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Heart of Darkness and the Failure of Identity

Who am I? In Western cultures, the question is pervasive, being asked and answered in various forms across history. It is reflected in the way that movies and music and media are constructed to stake one's claim for identity regarding nationality, religion, race, politics, and everything between and beyond. It is explored in sciences such as psychology and sociology, where the answer given could tip the balance of a life. Naturally, the question of identity is also a major literary topic, just as it has been for centuries. Consider Conrad's 1899 novella *Heart of Darkness*, wherein the identity of a European sailor named Marlow is shaken by an expedition into the colonial Congo. Unlike many modern narratives, however, the novella is steeped in a lack of resolution, as though Marlow is no closer to an identity by the end—indeed, is even further away from one than when he began. This inconclusion is not just an artful quirk. Rather, *Heart of Darkness* serves to critique the limited identities accepted in Conrad's imperialistic society, drawing from Conrad's personal battle with identity in a way that uncomfortably echoes the struggles faced in today's individualistic societies.

Throughout Marlow's journey in the Congo, he runs up against an assortment of imperialistic characters. In his interpretation of the novella, David Ariniello distinguishes two possible roles for these characters to fill: hollow but concrete identities, and dangerously unanchored substance with endless potential. According to Ariniello, stable, unsubstantial identities are denoted by the labels that many characters have in place of names (53). This does not seem too terrible for the men aboard the *Nellie*, whose generalizing titles provide stability for

the cost of individuality. However, Marlow finds that this stability is overshadowed by want in the vacant figures of the Manager and the Brickmaker. The Manager holds an unearned position, having moved up the Company ladder by simple virtue of surviving what others could not. As a result, his station is a disorganized shrine to the god of ivory. While this unrestrained greed is contemptible to Marlow, it is almost more frustrating to him that the Manager pretends to have a moral substance that simply isn't there. Conrad repeats this disappointment in the character of the Brickmaker, described by Marlow as a "papier-mâché Mephistopheles" with "nothing inside but a little loose dirt, maybe" (26). The Brickmaker's obsession with securing a better position in the Company, despite never making any bricks to begin with, is enough to drive Marlow to the point of simply ignoring him. It would seem that a concrete identity is not enough—the Manager's identity is clear, but he and the Brickmaker have no substance, none of their "own true stuff" (36), as Marlow puts it, to honor. The stable role of a hollow title is clearly not enough for Marlow: from what he sees in the Congo, such people are prone to erosion from unsightly desires that counter the Victorian morals he likely aspires to. His hope, therefore, shifts to individuality unhindered by a vacant identity.

This other possibility identified by Ariniello, that of substantial, unbounded individuality, is perhaps most clearly embodied in Kurtz. Kurtz is not like the hollow Manager, who himself "inspired neither love, nor fear, nor even respect" (Conrad 21). In contrast to this, the responses that Kurtz inspires have the range of hatred from the other workers to worship from the African natives he encounters. Marlow himself tends toward worship—he is at least hopeful that Kurtz embodies the perfect individual identity. As Ariniello explains, Kurtz is "a name rather than a description," and as such, "he can be anything" (55). Indeed, Marlow learns throughout his journey that Kurtz is a little bit of everything: an artist, an author, and perhaps most of all, a

wondrously persuasive speaker. This is what makes him so dangerous. Marlow is wary of the African wilderness and the endless greed it seems to incite, but with no identity to hold him down, Kurtz finds in that very wilderness “things about himself which he did not know” (Conrad 57-58). The same potential for glory that springs from Kurtz’s lack of identity feeds the destructive hungers within himself that cause him to be lost. He labors wholeheartedly for his cause and as such holds power over his followers, so he is not hollow in the way of the Manager; but with no moral ground and no identity to stand on, he is not substantial in the ways that Marlow yearns for.

Having confronted the darkness of Kurtz, Marlow finds ample reason to reject the possibility of such an abstract identity. All his needs and hopes for identity become anchored instead in the image of Kurtz’s Intended, whom he finally meets upon returning to Europe a year after Kurtz’s death. In Lissa Schneider’s interpretation of this scene, Marlow’s dream of a comforting, quiet, perfect Victorian woman is shattered by the Intended’s need for comfort, desire to speak, and, ironically, her Victorian, unblemished devotion to Kurtz (478-9). She was Marlow’s last vestige of the ideal he worshipped, and when she failed him, he resorted to blatant deceit to revive his dream. I am compelled by Garrett Stewart’s claim that Marlow’s final lie stripped Kurtz’s death of meaning (329) because such an act would allow Marlow to strike from the books the horror of imperialism and return to him the world that imperialism promises: a world, according to J. Hillis Miller, of universal prosperity, democracy, and peace (473). Of course, Marlow is known for having renounced lies for their “flavour of mortality” (Conrad 27), so his act of dishonesty is also an act of sacrifice. He lays down his morals, even his sense of self, at the foot of the imperialistic machine. In doing so, he returns to the hollow identity that he

once eschewed. Perhaps if the Intended were to tell her story, Marlow would be reduced to the Sailor, a hollow man with stability to spare.

What remains, then, is a midpoint that Marlow never acknowledges: an identity that does not restrict individuality, like an anchor that can be lifted when the storms have passed. This possibility is invisible to Marlow because the sailor still clings to an ideology that has failed him, the cultural structure of imperialism that offers safety to all who sacrifice their names, the very structure that inches forward on the fire of burning greed stoked by silent outsiders. Marlow is hindered by the closed system of imperialism, which requires that imperialism be the best ideology to the point of all other ideologies being false (Said). Even though he has seen the disturbing mechanisms that drive his beliefs, Marlow is unable to conceive of a world without them, going so far as to believe that imperialism could even be untainted were it carried out selflessly (Stewart, 347).

At this point, a reader could very well consider the novella to be done and leave it be as a great literary work with little relevance to the current world. It is a tempting action to take, but as the countless responses to *Heart of Darkness* would suggest, there is more meaning to be gained from a second look. One reason for a deeper analysis is that to end the conversation here is to take Marlow at his word, and to suggest that Conrad, like Marlow, doesn't imagine a world beyond imperialism. According to J. Hillis Miller, many critics who take this stance are subsequently disappointed with the narrative's themes of racism, sexism, and Eurocentrism. The more substantial alternative is to consider the many literary devices within the novella as proof that Conrad does not espouse Marlow's beliefs and has instead crafted the sailor as a shockingly unreliable narrator in order to expose the many delusions and brutalities upon which imperialism stands. Critics from this end, such as Miller, often praise Conrad for his progressive thinking,

which they find to be evident in his attacking imperialism with weaponized irony (Cousineau; Said; Stewart). Though I agree that Conrad and Marlow are best understood as separate entities with different beliefs, Miller and others seem too generous in their praise of Conrad. In this respect, I am most convinced by midline arguments like that of Lissa Schneider. In her evaluation of the male idolization of female figures throughout Conrad's many works, she concludes that, while it is unclear if Conrad entirely opposes such practices, it is evident that he at least demystifies them (483). This conclusion is easily applied to Conrad's views of imperialism in general: though he questions and criticizes many aspects of the ideology, it seems unfounded to claim with certainty that he would like to see imperialism erased from the earth.

It is therefore reasonable to consider that the midpoint identity Marlow fails to see is intentionally, ironically evident in Conrad's construction of the narrative. As Thomas Cousineau explains, the systems of othering that run rampant in *Heart of Darkness* are only one approach to identity formation. In this approach, the qualities of others are used to define what one is not, providing an identity by elimination. According to Cousineau, this dynamic applies to groups in interesting ways: ingroups identify "others" to gain what is perceived as a personal benefit. Some outsiders are demonized as in the case of the Manager and the workers ostracizing Kurtz as a danger that, once eliminated, will bring peace. Some others are exalted, as when Marlow insists on Kurtz's grasp of language, implying that a failure of his diction would destroy Marlow's hope for survival. In this way, the social hierarchy of imperialism is created based on differences. Though this is the world that Marlow ultimately fails to escape, it is not the only possibility that Conrad offers. As Cousineau explains, Conrad posits that artists can only create collective experiences because every person has a hint of artistry within them—that, in this case, group identity depends on similarity far more than difference (Cousineau 150). Cousineau argues, and I

am inclined to agree, that such a space is evident in the frame narrative among the men on the *Nellie*, where Marlow's many differences are articulated without any intention of turning him into demon or god. Marlow is undeniably different from the other men, his audience, but the narrator reveals through comments about Marlow's usual storytelling that the sailor's oddities have done little to jeopardize his position among them. The phrase "It was just like Marlow" (Conrad 5) is not only proof of familiarity, but tangible evidence of the bond that is promised to exist among the men (3). Marlow is unique to the group and has always been, and there is no problem with that.

To understand the relative absurdity of such a hopeful community, it is useful to know the cultural beliefs Conrad is contradicting. Anthony Fothergill explains that in the time of Conrad's writing, European views of Africa had adapted to accommodate new desires for colonization. The others that had once been pitiable and in need of spiritual guidance became also irredeemably inferior, allowing them to be appropriated for physical labor. The land mass itself was a wild beast in need of "taming" by superior peoples (447). Even scientific breakthroughs suggesting an ancestral link between Europeans and African people became molded into a belief that native "savages" are evolutionarily challenged in comparison to Europeans (448). This flexibility of imperialistic viewpoints shows that the traits of the cultural other were (and are) used to define what the self is not. As Fothergill explains, "*How* these attributes were then evaluated depended on the needs to which the construction was put" (449, original emphasis). The process of identifying an other is therefore not based on reality, but rather on the most convenient way of identifying oneself or one's group as innately superior. For Conrad to portray, even in passing, a different social construction is therefore to threaten the cultural power that the European mindset had worked so fervently to create.

The threat becomes more evident for readers who take a second look at the imperialistic practices that are demystified in Conrad's portrayal of their failure of logic. Cousineau finds Conrad's repetition of the emblematic creation of outsiders to be particularly ironic considering that, whether Kurtz is vilified for the Company or deified for Marlow, the man becomes imbued with a significance he does not realistically carry (147). This is perhaps the most pressing failure of identity presented in the novella, that the imperialistic dichotomy of insiders and outsiders is dependent on illusions of grandeur that no person can fulfill. Furthermore, the differences that divide are not only unrealistic, but also vague: the Manager and the Brickmaker are despised by the other workers, but are not so othered as Kurtz. Marlow feels an outcast among the pilgrims, but as he himself realizes, he can be lumped in with all the other white men from the perspective of an African native. Marlow sometimes aligns himself more with the native men working for the Company, and still his narrative is riddled with an insistence of their often-inferior differences. Marlow stumblingly asserts that women are, should be, must be "out of it" (Conrad 48), even though women are very much a part of his journey and of the darkness he finds. It is unclear how many of these ironies Conrad intentionally used, but what is clear is that imperialism, like Marlow, cannot be counted upon for logical consistency.

To understand *Heart of Darkness* as even a partial satire, it must be interpreted as not an autobiography but a work of literature and fiction. Marlow is not Conrad and does not embody all of the author's beliefs—none of the characters do—but that does not mean that Conrad did not draw from the material of his own experiences. As a Polish expatriate, it is not a stretch to consider that the author would feel like an outsider in English society. In his analysis, Ariniello argues that the novella is Conrad's ticket into such patriotic cultures as the readership of *Blackwood Magazine*, the narrative's original publishing platform (52). Ariniello considers this

Conrad's conscious movement from the acceptance afforded to him as an English sailor to the recognition of himself as an individual (51). Conrad's evident motivation toward becoming an acknowledged insider may be traced to his self-knowledge of his status as an other, which clearly bothered him. However, to earn a place with the ingroup, Conrad would be expected to sacrifice pieces of his individuality. Konrad Korzeniowski became Joseph Conrad. His resistance toward the brutalities of imperialism became hidden in Marlow's layers of self-deceptive ambiguity. Like Marlow, his choice was between conventional identity and substantial individuality; unlike Marlow, this divisive decision revealed to him many of the unjust underpinnings of the normative ideology. He may not achieve the level of cultural enlightenment available today, but Conrad realizes and demystifies the illogical practice of othering, reaching a stage of understanding that Marlow does not attain. This turns *Heart of Darkness* into an exposition of the constraints that frustrate Conrad and subjugate Marlow.

The reality of a reliance upon "us" and "them" is that this is a false dichotomy by which the complex identities that every person carries must be simplified to the point of insignificance. Each person's concept of their self is subject to information from their experiences: who we are as individuals shapes and is shaped by our experiences, and simple logic finds that no two lives follow the exact same path. People are therefore necessarily different from one another, but the categorizations of "us" and "them" require that some differences be more important than others, and the less important differences become inconsequential. It is for this reason that, as Paul Armstrong observes, Marlow fails to enter into cultural dialogue with the African people he encounters—the natives are other, and the other is always wrong, too far removed to be worth speaking to. Alternatively, Kurtz as a glorified other creates a standard that no one dare meet: he is the sort who speaks, but never listens. Perhaps from his experiences as both an other and an

insider, Conrad provides the alternate possibility of a place where Marlow is recognized as other without becoming inhuman. Aboard the *Nellie*, Marlow is an outsider in many ways, most strikingly as a narrator to his audience; yet, his place in this dynamic is not defined by the difference between one and the other, but by the similarities that allow his audience to listen and to care (Cousineau 150). The fact that Marlow is still not a participant of dialogue may be suggestive of Conrad's inability to fully see beyond imperialism to a world of both individualism and equality where narrator and audience take turns and trade places. Even so, critics' interaction with the novella exemplifies the importance of such dialogue: as voices like Armstrong and Miller assert, the full meaning of Marlow's and Conrad's struggle with imperialism loses its potency when readers do not respond to the text. Just as dialogue shows dutiful respect for literature, when applied to interpersonal interactions, it shows respect for the people with whom we interact by creating spaces where similarities knit together all that a difference might divide.

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