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‘A Choice of Nightmares’: narration and desire in Heart of Darkness

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ABSTRACT This paper considers the gendered organisation of narration in Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness. It is argued that the text fictionalises its audience as an exclusively masculine community of readers, bounded together by shared interests and commitments. The discursive construction of preferred reading positions is critically examined with reference to the mobilisation of discourses of cannibalism and representations of femininity in the text. It is argued that positive evaluations of the text, as a critique of imperialism or a commentary on the human condition, are problematised by consideration of the gender values inscribed in the texture of the narrative.

Dislocating Heart of Darkness

Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness is widely acknowledged to be a powerful moral critique of imperialism. The stage upon which its universal themes are played out is King Leopold II’s Congo Free State at the end of the nineteenth century. Conrad had been to the Congo in 1890 and Heart of Darkness first appeared, in Blackwood’s Magazine in 1899, at a time when events there were central catalysts to an emerging liberal and humanitarian critique of European imperialism. This story’s location in specific geographical and historical contexts has been used to insist upon the text’s critical engagement with pressing political issues of its own contemporary moment. However, on closer examination, it emerges that reference to these specific geopolitical co-ordinates is not directly provided by the text itself. The problematic quality of geographical reference in a text overflowing with a vocabulary of rest, motion, location, and travel, is underscored at various points [1]. The text does not refer as such to events taking place in any named location other than the occasion for Marlow telling his story. Heart of Darkness is the story of Marlow telling the story of his journey up-river and his encounter with Kurtz.

Recognising the ways in which Heart of Darkness simultaneously secures and problematises the locations of Marlow’s story draws attention to how the text fictionalises its audience. By mobilising a rhetoric of allusion, and underscoring the conventional qualities of communication in general and geographical nomenclature in particular, the text calls upon the implicit knowledge of its readers to ‘get’ the allusions, and to reclose the referential gaps which it opens. Attention to the geographical rhetoric of Heart of Darkness therefore directs our attention to the need to consider the textual construction of reading positions in the novel. Brosseau (1994) argues that scrutiny of the specifically textual features of literary texts has frequently been sacrificed to instrumental appropriations of geographical themes. Thus, while Heart of Darkness might be fruitfully read in...
relation to its representations of landscape, gender, race, and other thematic concerns, my particular focus here is upon the representation of narrative itself. I want to pause to disrupt the text’s own impulse to narrative closure by examining the tensions set up by its representations of the uneven relations between masculinity, femininity, and narration. *Heart of Darkness* invites its readers to be loyal to the principle of closed communities of interpretation. In this paper, I want to ask what sort of reader this text is trying to turn me into by constructing its preferred audience in these communal terms.

**Reading Imperatives**

In staging its reading as an activity shaped by a commitment to certain bonds of loyalty and community, *Heart of Darkness* exemplifies Conrad’s conviction that the world ‘rests on a few simple ideas’, not the least of which is ‘the idea of Fidelity’ (Conrad, 1919, p. 19). Marlow returns to Europe charged with a duty to protect Mr Kurtz’s memory. His observation of colonial exploitation has provided him with ‘a choice of nightmares’ (Conrad, 1988, p. 62) [2]. Kurtz went to Africa with the purpose of providing guidance and a wider sense of moral mission to the imperial project, and Marlow found himself identified with him as a member of the new ‘gang of virtue’ (p. 28), an identification initially forced upon him which he subsequently affirms as his own ‘choice’. In ‘choosing’ Kurtz, in turning ‘to Kurtz for relief—positively for relief’ (p. 61) from the brazen hypocrisy of colonial apologetics, Marlow decides to remain loyal to what he regards as the most manly of options. The idealistic vision of imperialism as a civilising mission is revealed as no more than a comforting illusion, embodied throughout the text by women, while the greed, violence, and hypocrisy of modern empire are of an essentially unmanly variety (pp. 19–20). The nightmare Marlow chooses binds him tightly into a network of exclusively masculine communality which excludes women and those forms of masculinity considered to be ‘flabby’.

It is this choice, a choice *forced upon him*, to which Marlow has remained loyal in guarding Kurtz’s memory. This obligation requires him to keep secret from all but a select few the full details of what he has experienced and observed, as he explains when recounting why he did not raise the alarm upon discovering that Kurtz had left the steamer and returned ashore:

I did not betray 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 of 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. (p. 64)

Marlow’s commitment to Kurtz is presented here as a freely taken choice to submit himself to an unavoidable obligation: as a response to the command of an unconditional categorical imperative which must be obeyed. In turn, the chain of identifications which the text sets in play between Kurtz and Marlow, and Marlow and his audience, invites the reader to join in the same form of identification structured around Marlow’s ‘choice’. His loyalty to Kurtz requires that he simultaneously pass on his words while betraying neither their force nor Kurtz’s good reputation. As a consequence, narration is organised around certain principles of division and exclusion. Attention to the representational field of sexual difference around which the reader relations of *Heart of Darkness* are organised will cause us to question the possibility of maintaining fidelity to this text. Rather than an unconditional affirmation of the text’s own protocols, what follows will be a work of reading which is neither entirely respectful of the text, nor entirely indifferent to it.
All Aboard

Marlow’s story is not a simple description of past events. Rather, he stages these events as part of a retrospective exercise in self-examination. His accounts of the attack on his steamboat, of the death of the native helmsman, and of his first sight of the severed and shrunken heads which decorate Kurtz’s compound, are all presented in ways which dramatise each of these events as he restages his own surprise. In so doing, the reader is instantiated in the same movement by which Marlow realised that the ‘sticks’ were in fact arrows, that the ‘warm feeling’ on his feet was the helmsman’s blood, and that the ‘ornaments’ were in fact heads. The story which Marlow relates is one in which the central ‘events’ are overheard conversations, rumours, and snatches of verbal or written information regarding Kurtz, and finally, the encounter with Kurtz himself, who appears to Marlow as little more than a voice and whose final words are the animating centre of his story. *Heart of Darkness* thus exemplifies the dramatic protocols which Said (1974, p. 119) suggests are characteristic of Conrad’s fiction—swapped yarns, reports, and verbal exchanges—and which work to construct the narratives as acts of sharing between a speaker and a hearer.

The text opens with the frame narrator describing the occasion for Marlow’s story. Sitting aboard the *Nellie* on the Thames, five men wait for the tide to turn as the day draws to a close. This group forms a community:

Between us there was as I have said somewhere, the bond of the sea. Besides holding all hearts together through periods of separation it had the effect of making us tolerant of each other’s yarns—and even convictions. (p. 7)

The ‘bond of the sea’ is presented as tying the narrator and his fellows together into a community of storytellers. The narrator’s first words, related in a tone of familiarity to his own utterances on previous occasions, suggest that this particular meeting is but one in a line of similar gatherings. The description of Marlow’s resemblance to a Buddha ‘preaching in European clothes’ (p. 10) places him in a line of prophetic figures who form part of a chain of inherited wisdom which is continued indefinitely. And that the bond of the sea provides access to an exclusive community of trust within which information can be shared is confirmed when the Russian ‘harlequin’ takes Marlow into his confidence in telling him that the attack on the steamboat which preceded the arrival at Kurtz’s remote station had been ordered by Kurtz himself. The Russian tells him this secret because of the professional bond which they share. It is as a ‘brother seaman’ (p. 62) that he takes him into his confidence. Thus, in assuring the Russian that Kurtz’s reputation is safe with him, Marlow also affirms his loyalty to the community of men of the sea. Weaving the narrative backwards and forwards into wider networks of storytelling, the text makes available a position for the reader as part of the same community of listeners which make up Marlow’s immediate audience. The frame narrator does not disrupt or contradict the interpellative force of Marlow’s narrative, but secures it by including the reader as a listener bound by the same bonds of fidelity as those listening to Marlow’s story on board the *Nellie*. The reader is invited on board to share in the intimacy of this particular company.

Stewart (1980) suggests that the ‘dark transmissible import’ of Kurtz’s death is betrayed when he lies to Kurtz’s fiancée about his final words at the close of the story. On the contrary, the ‘import’ of Kurtz’s fate is established only because the transmission of his story is tightly policed in precisely the way represented by Marlow’s lie to the Intended. In finally telling of his experiences, Marlow is not betraying his ‘choice of nightmares’ but affirming the commitment to a strictly bounded network of storytelling
through which his responsibility to guard Kurtz’s memory was first articulated, and into which the reader of the text is also being solicited. Not betraying Kurtz involves not complete secrecy, but selective retelling, of which this text becomes the performance.

Marlow is not representative of all seamen, and this is reflected in his stories, which do not have meaning in quite the same way as those of the typical mariner:

The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted) and to him 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, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that, sometimes, are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine. (p. 9)

In providing its own interpretative protocols, the text also places Marlow in a tradition of storytelling to which he bears an eccentric relation. It is in this specific relation to a particular community of knowledge that the ‘anti-imperialist’ impulse of the text lies. It is because he addresses an audience of professionals committed to the business of state, commerce, and empire, that the demystificatory force of his story registers a critical impact. At the same time, this force is limited by being contained within this closed circle of friends (Marlow, his shipmates, and the reader of the text). If *Heart of Darkness* thus exemplifies Conrad’s ‘double vision’ (Parry, 1983, p. 7), simultaneously condemning a certain imperialist ideology while also colluding in its modes of authority, it does so by the way in which its overlapping narratives are constructed as exclusive forms of knowledge and sharing.

Marlow’s cynicism and irony are staged explicitly as rebuffs to the easy assumptions of his audience. The frame narrator extols the glorious imperial past and present for which the Thames figuratively stands as the source:

Hunters for gold or purveyors of fame they all had gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire. What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth?... The dreams of men, the seeds of commonwealths, the germs of empire. (p. 8)

The narrator’s invocation of this imperial past is not made aloud, so that access to these thoughts establishes a bond of intimacy between the narrator and the reader. In this way, the reader is positioned as one who shares in the values and convictions of Marlow’s audience on board the *Nellie*. It is these optimistic and untroubled thoughts that Marlow interrupts when he breaks the silence on board by suggesting that this, too, ‘has been one of the dark places on the earth’ (p. 9). What follows is Marlow’s imaginative consideration of the time when Britain itself was a ‘place of darkness’. If this throws the simple thoughts of the narrator off balance, then it is important to note where precisely Marlow’s sympathies lie in the course of drawing the parallel. It is with the dilemmas of the conqueror living amidst an abominable and detestably fascinating wilderness that Marlow is concerned throughout his story. The object of his narrative is the relation between conduct and a set of guiding principles in extreme situations. This story is the occasion for his re-examination of vocation in the wake of his experiences. Having had any conviction in the redeeming value of work in the service of the imperial mission revealed as a mere sham, Marlow narrativises the resultant crisis of vocation and in so doing establishes narration itself as an alternative version of vocation. As Robbins suggests (1993, p. 123), Marlow’s knowledge of the dark truth of the human condition
Masculine Narration in Heart of Darkness can be ‘embraced existentially’ only by being contained within a ‘professional community of listeners’, commitment to which is established as an inviolate value.

Heart of Darkness is constructed in the form of the narrative art which Walter Benjamin characterised as storytelling, an affinity identified by Said (1974), who does not, however, pursue the gendered implications of this form of narrative exposition. In Benjamin’s discussion, storytelling is distinguished from novelistic discourse by being rooted in a shared sense of community between speaker and listener. It is an essentially oral and communal form in which narratives are woven into myriad ‘layers of retelling’: ‘The storyteller takes what he tells from experience, his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those listening to him’ (Benjamin, 1968, p. 87). Conrad presented Heart of Darkness in similar terms when commenting that ‘it is experience pushed a little (and only a very little) beyond the actual facts of the case for the perfectly legitimate, I believe, purpose of bringing it home to the minds of the reader’ (Conrad, 1917, p. ix). While Benjamin presents the novel and storytelling as antagonistic modes of narrative, the presentation of narration in the form of storytelling in Heart of Darkness enables the text to hold in tension features of both. This is achieved by presenting a community of shared values represented by the figure of the ship, a central device in Conrad’s fiction which, as Williams (1971, p. 141) suggests, enables him to explore questions of individual conduct within a community which shares an agreed scheme of values:

The ship in Conrad has this special quality, which was no longer ordinarily available to most novelists. It is a knowable community of a transparent kind.

The ship has in the main a clear and shared social purpose and an essentially unquestioned customary morality, expressed in fellow-feeling and in law.

In Heart of Darkness there are two such ships which enable a sense of isolation to be dissembled through the construction of a sense of community: the steamer, on board which Marlow is able to keep himself together by having something to do, and where in turn through the common purpose of work on the ship he comes to recognise dimly some shared humanity with the native helmsman; and the Nellie, where Marlow is safely able to tell his story amongst a group who share basic bonds of experience and conviction.

Heart of Darkness is thus presented as if it were an essentially spoken performance, so that the text is made to appear merely as the written transcription of a set of stories which are orally transmitted. The text invites its readers to share in the companionship of those on board the Nellie by taking their place within the same community of storytellers and listeners of which Marlow is but one part. If one effect of this is to conceal ‘the solitude of writing behind the commonality of conversing’ (Tanner, 1978, p. 105), then the concomitant effect is the interpellation of the faithful reader as not really being a reader of a text at all. Heart of Darkness is a text which is endeavouring to efface its own written-ness (Said, 1974, p. 130). The paradoxes which result from this effort are held in tension by the description of both Marlow and Kurtz as having no presence other than that of disembodied voices, emphasising the text’s representation of narrative as essentially oral. Simultaneously, by presenting these voices as disembodied, and not therefore irreducibly tied to any particular location, the text establishes the discursive condition for these voices to be inscribed in writing in order to be subsequently recovered and heard once again.

By sealing the circulation of stories into a community of shared values, the effacement of writing also works to expel women, as figures of disruption and difference, from that
circuit. The causes of the collapse of personal identity are persistently embodied in *Heart of Darkness* in feminine form, and against this both Marlow himself and the text’s own construction present the telling of stories as one of those activities which can secure the integrity of masculine identity. The corollary of this is that narration must be established in specifically masculine terms by the exclusion of the feminine presence. Figures of femininity thus function in *Heart of Darkness* as ‘prosopopeia of noise’ (Serres, 1982, p. 67).

In order for knowledge to circulate within a dialogic circuit of speaker and listener, a background against which the information or meaning in the foreground stands out as intelligible and comprehensible must be posited. Figures of difference must, therefore, be simultaneously excluded from and represented in the circuit. This contradictory figuration of difference becomes a condition for the circulation of meaning within relations of sameness, but also means the constant presence within the circuit of a disruptive potential which threatens the circulation of meaning (Serres, pp. 65–70). In *Heart of Darkness*, the personified wilderness and representations of delusional femininity serve as the figures of ‘noise’ against which the significance of Marlow’s narrative takes shape (London, 1989, pp. 236–237). They are also, by extension, represented as the always present threat to the circulation of narrative and to the form of masculine identity which is secured by the reproduction of that exclusive circuit.

**Figuring Femininity**

One of the enduring tropes of Western colonial discourses deployed in *Heart of Darkness* is that of cannibalism, a ‘mark of unregenerate savagery’ (Hulme, 1986, p. 3) and ‘a key metaphor of outrageous transgression’ (Warner, 1994, p. 70) which articulates various fears and fantasies of hybridity and monstrosity. Marlow’s description of the cannibals on board the steamer is the occasion for reflection on the founding value of his personal ethic of conduct: restraint. The cannibals in *Heart of Darkness* are presented as admirable figures. Marlow wonders why he and his companions have not been eaten by these men, and he can think of only one reason:

> And I saw that something restraining, one of those human secrets that baffle probability, had come into play there... Yes—I looked at them as you would on any human being with a curiosity of their impulses, motives, capacities, weaknesses, when brought to the test of an inexorable physical necessity. 

Restraint! What possible restraint? Was it superstition, disgust, patience, fear—or some kind of primitive honour? (p. 43)

The theme of cannibalism enables Marlow to confirm the overriding significance of restraint as the very basis of keeping body and soul together when normal social conventions are absent. The particular form of restraint which Marlow practices is work, which for him is an individual act and a paradigm for self-fashioning, providing as it does ‘the chance to find yourself’ (p. 31). Work is how Marlow imagines he can weave a frame of reference to secure his own identity in extreme situations. His work ethic, embodying his commitment to the value of restraint, stands in stark contrast to the conduct of Kurtz, in whom he sees ‘the inconceivable mystery of a soul that knew no restraint, no faith, and no fear’ (p. 66). Upon observing the heads which decorate Kurtz’s compound, Marlow concludes that these ‘showed that Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts’ (p. 57), and this small character flaw had been exploited by the corrosive powers of the wilderness. Work functions as Marlow’s reality principle, the
means by which gratification is deferred, in contrast to Kurtz’s lack of restraint, which has opened him up to a void within himself in which his desire has turned demonic.

According to Rawson (1985, p. 20), the discourse of cannibalism tends to work in two opposite directions: on the one hand the literal imputation of cannibalism serves to identify non-Western peoples as bestial and savage; on the other, the metaphorical insinuation of the cannibalism of the tyrant has long served a critical function by suggesting that it is the conquerors who are more savage than the savages, more cannibalistic than the cannibals. This play between metaphorical and literal imputations of cannibalism is evident in *Heart of Darkness*. The cannibals do not actually eat Marlow, but their cannibalism is established as real nonetheless by their very own words, confirming Hulme’s claim (1993, pp. 183–184) that cannibalism has real historical existence as a discursive effect even in the absence of actual acts of eating human flesh. By comparison to them, Kurtz emerges as the more cannibalistic, if only metaphorically, an implication which confirms Marlow’s convictions about restraint. As McClure suggests (1978), this ethic is inscribed in the very form of Marlow’s narrative, with its interruptions, hesitations, and detours, in stark contrast to Kurtz, whose speaking and writing are marked by an ‘unbounded eloquence’. Marlow metaphorically represents Kurtz’s eloquence as a cannibalistic impulse upon seeing him in the flesh for the first time:

> I 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. (p. 59)

Marlow evokes the very same image at the moment of his meeting with Kurtz’s fiancé to express his sense that the power of darkness was now encroaching upon the placidity of the imperial metropolis itself:

> I had a vision of him on the stretcher, opening his mouth voraciously as if to devour all the earth with all its mankind. (p. 72)

Rawson notes that the metaphorical imputation of cannibalism to the dominant figure tends not to be accompanied by imputation of the literal deed itself. In even the most realistic writing on the topic, cannibalism ‘has almost always been subjected to “de-realising” stylisations and circumventions of various kinds’ (1985, p. 20). This, too, is a feature of the treatment of cannibalism in *Heart of Darkness*, in which Kurtz’s atavistic and ravenous desires result in ‘unspeakable rites’ which finally remain unspecified. This ‘deep cultural reticence about the literal deed’ (Rawson, 1992, p. 12) accompanying the use of metaphors of cannibalism is the condition of this trope being able to represent a number of displaced themes, such as proscribed and prohibited sexualities and passions, exploitation and barbarity, and fears and fantasies of absorption and incorporation. In this text, it is a fear of the dissolution of masculine identity that is articulated through the rhetoric of cannibalism.

Marlow assures his audience that it was the wilderness which had awakened in Kurtz instincts best kept dormant and ‘beguiled his soul beyond the bonds of permitted aspirations.’ (p. 65). The wilderness is the manifestation of the external evil force which enflames the capacity for evil within each individual soul, and Kurtz’s encounter with it is persistently presented as an encounter with an overbearing feminine Other. If ‘darkness’ represents the corrupt, evil, and immoral forces which secretly inhabit the project of empire, then it is significant that, as Hillis Miller (1990, p. 191) observes, ‘darkness’ ultimately comes to be represented ‘as a woman who unmans all those male questors who try to dominate her’. Marlow’s restraint is the bulwark he erects against this
fear of being unmanned, and his narrative affirms the value of securing masculine integrity by ensuring sharp differentiation between men and women.

In *Heart of Darkness*, the landscape is feminised through a persistent rhetoric of personification (Miller, 1990, p. 191) \[3\]. The landscape is figuratively constructed as an entity which speaks and acts, as both witness and accuser, and is consequently made to appear as something which is alive. Above all this personification of the landscape works through the projection of a face on to the landscape: ‘the sunlit face of the land’ (p. 35) is an intimation of an ominous patience, which fills Marlow with the perception that ‘[i]t looked at you with a vengeful aspect’ (p. 36). His suspicion is not simply that there is someone in the forest looking at him, but that it is the forest itself which is watching him. The rhetorical personification of the landscape animates the wilderness, gives it life, and it is this which Marlow presents as the source of his unease as he travelled up-river.

The heavily sexualised significance of Kurtz’s undoing by the wilderness and Marlow’s ethic of restraint is underscored above all by the account Marlow provides of the ‘wild and gorgeous apparition’ of a native woman he observes from the steamer:

She walked with measured steps, draped in striped and fringed cloths, treading the earth proudly with a slight jingle and flash of barbarous ornaments. She carried her head high, her hair was done in the shape of a helmet, she had brass leggings to the knees, brass wire gauntlets to the elbow, a crimson spot on her tawny cheek, innumerable necklaces of glass beads on her neck, bizarre things, charms, gifts of witch-men, that hung about her, glittered and trembled at every step. She must have had the value of several elephant tusks upon her. She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress. And in the hush that had fallen suddenly upon the whole sorrowful land, the immense wilderness, the colossal body of the fecund and mysterious life seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it had been looking at an image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul.

She came abreast to the steamer, stood still, and faced us. Her long shadow fell to the water’s edge. Her face had a tragic and fierce aspect of wild sorrow and of dumb pain mingled with the fear of some struggling, half-shaped resolve. She stood looking at us without a stir and like the wilderness itself, with an air of brooding over an inscrutable purpose. (p. 60, emphasis added)

The wilderness is here figuratively embodied in the form of the native woman, and simultaneously personified as a particular type of femininity. This woman is the figure for the fearful all-consuming embrace by wilderness and darkness which Marlow identifies as having been the cause of Kurtz’s mental and physical collapse, and from which he is protected only by his restraint:

Suddenly she opened her bared arms and threw them up rigid above her head as though in an uncontrollable desire to touch the sky, and at the same time the swift shadows darted out on the earth, swept around on the river, gathering the steamer into a shadowy embrace. (pp. 60–61)

And the sexualised nature of Kurtz’s fall, rhetorically established through the feminisation of the wilderness, is underscored when the Russian harlequin tells Marlow that this woman is a close confidante of Kurtz himself—she was his mistress, his Queen.

That Kurtz’s fall is constructed around a fear of the feminine Other is confirmed when one considers that the feminised personification of the wilderness and the discourse of cannibalism are articulated together in Marlow’s narrative. He was particularly struck by Kurtz’s baldness:
The wilderness had patted him on the head, and behold, it was like a ball—an ivory ball; it had caressed him, and—lo!—he had withered; it had taken him, loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation. (p. 49, emphasis added)

The insinuation that Kurtz’s relation to the native woman is a sexual one is finally confirmed by the representation of the wilderness of which she is the embodiment as cannibalistically devouring him. The play between metaphorical and literal imitations of cannibalism establishes that it was Kurtz’s own urge to devour the world which led to his own self being swallowed by the wilderness. The tropes of cannibalistic transgression are combined with the representation of the wilderness to present Kurtz’s predicament as the result of an encounter with an all-powerful feminine sexuality which is the cause of the loss of masculine definition. And if Kurtz’s transgression of the sexualised boundary of racial difference leads to a loss of self-identity, Marlow’s story concludes by confirming the value of maintaining sexual and racial identity by keeping women in their proper place.

The Economy of Lying

The personification of the wilderness in Heart of Darkness is the means by which subject-status is transferred to an inanimate entity, the geographical landscape, in the same move as that landscape is feminised. The corollary of this rhetorical transfer is that the subject-status of women themselves is denied in the text, so that women’s identity as embodiments of both darkness and illusion is established in a discourse in which they are spoken about but are not themselves allocated a space of enunciation within the circuit of narrative.

Marlow’s journey is facilitated by women at every turn. His position with the trading company is originally secured for him by an aunt whose touching faith in the ideals of imperialism serves as the occasion for one of his reflections on women’s place in the general scheme of things:

It’s queer how out of touch with truth women are! They live in a world of their own, and there had 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. (p. 16)

Marlow’s story is told to a group of men because this is a story which is only fit for their ears and that only their hearts could bear. Only men are capable of living with the full and awful truth of the emptiness at the heart of human existence which is Marlow’s theme.

Conrad identified the final scene of Marlow’s narrative as pivotal for giving the story more than prosaic significance, when commenting on his method of constructing fictions in which the whole story falls into place in the final incident, as in ‘the last pages of Heart of Darkness where the interview of the man and the girl locks in—as it were—the whole 30000 words of narrative description into one suggestive view of a whole phase of life and makes of that story something quite on another plane than an anecdote of a man who went mad in the Centre of Africa’ (1986, p. 417). The value of Marlow’s story is secured in this final meeting, in which what is affirmed is that ‘they—the women I mean—are out of it—should be out of it’ (p. 49). To read Heart of Darkness either as historical
testimony, political critique, or moral allegory without attending to the ways in which such extra-textual significance is established through the exclusion of women from the circuit of narrative, as dramatised in the meeting of Marlow and the Intended, is unproblematically to reproduce its gendered distribution of narrative power. Marlow's story only has value because of its exclusivity, an exclusivity in which the reader is invited to share by colluding in his act of withholding.

The condition for Marlow's story to those on board the Nellie on this occasion lies in his withholding from the Intended the full truth of his encounter with Kurtz, which is thereby confirmed as valuable knowledge to be shared only with select interlocutors. Upon his return to the sepulchral European city from which he originally departed, Marlow slowly parted with those artefacts of Kurtz's with which he had been entrusted:

All that had been Kurtz's had passed out of my hands: his soul, his body, his station, his plans, his ivory, his career. There remained only his memory and his Intended—and I wanted to give that up too to the past, in a way—to surrender personally all that remained of him with me to that oblivion which is the last word of our common fate. (p. 71)

Yet this account of his motivations for finally visiting her turns out to be a misrepresentation. Far from giving up the care of Kurtz's memory, when faced with the Intended he ensures that it will not be shared with this figure of feminine innocence and that it will remain instead in his possession. This contradiction between what Marlow says of his motivations and his description of his actual deeds serves to underscore the sense that protecting Kurtz's memory remains an obligation that he seems unable to relinquish however much he apparently would like to.

Marlow lied to the Intended in telling her that the last word Kurtz pronounced was 'your name' (p. 75) [4]. He justifies his deceit as an act of keeping the Intended safe from the encroaching darkness, which according to his own account, threatened to engulf her at the moment of their meeting. Marlow describes how, as he stood on the Intended's doorstep, he had a vision of Kurtz, of the wilderness and the conquering darkness, a vision which accompanies him into the house:

'It was a moment of triumph for the wilderness, an invading and vengeful rush which, it seemed to me, I would have to keep back alone for the salvation of another soul.' (p. 72)

It is Marlow's intimations of Kurtz's ghostly presence there in the room alongside him, 'his death and her sorrow' (p. 73) occupying the same space in his perception, which justifies his decision not to share the full truth with her. The repetition of the personified rhetoric of darkness in the meeting with the Intended enables him to present his lie as the only possible choice open to him, as he seeks his audience's absolution and complicity in the lie and his own fantasy of salvation (Parry, 1983, p. 38).

Marlow tells his listeners that as the Intended recalled the persuasive power of Kurtz's eloquence, he heard in her words the echo of 'a voice speaking from beyond the threshold of an eternal darkness' (p. 74). This is the voice of Kurtz's final judgement, 'The horror! the horror!' (p. 68), which for Marlow represents a 'supreme moment of complete knowledge' (p. 68), an 'affirmation, a moral victory' (p. 70) in the face of nothingness. If what makes Kurtz a remarkable figure in spite of his actions is that he managed to give utterance to this experience, then loyally guarding his memory requires that Marlow carefully police the circulation of his words: by detaching the words 'Exterminate all the brutes' from Kurtz's otherwise altruistic report for the 'International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs' (p. 51), making it fit to be received by those for
whom brutality and idealism remain antithetical poles; and by not sharing his final words with the Intended. Doing so would make her vulnerable to ‘the triumphant darkness from which I could not have defended her’ (p. 74). This decision enables Marlow to fashion a heroic identity for himself and his listeners, for they, too, have now had revealed to them the awful truth which means they must live with the knowledge of ‘darkness’. The value of this knowledge is established by virtue of the fact that it is not available to all, and its selectivity is constituted by Marlow’s own actions. This construction of the carefully proscribed dimensions of narrative circulation reveals that the affective dimensions of the text work to offer imaginative resolution to certain forms of masculine anxiety only by staging the ‘psychic penury of women [as] a necessary condition for the heroism of men’ (Straus, 1986, p. 125). If the critical impact of Marlow’s narrative lies in his revealing the hypocritical power of imperialism’s rhetoric to mask an awful reality, then this critical force is contained by his reinvestment in the very same feature when he mobilises the deceptive power of language to manipulate the Intended and simultaneously confirm the significance of his own narrative.

**Un-Intended Readings**

*Heart of Darkness* explores zones of liminality where the boundaries of identity begin to dissolve, but does so only to reaffirm all the more strongly the need for men to maintain their masculine identity through sharp differentiation from women. Women are explicitly excluded from the circuits of narrative in which men confirm for each other the value of knowing the awful emptiness of the dark recesses of the human heart. What sort of masculine togetherness is it that is structured by such a stark and asymmetrical binary opposition between masculinity and femininity?

Identification between men is articulated in this text through triangular relations between male protagonists and women (cf. Sedgwick, 1985, pp. 20–27). In Marlow’s story, his relationship with Kurtz is mediated by the figures of the feminised wilderness, the native woman, and the Intended. Given its first-person narrative embedded within a frame-narrative, involving a communication between a male protagonist and other men, the substance of which includes a discourse about women, *Heart of Darkness* shares structural affinities with the form of confessional récit analysed by Segal (1988, p. 9). The confessional mode of such narratives invites the reader to join in the collusion of men in excluding the female-subject from their discourse:

She is the object, not the subject, of its speech, and to the pattern of male doubles within the text there corresponds, essentially, an implied reader and implied or intended author who are also male. (Segal, 1988, p. 11)

*Heart of Darkness* constructs storytelling as a strictly masculine privilege, and with its doubling of Kurtz and Marlow, has just this sort of ‘intended’ reader, and its critical reception has been often characterised by readings which do indeed consent to play the roles marked out by the text itself. Straus (1986, p. 126) argues that the dominant form of masculine commentary on the text involves an identification on the part of the critic with the male protagonists, who can then share in the pleasure of entering into the masculine circuit of communication on matters of high moral, metaphysical, or artistic importance.

Segal suggests that by identifying the third person positions which are excluded subject-status in narratives yet which are critical to their structure and significance—by taking up the position of the *unintended reader*—it is possible to reveal what the text does
not wish to say about itself by reading against its own interpellative demand. It is this sort of possibility that Straus (1986, p. 134) invokes when she suggests that ‘what the woman reader can “do” is to recognise that in _Heart of Darkness_ women are used to deny, distort, and censor men’s passionate love for one another’. Straus appeals to Freud’s notion of ‘narcissistic identification’, ‘which is closer to homosexual object-choice than to the heterosexual kind’ (Straus, 1986, p. 132), to describe the bond between Marlow and Kurtz. Having raised the issue of masculine desire, however, she does not fully pursue it. The result is that her argument leaves intact the implication that patriarchal misogyny is really latent ‘homosexuality’, an implication which remains essentially homophobic [5]. Straus’s reading of the traces of desire in Marlow’s narrative of identification with Kurtz misapprehends the precise relation between identification and desire in his story. For her, the staging of identification _hides_ what are in fact relations of desire. Rather than reading identification and desire as related in this way, I want to trace how they are articulated in this narrative in _opposition_ to each other.

Sedgwick (1991, p. 210) argues that modern constructions of male heterosexual entitlement depend upon an unstable ‘self-ignorance in men as to the significance of their desire for other men’. Marlow does suffer a form of self-ignorance, evident in the distance which separates his avowed motivations and justifications from his actual acts. And his lie to the Intended does indeed finally emerge as an act of _jealousy_ by which he keeps the memory of Kurtz from the one person who claims to have known him better than any other and to have loved him, an act made to ensure that the two shall not be together (p. 73). Marlow justifies his lie by reinvoking the image of the conquering feminine figures of darkness, enabling him to present his own wilful economy with the truth as an act of salvation. The Intended, dressed in mourning black, not only resembles the native woman in appearance, she embodies the very same gestures, and with them the very same significances:

> She put out her arms as if after a retiring figure, stretching them black and with clasped pale hands across the fading and narrow sheen of the window. Never see him! I saw him clearly enough then. I shall see this eloquent phantom as long as I live and I shall see her too, a tragic and familiar Shade resembling in this gesture another one, tragic also and bedecked with powerless charms, stretching bare brown arms over the glitter of the infernal stream, the stream of darkness. (p. 75)

The lie emerges as the means by which Marlow’s restraint finally secures his integrity by enabling him to resist this embrace of the feminine Other which mirrors that of the wilderness which was the undoing of Kurtz. The final scene establishes that Marlow’s _difference_ from Kurtz lies in his ability to restrain desire. But the point of this differentiation is also the point at which his _identification_ with Kurtz is secured. Marlow is finally able to identify with Kurtz, despite his retrograde actions, by disavowing that feature of Kurtz’s character, unrestrained desire, which he presents as being behind his fall. Both Marlow’s restraint and Kurtz’s lust for gratification are presented in ways which confirm that desire exists only in a single dimension: between men and women. Desire is presented in _Heart of Darkness_ as essentially and singularly heterosexual. It follows that Marlow’s lie, his final act of restraint, simultaneously works as a disavowal of the place of desire in his _identification_ with Kurtz.

_Heart of Darkness_ characteristically structures masculine narrative homosociality by setting up conceptual distinctions between ‘men’s _identification_ (with men) and their _desire_ (for women)’ (Sedgwick, 1991, p. 62). However negative _Heart of Darkness_ may be in its
judgement of relations between men and women, and however exclusive these relations are made to appear, it is by virtue of their being presented so graphically as relations of desire that heterosexuality is posited and maintained throughout the text as the structuring principle of all relations of desire. By constructing female–male relations as relations of desire, relations of identification between men as they are articulated through narrative are clearly demarcated from any taint of desire, so that Marlow’s identification with Kurtz appears as one wholly without an affective dimension. The rhetorical relations through which the reader’s assent to the text’s patriarchal values of narrative authority is sought prohibit any articulation of relations of desire between men. If, then, the dynamics of identification which *Heart of Darkness* sets in play are indeed patriarchal and misogynist, it is because of the articulation of masculine homosocial desire in specifically modern heterosexual homophobic terms.

**Allegories of Responsibility**

I have considered *Heart of Darkness* an allegory of reading in so far as it presents reading as an activity guided by an ethic of fidelity, according to which individuals respond to what is forced upon them as their own choice. *Heart of Darkness* is often taken as an allegory of reading, as a text which thematises textuality itself (e.g. Brooks, 1984; Todorov, 1989; Cunningham, 1994). Such readings are characterised by a loyalty to the text which requires accepting the authority of its own meta-commentary at face value. Following Johnson (1987, p. 18), moments of self-interpretation in the text are not to be granted authority, but rather taken as points at which responsibility for the work of reading is thrown upon the reader. No text is empowered to force its readers to comply with the subject-effects inscribed within it, yet neither can the pattern of preferred reading positions be ignored if a text is to be addressed critically. Thus, perhaps paradoxically, Johnson (1994, p. 31) also recommends a ‘hyper-fidelity’ to the text as the means of pursuing subversive readings. Such a strategy suspends the interpretative sovereignty usually invested in the act of reading in order to follow closely the weave of the text and identify moments at which it addresses unconditional demands for assent to the reader. Such an effort to follow ‘what has to happen’ reveals *Heart of Darkness* to be a text in which the dimensions of narrative space are organised according to specific gendered principles. To respond to the text’s demand for loyalty would be to affirm the value of a form of masculine identity premised upon the discursive maintenance of asymmetrical binary sexual difference. This affirmation is the condition of admission into the select arena in which issues of the very highest metaphysical importance are discussed. A reading that follows the imperatives of the text up to the point of decision and response is one which cannot presume to sit in judgement from a detached position, but one which acknowledges complicity with what it endeavours to open to critical scrutiny as the very condition of finally dissenting from the text and its implications.

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NOTES


[2] Further references to this edition are included in the text.


[4] Thus, even the form in which Marlow re-represents his lie confirms that the proper names of women, as the marks of their subject-status, remain unuttered and unutterable within the confines of the community inside of which Kurtz’s final words and their dark significance can circulate.

[5] Sedgwick calls into question the identification as:

flatly, transhistorically ‘homosexual’ of the male homosocial bonds that largely structure patriarchal culture. Precisely to the degree that this is a potent polemical move, it is a dangerous and demagogic one: its rhetorical kick depending on and hence reinforcing our own historically specific culture’s distaste, not in the first place for patriarchal oppression, but for homosexuality itself. (1994, p. 49)

REFERENCES


MASCULINE NARRATION IN HEART OF DARKNESS


