and general "scramble for loot" in the colonies, the cruel slaughter at Omdurman, or slave trade in the Congo? What did they learn from Conrad and other writers? Provocative opinions concerning the White Man's Burden are expressed for instance by Mrs. Travers in Conrad's "The

Rescue" and equally emphasized in "An Outpost of Progress" concerning the attitude against 'the lower races' preventing the progress of so-called civilization. Waswo's study and Conrad's novella both serve to highlight the fact that the process of perpetual colonization necessarily seems to involve racist and imperialist tendencies.

The *Aeneid* became the verbal expression of the ideology described by Waswo, the tenet that even today constitutes the motivation of post-imperial Western establishment and policies of expansion. The parallels between Aeneas arriving in Latium, assuming power over the autochthonous population, the 'barbarians,' is described in the eighth song of the *Aeneid* in much the same terms as Conrad's rendering of imperial manifestations in the Africa of his time. *Heart of Darkness* illustrates the Western attitude of us vs. them, described by Waswo as follows:

We can sink; but there's never even the possibility of their rising — by themselves... They have no language and no past, unless we give them ours; and that is the effort at which Kurtz, whom Marlow calls "childish" more than once, fails (Waswo 263).

The established image of civilization is the city of urban refinement and the world is seen as directed from a colonial metropolis. The story of the civilizing process originating from the city is traditionally structured as a journey, presented as a design or a historical event that is perceived as unavoidable, and in which the hero and quester may seem strangely passive (Waswo 25). Aeneas, like Marlow, is described as loyal to some kind of master plan, and compassionate to suffering people, a typical "worrier" (Waswo 27). He, too, becomes the representative of a whole civilization and its empire conveying his own ideas of a society of settled hierarchies, his mission aiming at a transformation from wilderness to garden. The indigenous peoples, in his view, are ignorant, totally identified with their own landscape. They have no acceptable social conventions, and they do not sow and plant, but live by gathering and hunting. The *Aeneid*, however, also intimates that any society of sophisticated agriculture and walled-in cities would provoke violence, war and destruction (Waswo 35). Parallels with postcolonial novels like Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* or Atwood's *Surfacing* can be drawn.

In many respects it is possible to see Marlow as a modern Aeneas and his arrival in Africa as that of a cultural apostle and a bringer of light. As in all colonizing contexts, imposing the language of the invader's superior culture becomes coterminous with civilizing. Invaders mark their possession by their speech, and in advance Marlow is looking forward to hearing Kurtz's voice rather than seeing him. To the traditional colonisers the frontier became a threshold of commercial activity instead of a physical or political boundary. It is interesting to note that ivory, which becomes the central image of exploitation in *Heart of Darkness* occurs in the *Aeneid* too with the connotations of something false and unnatural. Characteristically, it is emphasized that in all trading the savages do not control the production. Nor do they know how to cultivate their own land. Agriculture and trade are considered synonymous with culture, a prerequisite for civilization: "We are the culture-bringers in two senses: we bring it to them... and once we're installed where they are, we bring them to it" (Waswo 93).

Conrad's story and Waswo's study illustrate that the legend of *Heart of Darkness* is both timeless and historically transportable. What the Europeans found in Africa was once European reality: the barbarians are what we were not so long ago.

The first words uttered by Marlow define Britain as one-time wilderness, a primitive place which the Romans thought did not even deserve a name (Waswo 100-103). A general observation concerning Western exploitation applies to Conrad's novella and Kurtz's view of the final solution in his manifesto:

The narcissism of our view of the savage could work both ways: to exterminate him (or just let nature do it) as unworthy of us or to try and make him worthy, to encourage him to grow up into agriculture and commerce. Either way, he is seen as the legend defines him, and is otherwise overlooked (Waswo 225).

Thus *Heart of Darkness* serves as an introduction to colonialist literature, thematically concerned with colonial expansion and informed by theories concerning the superiority of Western culture and the rightness of empire, expressing the imperialists' point of view. In the context it is necessary to observe the distinction recently made between post-colonial and postcolonial writing. The former stands for a literary period, largely representing the post-Second World War era, whereas the term postcolonial (without the hyphen) has come to define perspectives in writing in opposition to the Empire. Such writing resists colonialist attitudes in critically scrutinising the relationships between coloniser and colonised (Boehmer 3). In the following discussion the latter aspects will be more relevant than others.

Postcolonial studies necessitate close attention to point of view. In *Heart of Darkness*, the position of the actual writer, the implied author and the first-person narrator is intriguing. Joseph Conrad, the writer and himself a man in exile, is not identical with Conrad the implied author. Nor should he be confused with Marlow, his first-person narrator in spite of all biographical similarities. The triple narratological perspectives raise questions about authenticity, especially as the issues of storytelling, visibility, and truth are thematically foregrounded in the novella itself. It seems to present the characteristic postcolonial story of 'the Other' and 'the periphery' told from within the sanctuary of the dominant colonizing ideology of the West, the secure society Marlow speaks of with the butcher and policeman at the corner (204). At the same time, though, all its ambiguities and inconsistencies work in another direction. It soon becomes clear to the students that *Heart of Darkness* is not just the ordinary story of 'us' and 'them.'

Conrad has been accused of vagueness in his picture of Africa, of not stating his point clearly. Appearances, as critics have noted, are deceptive and inexact. From a postcolonial perspective, though, the fact that the borderlines between centre and periphery, between civilisation and barbarism are blurred contributes to making the book less dogmatic and consequently more trustworthy. It should be remembered that Conrad was never wholly incorporated in English culture, but preserved an ironic distance in all his works. Temperamentally, he belonged to a later period than Kipling, as he was able to perceive colonial possession as more problematic. He was aware of primitive and demoralizing instincts in white Europeans that previously had never been brought into the open. Again point of view is essential and the question has to be asked to what extent the image of Africa presented in the novella is to be trusted. At this point Chinua Achebe's controversial article, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" can be brought into the classroom discussion. It expresses the allegation that in Western psychology there is a desire and indeed a need "to set Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in

comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest." According to Achebe, no book displays that desire better than *Heart of Darkness* (251-252). Edward Said indirectly supports this view when he argues that, paradoxically, by the mere act of telling the story, Marlow in fact repeats and confirms Kurtz's action which in itself implies the restoration to Africa to European hegemony by emphasizing and narrating its otherness.

[Conrad] writes as a man whose Western view of the non-Western world is so ingrained as to blind him to other histories, other cultures, other aspirations. All Conrad can see is a world totally dominated by the Atlantic West, in which every opposition to the West only confirms the West's wicked power. What Conrad cannot see is an alternative to this cruel tautology (Said xix).

After such a general introduction, the classroom discussion will continue with a focus on narratological and paradigmatic aspects, concentrating on the structures of the text rather than the meaning, with special emphasis on the features relevant to postcolonial interpretations. This pattern can be applied on a selection of postcolonial novels such as the ones mentioned in the beginning of this paper. The subsequent analysis aiming at an understanding on increasingly deeper interpretative levels takes, of course, more than one reading of Conrad's novella, but, in my experience, it will facilitate the understanding of the other texts considerably.

The students can easily be convinced that *Heart of Darkness* does not function satisfactorily if it is read on the purely narrative level only. It is also stressed at the beginning of the book that this is not an ordinary seaman's yarn. It is not "typical" it says, which indicates that the story has to be considered on multiple reading levels in order to make sense. This is also suggested precisely by the features that have been most heavily criticized, such as Conrad's alleged lack of precision, his unevenness, his implausible dialogues, and his inability to provide an acceptable and realistic description of the Congo. The reason why critics to a very large extent have misunderstood the text is most likely their failing to pay attention to these various levels of interpretation rather than artistic inability on the part of Conrad. E.M. Forster, we recall, accused Conrad of fogginess. An anonymous critic even claimed about *Heart of Darkness* that "above all this is a tale of cannibalism." Achebe quotes F.R. Leavis's criticism of Conrad's "adjectival insistence upon inexpressible and incomprehensible mystery" (Achebe 253). The students will soon understand that the reason why Conrad's book has received such immense critical attention over the years is not merely the poor quality of his plot. Other dimensions have to be observed. For instance even in the first few pages attention to the emphasis on words denoting light and darkness: *glow*, *haze*, *halo*, *spectral illumination*, and the constellation *brooding gloom* repeated four times prepares the student to note Conrad's consistent use of light-darkness symbolism.

If biographical information is provided it becomes clear that the book is not just a British classic, but actually a foreign intruder in the English canon. Facts about Conrad's family background can be introduced. Russia's imperialistic policies towards Poland, his family's exile, and his own experiences of the Congo, which form a parallel with those of his narrator, can be mentioned. If time allows, passages from his Congo diary, from "A Personal Record," and from *Last Essays* can be offered, describing his admiration for the adventurous, brave, and devoted explorers, who set out

“conquering a bit of truth here and a bit of truth there” (“Geography and Some Explorers” 145). Like Marlow, they were sometimes “swallowed up by the mystery their hearts were so persistently set on unveiling.” This is also what happens in another fictional story based on a historical fact, Patrick White's *Voss*, whose hubristic protagonist is “swallowed up” by the continent he set out to conquer.

At this point the students will have to note the distinction between author and first-person narrator, which is particularly important in cases where the implied author seems more or less identical with the protagonist-narrator. As Conrad states in his “Author’s Note” we have to do with “experience *pushed* a little beyond the actual facts.” Nevertheless, in spite of similarities in the narrative discourse in Conrad's fiction and autobiographical non-fiction, one must maintain, in Zdzislaw Najders's words, that “paying excessive attention to such analogies may be detrimental to a fuller understanding of the story” (Najder 156). Unlike Marlow, Conrad was, it should be pointed out, not British but genuinely European considering his national and political background. From a literary and philosophical aspect, he belongs together with names like Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann, Czeslaw Milosz, and Milan Kundera, who all consider Polish culture as part of Central European tradition. In this sphere, Conradian themes such as sense of responsibility, duty, and faithfulness are recurrent in the discussion of a moral dimension that is basically un-English, ideals that rather make one think of Schopenhauer or Wittgenstein.

The biographical aspects lead to the actual historical situation when Conrad visited the Congo in 1890 and when he wrote his book almost a decade later. As most students will not be sufficiently familiar with the situation in Africa in the late 19th century, information is required about the period as the heyday of imperialism and one of intense rivalry for colonial acquisition. The Berlin conference of 1885 recognized the Congo Free State as the personal property of King Leopold II of Belgium and gave him full control of an area 80 times as big as the mother country. Henry M. Stanley, and his books *Through the Dark Continent* (1878) and *In Darkest Africa* (1890) were widely read and spread idealised versions of the dissemination of civilization and Christianity. Conrad himself describes the “the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration” (“Geography and Some Explorers” 17). The slave trade caused the death of a thousand people per day; 80,000 Africans were brought to the slave markets every year; the population of the Congo was halved. Next to slaves, ivory was the most important ‘merchandise.’ Edward Said claims that the fact that the listeners to Marlow's story on board the *Nellie* are largely drawn from the world of business strikes the note of materialism and greed. This is “Conrad's way of emphasizing the fact that during the 1890s the business of empire, once an adventurous and often individualistic enterprise, had become the empire of business” (Said 25).

If “An Outpost of Progress” is introduced as the pre-study for *Heart of Darkness*, the ironical connotations of words like *barbarian* and *civilization* become increasingly apparent. Marlow for instance, is described as a bringer of light (we recall that the name of Lucifer means exactly that), an apostle “weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways” (149). In other words, his mission can be seen as identical with that of Kurtz, who officially was to write the report for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs.

The irony becomes even more scathing and brutal when Marlow is compared with his much-admired paragons, Sir Francis Drake and Sir John Franklin, knights of the sea, referred to in the beginning of the text. The names of their ships foreshadow

the outcome of Conrad's story. Drake's vessel, the *Golden Hind*, returned to England filled with loot from a cruel and successful expedition, resembling the one that took place in Africa 300 years later. The *Erebus*, Franklin's ship had got its name from Hades and the underworld, the god of darkness, child of Chaos. His second ship, the *Terror*, which is also mentioned, never returned from its expedition. The whole crew, including Franklin, died. Kurtz's exclamation, "the horror, the horror" is a natural association.

These reflections take us to a more general historical level as the names invite such parallels. In the text, the Thames becomes connected with all waterways in the world, including the rivers of Hades. Marlow's first words are uttered as a fragment of an ongoing conversation, whose contents remain unknown to the reader: "And this also ... has been one of the dark places of the earth" (138). In the same way as the Roman conquerors once spread "civilization" to England, Marlow states, the Thames, representing the heart of Empire, has continued to send out her missionaries and explorers to bring light into darkness:

Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame, they all had gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark of the sacred fire. (137)

Here Conrad's irony is built on contrasts between light and darkness, between white and black, between so-called civilization and so-called barbarism. Torches, fires and sunlight are contrasted to shadows, haze and darkness. All builders of empire: missionaries, explorers, traders, soldiers and conquerors, regardless of where they came from, become the targets of Conrad's irony.

It can be noticed that there are very few proper names in the text. This is true about a number of postcolonial texts dealing with civilization as opposed to barbarism, for instance *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *An Imaginary Life*. The listeners on board the *Nellie* are anonymous, Brussels is referred to as the white sepulchral city, Kinchasa "the Central Station," Stanley Falls "the Inner Station," and one can assume that a sense of universality and timelessness is intended. Kurtz is also depicted as a representative of the entire Western civilization. "All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz" (207). In class, this connection will initiate a discussion of the implications of his "unspeakable rites" and "unsound methods." If one reads *Heart of Darkness* as an indictment of imperialism in general considering the political cum moral dimension, Kurtz's conclusion: "Exterminate all the brutes," can be regarded as capitalist exploitation aiming at world hegemony. What shocks loyal, dutiful and civilized Marlow more than anything is not his utter disappointment with "the pilgrims" and "the gang of virtue," but the fact that Kurtz has this fascinating, tempting, and hypnotizing appeal to him, just like the snake-river on the map.

The inference suggested is that every human being subjected to such an extreme exposition, with no existential and social anchorage, might turn into a Kurtz figure. The parallel with William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* often crops up. This novel also describes the force of primitive instincts hidden under a thin layer of cultural varnish. Time and place can vary, but man's selfishness and greed are, obviously, eternal. Like Golding, Conrad has a pessimistic view of man's morality. Christ or Buddha, London, Gravesend, Brussels or Rome, antiquity or *fin de siècle*, temptations, hatred, and evil can never be defeated by what is usually referred to as civilization.

Again the reader will ask, who indeed are the barbarians? In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the disruption of the culture and structure of the Ibo village is brought about by the colonial presence. In Atwood's *Surfacing*, the barbarians the Canadians are waiting for are the Americans, and the threat they experience is becoming americanized themselves.

Early in the novella, Marlow discusses how the individual and society could be saved. Over and over again he returns to the concept of “restraint” and the work ethic: “What saves us is efficiency” (140), he contends, that is hard work, duty and control are the positive values to counteract egotism and evil. The students usually feel that there is something of a surrender, even something narrow-minded and blinkered, in Marlow’s desperate concentration of the bearable and superficial and his avoidance of commitment or openness to dimensions that might affect his whole personality in a rewarding but also very agonizing and radical manner. In this context his negative attitude to people going ashore “for a howl and a dance” (187) can be discussed, possibly with references to White's *A Fringe of Leaves* or Brink's *An Instant in the Wind*.

This aspect leads to the fifth interpretative level on which we consider Marlow's painful passage into the heart of darkness, and his goal, “the Inner Station,” from a psychological aspect. Symbolically the journey can be seen as a Jungian individuation process. Contemporary letters also bear witness of Conrad’s interest in the problem of self-knowledge:

Know thyself. Understand that you are nothing, less than a shadow, more insignificant than a drop of water in the ocean, more fleeting than the illusion of a dream. (CL, 1, 423)

A recurrent theme in his writing is the trial of the individual in a situation of moral isolation leading either to destruction or illumination. The significance of a sense of insight and identity is intimated by titles like “the Second Self,” “the Secret Self,” and the initial title of “the Secret Sharer,” i.e. “the Other Self.” A central theme in *Heart of Darkness* is the issue of a retaining one's moral and philosophical standpoint without the support of friendship or social norms. From his visit to the surgeon who told him to expect changes to take place “inside,” Marlow goes through a gradual loss of illusions. He has to mobilize his capacity for self-control and concentration on “surface reality” in order to escape the terrible truth that Kurtz has discovered, summed up in his last words: “the horror, the horror.” What Marlow had witnessed when he was tempted to “peep over the edge” had proved unbearable.

A word in English on a written page represented by Towson's (or Towser's) *Inquiry into some Points of Seamanship* offers some kind of safety and solace: “Not a very enthralling book; but at the first glance you could see there a singleness of intention, an honest concern for the right way of going to work ...” (189). The scene, as Homi Bhabha has noted, is recurrent in postcolonial writing:

There is a scene in the cultural writings of English colonialism which repeats so insistently after the early nineteenth century — and, through that repetition, so triumphantly *inaugurates* a literature of empire — that I am bound to repeat it once more. It is the scenario, played out in the wild and wordless wastes of

colonial India, Africa, the Caribbean, of the sudden fortuitous discovery of the English book... (Bhabha 102)

Bhabha refers to the phenomenon as "the emblem of the English book," seeing it "as an insignia of colonial authority and a signifier of colonial desire and discipline." He might have added Australia to his list. For instance in Patrick White's *A Fringe of Leaves*, David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* and *An Imaginary Life*, the written words in the language of the colonising power represent the voice of cultural authority. As Bhabha observes, the effect depends on its belatedness: "As a signifier of authority, the English book acquires its meaning after the traumatic scenario of colonial difference, cultural or racial, returns the eye of power to some prior, archaic image or identity" (Bhabha 34).

A distinction is made between those who have the capacity of "restraint" and others. Giving up his "restraint," Kurtz has also let go of the security of surface reality. This has made it possible for him to transgress the borderlines of the unconscious, which civilized Marlow interprets as: "there was something wanting in him" (221). Surprisingly, the starving cannibals on board the steamer show the kind of "restraint" that he appreciates. The Chief Accountant with his pedantic book-keeping, his white cuffs and starched collar, seeks safety behind the disguise of perfection and efficiency. Marlow, himself, finds comfort in the practical manual on seamanship. Its insistence on the reality of knots and ropes offers a counter-force to Kurtz's unspecified barbaric rites. Waswo quotes Conrad's contemporary, the "staunch imperialist" James Anthony Froude who also set great store by the saving power of restraint:

We set it down to slavery. It would be far truer to set it down to freedom. The African blacks have been free enough for thousands ... of years, and it has been the *absence of restraint* which has prevented them from becoming civilized. (Waswo 228, my italics)

Applying a somewhat anachronistic Jungian terminology, one might regard Kurtz as Marlow's shadow, representing the dark side of his personality, his second self, which has to be acknowledged to make him a complete human being. If a person, like Marlow, were to let his subconscious and his conscious self follow separate courses the unavoidable consequence according to Jung would be a neurosis. The Congo experience resulted in just that — for Marlow, as well as for Conrad himself.

Jung also contends that with the help of primitive rites, tabooed in civilized society, the individual can be brought into contact with dark powers in the unconscious. The confrontation can help healing the personality. Marlow is not prepared to pay the price, however. He despises those who go ashore "for a howl and a dance" (187), and at the last moment he withdraws from the experience that he compares to a wrestling match with death (240). The identity between Kurtz and Marlow has been established, though, as Marlow feels that it was Kurtz's "extremity that /he seems/ to have lived through" (241), perceiving Kurtz as his alter ego, an alternative existence. The Congo turns into a river of death and very little remains of the comfort of surface reality and the fulfilment of duty. Outside it was "so beastly, beastly dark" and when they "buried something in a muddy hole" they "very nearly buried me" (240), says Marlow.

Death is clearly present throughout the story. The mention of Gravesend and the Sepulchral City, the lethal snake-river, the grand piano resembling a polished sarcophagus, the allusions to Acheron and Styx suggest mythical/religious readings. As pointed out in the introduction, the *Aeneid* has the function of an infracontext. Associations are triggered by the event of the killed helmsman, the symbolic ivory and the snake image, for instance. As in the *Aeneid* and the *Divine Comedy*, the notion of descent into the underworld is relevant. It is interesting to note that in *A Fringe of Leaves*, Patrick White uses Virgil as a subtext in the setting of the Australian wilderness with a similar function.

In the beginning, the middle and the end of the story Marlow is compared to a Buddha figure in terms that illustrate his mental status. Another feature that underlines the mythical and religious references is the notion of timelessness that is stressed: "going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world" (182). Conrad scholars have also found parallels with the Faustus legend, suggesting that Christopher Marlowe inspired not just the name of Conrad's narrator but also an intertextual relationship. Both stories deal with characters that challenge the powers of the unknown for filthy lucre, who bring disaster to themselves and others and who make a pact with the devil. Marlow finds that Kurtz "had taken a high seat among the devils of the land," and argues that "no fool ever made a bargain for his soul with the devil" (206-7). Kurtz crosses the borderline of the forbidden and turns into a devil, a personification of internal evil. It is also worth noting that Marlow comes across a Mephistopheles of papier maché and that the name of Lucifer carries the double connotations of devil and light-bringer.

In addition there are parallels with the Grail legend and its mythical heroes in search of an object representing ultimate truth and insight, *illuminatio*. Conrad's light-darkness symbolism fits well into the pattern. The legend speaks of a wounded king close to a river who must be saved by the questing hero. In the novella the up-river stations had to be relieved, the situation was "very grave," and Mr. Kurtz was ill (164-165). When Marlow has reached "the farthest point of /his/ navigation," Kurtz becomes his grotesque Grail, compared with "an enchanted princess" (196) who is dangerous to approach. He experiences what might be called a negative illumination: "it threw a *kind of light* on everything" about him (*italics mine*, 141). This illumination, or black, inverted epiphany is too loathsome to be conveyed to the Intended: "It would have been too dark—too dark altogether" (252). Instead Marlow chooses to tell a lie, the same Marlow who said he hated lying because lies belong together with death and corruption.

Finally an interpretation of the title is due. The students are asked to give their opinion, which usually depends on the reading level they prefer to emphasize. Some take 'heart of darkness' to suggest the 'innermost, deepest darkness possible,' others stress the positive connotation of a 'living, beating heart' in the midst of darkness, yet others point to the white/dark dichotomy. The last word in the book is, characteristically, *darkness*. Whatever associations students choose to attach to that word, if they adhere to Conrad's advice and look back on the story they will find that the word has acquired other and more complex connotations than on a first reading. It has different associations on all interpretative levels described, which is just one indication of the richness and complexity of the text.

It is a cliché to state that Conrad, particularly in this book, was ahead of his time in many respects. Suffice it to notice that a century after its publication *Heart of Darkness* continues to serve as a point of reference and a source of inspiration for

writers, who would agree with V.S. Naipaul's view of "Conrad's Darkness." He finds that "Conrad had been everywhere before /him/. Not as a man with a cause, but a man offering a vision of the world's half-made societies ... Dismal but deeply felt: a kind of truth and half a consolation" (Naipaul 233).

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