

SUMMARY

This essay presents an analysis of the several stages Marlow, the main character in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of darkness*, passes by in his search for truth and self-understanding. It also questions the nature and extent of his achievement and success.

RESUMO

Este ensaio apresenta uma análise dos diversos estágios por que passa Marlow, o narrador principal em *Heart of darkness* de Joseph Conrad, na sua busca de verdade e auto-conhecimento. Também questiona a natureza e o sucesso dos resultados dessa busca.

Multiple reasons account for the special appeal a literary text has for the reader. To detect those reasons and explain them is the task of specialized criticism. But, even the common reader is able to see that certain texts are more inviting than others to varied approaches, which is the case of Conrad's *Heart of darkness*. This is the kind of book that can be analysed from a sociological point of view if one's main concern is to explain what European contact meant to a continent like Africa or analyse what can really be found in the roots of colonialism. Or, it can be approached from an eminently psychological standpoint through which the reader will be tempted to follow Marlow's strip to the dark centres of the self and to establish a parallel between a physical trip and a psychological one. Or else, the approach can be historical, in an attempt to have a better understanding of the processes connected with countries economic, political and cultural development.

But, none of these methods, interesting as they may be, is, by itself, to be pursued in this essay. What is intended here is to use as many resources and approaches as necessary to achieve a satisfactory explication of Marlow's search for truth and understanding concerning himself and the world around. How near he gets to self-knowledge and what stages he passes by in the process are aspects that enrich this search and explain a lot about it.

Preoccupation with getting a more careful and exact view of reality is a dominant theme in Conrad's writing. In *Heart of darkness*, Marlow embodies this idea and at the same time reflects

Conrad's personal concern about it. The author himself had been to Africa and, on his return confessed to a friend "Before the Congo I was a mere animal." He was perhaps referring to a somewhat distorted way of seeing the world (before his trip to Africa), which had been replaced by a more reliable perception of life (after the Congo experience).

In *Heart of darkness*, the first narrator sets the tone of the book when he suggests that that particular night on the Thames estuary is pregnant with promises of remembrances of past days, past experiences: "We looked at the venerable stream not in the vivid flush of a short day that comes and departs for ever, but in the august light of abiding memories" (CONRAD, 1986: 28).

To this comment he adds, later on, pieces of information concerning Marlow, the second narrator, indeed the narrator of the Congo experience. It is a significant descriptive piece because it talks of Marlow as not being a typical sailor, but a man of meditative nature, one for whom "the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze..." (30).

The two quotations seem to be complementary and the connection between them is important. The reader can see that on a night and in a place that are evocative of things already done and lived, there is a man in a group of others who is able to bring out the meaning of a tale (even if simply in

\* Departamento de Letras  
FUC/MG

the likeness of a misty halo) by telling that tale to people.

It is tempting to associate a character like this with archetypes such as that of the Wandering Jew or a character such as Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, traditional images of wanderers who go through the world telling a tale. But, such a ready association would lead to a kind of oversimplification that might be misleading to the reader. Unlike them, there is no personal feeling of guilt in Marlow; there is the fascination for the wilderness, a fascination made clear by the comparison of the Congo river with a snake, an animal which often stands for the Tempter that offers the wisdom of the Tree of Knowledge. Marlow acknowledges the fact that the river attracts him as a snake attracts a bird. In this aspect the river = snake carries with it the Biblical implication of an agent of the Fall: "But there was in it one river specially, a mighty big river, that you could see on the map, resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its body at rest curving afar over a vast country, and its tail lost in the depths of the land. And as I looked at the map of it in a shop-window, it fascinated me as a snake would a bird... I went on a long Fleet Street, but could not shake off the idea. The snake had charmed me" (33).

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"And the river was there-fascinating-deadly-like a snake" (36).

But, the tension created by this suggestion of fascination and impending doom is relaxed by the pervading idea that if one is strong enough to survive the attraction of the wilderness, then one is bound to move from darkness into some kind of light. This is not made clear in the text but is given signs of in a number of ways. The doctor that gets the dimensions of Marlow's head before his departure remarks: "... the changes take place inside, you know" (38). The first narrator refers to Marlow's stories as "inconclusive experiences" (32). Marlow himself points out that there is no initiation into the mysteries of the wilderness and that one "has to live in the midst of the incomprehensible" (31). But, he counterpoints these comments by referring to the farthest point of his voyage as being "the culminating point of my experience. It seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me — and into my thoughts. It was sombre enough, too — and pitiful — not extraordinary in any way — not very clear either. No, not very clear. And yet it seemed to throw a kind of light." (32) In the quotations presented in this paragraph two elements are clear: the certainty that experience leads to some kind of insight and the notion that this experience is not a way of achieving absolute truth but rather one of a series of steps on the way towards "a kind of light" (32). That is why Marlow's tales are called "inconclusive": they will be retold again and again

before most of the hidden implications can come to full clarity.

For the reasons given above, it is interesting to observe the way in which Marlow is described

while talking to the other men on board the *Nellie* "... with his legs folded before him, he had the pose of a Buddha preaching in European clothes and without a lotus-flower" (31).

The analogy between Marlow's and Buddha's position refers one back to the comparison between Marlow and wandering characters, such as the Jew and the Mariner and reinforces the idea that the connection in this case is not quite suitable. It would be more accurate, indeed, to think of Buddha in connection with Marlow than of the two characters mentioned above. In the very last paragraph of the book, the first narrator again describes Marlow as sitting in the position of a meditating Buddha and the reader is then reminded that in Buddhism *wandering* symbolizes *samsara*, man's mid-position between birth and death until enlightenment is reached and he can then join the centre, which is *motionless*.

Summing up, Marlow, like the Jew and the Mariner, tells his story to different people on different occasions; unlike them, he may do so to try to come to a better understanding of the experience he had lived and not because he is haunted by guilt. Like Buddha, Marlow has a meditative nature but, unlike him, he does not carry — at least not yet — the lotus-flower, which stands for wisdom and spiritual flowering.

Before his setting off to Africa, Marlow's aunt makes it clear she thinks he is an emissary of light taking progress, culture and civilized values to a backward land. Her words end up by causing a strange and unusual effect: an uncomfortable feeling of being an impostor comes over him. For this reason, it is not surprising that on getting to Africa, his notions concerning the real and the unreal become confused. From such a feeling of confusion there emerges the sensation that whatever belongs to that world is real and whatever is connected with his own world is not genuine, not natural there: "... we passed various places — trading places — with names... that seemed to belong to some sordid farce..." (40). But, there is no feeling of unnaturalness when Marlow observes native life: "Now and then a boat from the shore gave one a momentary contact with reality. It was paddled by black fellows... They shouted, sang; their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks — these chaps; but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement, that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast. They wanted no excuse for being there. They were a great comfort to look at" (40).

To be able to perceive the clash between inative naturalness on one side and "a touch of insanity" (41) on the European side is quite a revelation to Marlow. He can now understand the feeling of imposture he had had before and the idea that no matter what he did he was inevitably part of the misdoings going on in such a situation. That is why one can say that there is no personal sense of guilt haunting Marlow. His is a social guilt, the guilt of belonging to the political group that has the power and that can so devastatingly promote "the merry dance of

death and trade" (41). This again explains why Marlow's story is told: not for penance, but, as an attempt to reach some kind of understanding or, perhaps, to bring some order out of chaos.

When Marlow reaches the Central Station, certain aspects make themselves relevant to the main point of this work. It is important to observe Marlow's recognition that when cut off from familiar surroundings and plunged into primitive and isolated places, man tends to unleash his most secret desires and forget the "external checks" (50) that are in a great measure responsible for his image as a civilized being. Marlow has always believed that work can be redeeming to a human being, not because of the effort in doing it, but because of "what is in the work, -the chance to find yourself" (59). But, as far as Marlow can see, those men out there are not working. Their greed for ivory makes them participants in all kinds of dirty games: "The only real feeling was a desire to get appointed to a trading post where ivory was to be had, so that they could earn percentages. They intrigued and slandered and hated each other on that account — but as to effectually lifting a little finger — oh, no" (54).

The Manager's ineptitude and the Brickmaker's laziness and uselessness are truly representative of the disjointedness between work and ideal in that world. The event witnessed by Marlow, in which a white man tries to extinguish a fire carrying water in a pail with a hole in the bottom, impresses him very much and reinforces the idea presented in this paragraph.

Another relevant aspect in Marlow's arrival at the Central Station has to do with his perception of the temptation the wilderness can be to some people, including himself. In reference to it, Marlow says: "... I wondered whether the stillness on the face of the immensity looking at us two were meant as an appeal or as a menace... Could we handle that dumb thing, or would it handle us?" (56).

At this point, Marlow finds out something about himself: he gets to know that he is not tempted by what is essentially material (ivory) but that he is deeply affected by the powerful primeval world of which he knows nothing; he is impressed by the enigma.

As Marlow goes on upriver to the Inner Station, he has the chance to think about mankind in general. It does not take a long time for him to come to the conclusion that although no man is superior to another yet every human being is really a mystery to each other. He goes deeper in his reflections and becomes able to see that the kinship between white men and the so-called uncivilized ones (the natives, in this particular circumstance) must be faced as a way of trying to understand one's own true nature: "...but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity — like yours — the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar ... What was there after all... truth — truth stripped of its cloak of time" (69).

Marlow experiences the pains of confrontation, of a confrontation between what is on the surface

and what lies hidden in the unconscious. And again it is in work that he looks for strength to bear what he sees: "I had to keep a look-out for the signs of dead wood we could cut up in the night for next day's steaming. When you have to attend to things of that sort, to the mere incidents of the surface, the reality — the reality, I tell you — fades. The inner truth is hidden — luckily, luckily. But I felt it all the same..." (67).

Here he advances one step forward in terms of self-knowledge: one can see from the quotation above that Marlow feels that work may be a way towards the understanding of his own reality. But, he can also see that that is not enough. In order to face such reality one needs more: one needs "inborn strength" and "deliberate belief" (69).

At this point, Marlow has managed to go beyond the mere surface of things: principles, acquisitions are important but cannot replace "inborn strength" and "deliberate belief". These only can lead to authenticity, which is possibly, at least from Marlow's viewpoint, the way to integrate your own self with the world around.

As the steamboat progresses towards the inner Station, the reader can see Marlow progressing in his evaluation of certain aspects of man's behavior. At this point two main events cannot be overlooked either because they are representative of Marlow's recent observations or because they appear to him as questions of an instigating and complex nature. One of these events is linked to the idea of hunger, the other to the one of uprootedness.

The cannibals' attitude towards hunger perplexes him. The word *restraint* is repeatedly used to explain that attitude but the idea behind this word is in itself part of the enigma Marlow has been facing: "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, amazes me now when I think of it ... And I saw that something restraining, one of those human secrets that baffle probability, had come into play there. ... Restraint! What possible restraint? Was it superstition, disgust, patience, fear — or some kind of primitive honour? ... It takes a man all his inborn strength to fight hunger properly" (75-76).

The "appetite" of the white men for ivory functions as a foil to that surprising restraint of the hungry cannibals. When analysing the situation from this angle, Marlow cannot but see in the white people the cannibalistic nature he had formerly thought to be an attribute of the natives.

As mentioned before, the other significant notion here is that of uprootedness, which, in this context, opposes the concept of authenticity. The steamboat helmsman is a good example of this contrast. Working for the white people in Africa, he has lost contact with his social group. Wounded during an attack suffered by the steamboat, he dies having in his eyes an "inquiring glance... it looked as though he would put to us some question..." (82). His bewildered glance no doubt expresses his confusion at his position in the order of things.

Detribalised, belonging neither to one world or another, he dies in utter puzzlement and without knowing what he is dying for!

While telling his story, Marlow sometimes interrupts the narrative of chronological facts to make digressions on what he has learned through observation and experience. In one of these moments, he ponders over the white man's power of restraint. He concludes that what makes civilized people behave in a socially acceptable way is the existence of the butcher (who provides them with meat for their hunger) and of the policeman (who forces them to stick to the straight path). Left to themselves in the wilderness they are prone to return to a state of savagery and ferocity: "... stepping delicately between the butcher and the policeman, in the holy terror of scandal and gallows and lunatic asylums — how can you imagine what particular region of the first ages a man's untrammelled feet may take him into by the way of solitude?" (85).

...Again, he takes up the idea of "inborn strength" and "deliberate belief"; these he has found out to be the resources man can count on. These alone will make it possible for him to "breathe dead hippo, so to speak, and not be contaminated" (86).

According to Marlow's narrative, he set off upriver, into the interior of the jungle do meet an agent called Kurtz and bring him back to civilization. On reaching the Outer Station, Marlow hears about Kurtz for the first time. From then on different people — the accountant, the manager, the brickmaker — provide pieces of information that make Marlow more than merely curious about that mysterious man. He very soon begins to perceive that Kurtz is part of the enigma that has been defying deciphering.

The accountant introduces Kurtz to Marlow by presenting a very flattering picture of the agent: "He is a very remarkable person. ... Sends in as much ivory as all the others put together. ... He will be a somebody in the Administration before long" (47).

To Marlow's question as to who had painted a "sketch in oils, on a panel, representing a woman, draped and blindfolded, carrying a lighted torch" (54), the brickmaker answers that Kurtz had done it. "He is a prodigy. ... He is an emissary of pity, and science and progress" (55).

For all that Marlow hears, he begins to see Kurtz first as a "word" (57) then as a "voice" (83):

"Hadn't I been told in all the tones of jealousy and admiration that he had collected, bartered, swindled, or stolen more ivory than all the other agents together? That was not the point. The point was in his being a gifted creature, and that of all his gifts the one that stood out pre-eminently, that carried with it a sense of real presence, was his ability to talk, his words — the gift of expression, the bewildering, the illuminating, the most exalted and the most contemptible the pulsating stream of light, or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness".

The seventeen-page-report written by Kurtz to the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs is read by Marlow and shows him how seductive but, at the same time, how destructive that kind of eloquence can be. The Russian boy, the harlequin, is also a proof of this. "You don't talk with that man — you listen to him (91) he tells Marlow. He insists that Kurtz has made him see things, that he has enlarged his mind. However, twice he says: "I don't understand" (98, 102). Marlow notices that the harlequin idolises Kurtz but is wholly unable to meditate over his selfishness and lack of moral sense. Marlow realizes that his own power for moral discrimination makes him stronger than those people that are easily entrapped by Kurtz. When describing his first meeting with him, Marlow says: "I looked around, and I don't know why, but I assure you that never, never before, did this land, this river, this jungle, ... appear to me so hopeless and so dark, so impenetrable to human thought, so pitiless to human weakness" (94).

Marlow can see that physically as well as morally, Kurtz has become the shadow of a man. His ambivalent feelings towards Kurtz become explainable when he sees himself face to face with the enigma. Marlow comes to understand that Kurtz is at the same time a living representation of what can make man great and a terrible illustration of

the way in which one can bring down destruction and debasement upon oneself. Kurtz's positive qualities — idealism, eloquence, sophisticated cultural background — have been impaired by his cannibalistic nature, his tremendous greed and sense of property. Marlow thinks that because Kurtz did not make use of his inborn strength and deliberate belief, he could not resist the spell of the wilderness, could not develop a resilient character that would have preserved his sanity and also his faithfulness to an ideal.

Although Marlow can come to conclusions such as those expressed above, he feels that part of the riddle remains inexplicable to him, impenetrable to his capacity of understanding. His admiration of Kurtz, in spite of everything, his feeling that something attached him to that man are aspects that will have to be made out in the long run: "I did not betray Mr. Kurtz — it was ordered I should never betray him — it was written I should be loyal to the nightmare of my choice. 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" (105).

The reader, however, can see more than Marlow. He can see that there are similarities between him and Kurtz that may account for his attachment to him. Like Kurtz, Marlow is also seen as a gifted creature and an emissary of light. Like Kurtz, his instrument is eloquence, a *voice*. But, Marlow does not believe in the white man's mission as the carrier of light: on being told this, he feels he is an impostor. He uses his voice not to deceive and dominate but to try to throw light into darkness.

This explains why Marlow can break the spell of the wilderness upon himself and why Kurtz cannot do the same. Besides this, it enables Marlow to look into darkness and, nevertheless, keep his integrity: "But his [Kurtz's] soul was mad. Being alone in the wilderness, it had looked within itself, and, by heavens! I tell you, it had gone mad. I had — for my sins, I suppose — to go through the ordeal of looking into it myself. . . . I saw the inconceivable mystery of a soul that knew no restraint, no faith and no fear, yet struggling blindly with itself" (108).

It is probably this fierce struggle that finally enables Kurtz to see the truth about himself: "It was as though a veil had been rent" (111), Marlow observes. Before his voice is gone, Kurtz whispers: "The horror! The horror!" (111).

Marlow is awe-struck at what he hears and sees. He thinks that Kurtz had been able to look at his own soul, balance what he had seen there and judge. Marlow's question "Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge?" (111) has no definite answer. But it brings Marlow face to face with himself; it forces him to compare Kurtz's vision with his own and conclude that while Kurtz had made a stride and stepped over the edge, he had only peeped over and then retreated. Kurtz had achieved a "moral victory": "Better his cry — much better. It was an affirmation, a moral victory, paid for by innumerable defeats, by abominable terrors, by abominable satisfactions. But it was a victory!" (113) For this Marlow has remained loyal to him and for this he has refused to destroy the illusions of

Kurtz's Intended. His belief that a woman's world should be preserved from the deterioration and ugliness that are part of a man's world has something to do with his decision to lie to the Intended. But, it is out of sheer respect for Kurtz's memory and of his certainty that it would be useless to add to the darkness which was already too dark that he allows the Intended to plunge into "that 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" (119).

Marlow has learned something! He has learned that perhaps "life is a greater riddle than some of us think it to be" (112) and that "The most you can hope from it is some knowledge of yourself — . . ." (112). Like Coleridge's ancient mariner (and now the comparison seems appropriate) he goes on through life each new day "a sadder and a wiser man".

Marlow finishes his story but not his self-questioning: "Marlow ceased, and sat apart, indistinct and silent, in the pose of a meditating Budha" (121).

Conrad has told us one of his "inconclusive stories". How far Marlow will get in his search for truth we cannot know. Let us hope that, like Buddha, he will be allowed one day to hold the lotus-flower.

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#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

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