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**“THE DREAMS OF MEN, THE SEED
OF COMMONWEALTHS, THE GERMS
OF EMPIRES”. THE IMPACT OF COLONIALISM
IN JOSEPH CONRAD’S *HEART OF DARKNESS***

“My task which I am trying to achieve is,
by the power of the written word,
to make you hear, to make you feel –
it is, before all, to make you see. (...)
If I succeed, you shall find there according
to your deserts (...) all you demand;
and, perhaps, also that glimpse of truth
for which you have forgotten to ask.”
– Joseph Conrad

“Our language determines our view of reality,
because we see things through it.”
– Ludwig Wittgenstein

Abstract: Despite accusations of racism and of upholding colonialism, *Heart of Darkness* reveals the problematic nature of the imperial enterprise. The dichotomy between superior versus inferior, us versus them, self versus other, embedded in colonial discourse, becomes challenging when considering that the foray into the Dark Continent reveals more about the character of Europeans. The outward journey of exploration of the still partially unknown Africa is mirrored by an inward journey that reveals the degenerate nature of the European identity. The geographical journey is doubled by an anthropological one, towards our earliest origins, as well as a psychological one, towards the primitive self.

Keywords: *Heart of Darkness; colonialism; disaster; degeneration; self; alienation.*

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Joseph Conrad strove to make his readers see through his written words, hoping to encourage them to glimpse and grasp the truth. Given that language determines how we view reality, he employed the ironic mode in *Heart of Darkness*, to reveal the problematic nature of colonial discourse. On the surface, his novel is an adventure tale, influenced by the travel writings of his times. Instead of its mere geographical or anthropological facets, what makes *Heart of Darkness* remarkable is what it reveals about the degeneration of Europeans heading into the uncharted territory of Africa. Conrad chose a title that underscores the power as well as the ambiguity of language. *Heart of Darkness* may suggest the heart of Africa (referring to the centre of the continent), but it may also refer to the human heart, to a place of evil as well as a place of corruption. It might be a heart corrupted by evil, but darkness also has connotations such as madness or the unknown, which may also be applied to the text. Marlow's voyage gives us an account of the blackness of Africa perceived as otherness for Kurtz who ultimately perishes there. Even the title requires further elucidation due to the versatility of language.

Heart of Darkness is a story of revelation in terms of the moral and mental corruption visited upon the Europeans heading into the depths of the African continent. In "*Heart of Darkness Revisited*", J. Hillis Miller investigates whether there is something apocalyptic about Conrad's novella in itself. The word apocalypse arrived in old English via Old French and ecclesiastical Latin from the Greek *apokalupsis* meaning to uncover / reveal, similarly to its use in the Bible, such as in the case of Paul in Romans, echoing Mathew's "revelation of the mystery". Thus, for Hillis Miller (207) "Apocalypse means unveiling (...) a narrative of unveiling or revelation". As he puts it, it becomes a narrative that tries to pierce the darkness and clarify:

As Marlow says of his experience in the heart of darkness: 'It was sombre enough too— . . . *not very clear either. No, not very clear. And yet it seemed to throw a kind of light*' (51). A narrative that *sheds light, that penetrates darkness, that clarifies and illuminates* – this is one definition of that mode of discourse called 'parabolic or apocalyptic', but it might also serve to define the work of criticism or interpretation. (Hillis Miller 207, my italics)

Joseph Conrad has his mouthpiece Marlow utter words aimed at this goal of unveiling the reality of colonialism. But throughout the text and in the aftermath of Marlow's story, the events narrated remain shrouded in mystery to a certain

extent. The attempt at elucidating the meaning behind both Marlow's and Kurtz's experiences in Africa does not yield a definite answer. When Marlow tells his story on board the *Nellie*, he is still trying to make sense of events, but as he does that, he becomes a guide for his listeners and is shown to be a somewhat enlightened figure, who has suffered for the knowledge attained: "Marlow sat cross-legged right aft, leaning against the mizzen-mast. He had *sunken cheeks, a yellow complexion, a straight back, an ascetic aspect*, and with his arms dropped, the palms of hands outwards, *resembled an idol, the pose of a Buddha preaching* in European clothes". (Conrad 3; 6, my italics) The mental anguish and moral qualms posed by the imperial project are reflected through physical distress once the subject starts seeing reality for what it is.

As Joseph Conrad puts it, he sought to make us "see" – what we, the readers, are meant to see is not related simply to external reality. Conrad sought to make us see ourselves, as well as the world. At the very beginning of the novella, Marlow sounds nostalgic when he talks about colonialism and empire: "The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires" (Conrad 5). However, throughout the text, the dreams of men are revealed to be those of greed and of yearnings for power, while the jungle becomes a claustrophobic, labyrinthine space that hinders rather than supports the attainment of one's dreams. Thus, a space where middle-class men went to achieve their lives' ambition to improve their station by gaining wealth, becomes nightmarish. The seed of commonwealths becomes even more problematic, since the colonists are revealed to live in isolation and to become alienated from humanity in general and from their culture in particular. Additionally, the 'noble cause' of imperialism is supposedly meant to bring people closer together by bridging the gap between the civilised Europeans and the barbaric Africans, but since imperialism merely paid lip-service to that so-called noble cause, nothing of the sort occurs. Finally, the germs of empires can be understood in two ways: either as the fountainhead of empires, or as a microbe that infects others. Even if the reference is to the starting point of an empire, it still leads to suffering and oppression in the long run, whereas in the case of an infection, it might refer to the corruption of those that start out as idealists, but who succumb to greed and a desire for power.

Many of the interpretations generated by *Heart of Darkness* are rooted in feminism, racism, postcolonialism and psychology. Conrad was denounced as a "bloody racist" by Chinua Achebe and as an enforcer of patriarchy by Elaine Showalter, while Edward Said criticized him for silencing the voices of those

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oppressed by imperialism. Other critics have looked towards psychological readings that turn Marlow's voyage into a journey of self-discovery and Kurtz into Marlow's shadow or double. In 1975, Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe claimed that Conrad's story was "bloody racist." Achebe stated the Africans were merely used as props and that Conrad did not bother to flesh out the African characters. In Achebe's view, Conrad failed to provide his characters with a voice and he focused on describing them as uncivilized in order to contrast them to the civilized Europeans. While right in essence, Achebe's view might be an oversimplification, given that he does not take into account Conrad's distance from Marlow, the narrator, unless it is as an accusation of creating a "cordon sanitaire" and the narrator is said to suffer from a "moral and psychological malaise". (Achebe 342) Furthermore, Achebe does not consider the change in mentality from the 1890s to the 1970s when he levels his accusation of racism at Conrad. The focus of *Heart of Darkness* is on the European discourses of power which end up being exposed as hypocritical through Kurtz's moral disintegration. Moreover, Conrad does not speak for colonial subjects and his target audience was one made up of middle- and upper-class readers "secure in the conviction" that they belonged to "an invincible power and a superior race". (Parry 1) Conrad could not afford to become alienated from his readers who were either civil servants or involved with the imperial project in the colonies. Furthermore, Conrad was writing a work of fiction rather than a sociological or anthropological account of colonialism. Conrad's mouthpiece, Marlow, still manages to reveal the worst transgressions of the hypocrisy and cruelty of imperialism.

Racist stereotypes provide a justification for colonial oppression in *Heart of Darkness*. The African characters are depicted as savages and Marlow does not make any effort in comprehending their behaviour or customs, which are regarded as utterly irrational. Marlow suggests that the only way to control the natives is through the use of violence, therefore, any European colonist who goes to Africa will have to resort to brutality. It seems as if the author indulges in a justification of this violence, since the colonists engage in cruelty, they starve and mutilate, they kill and they enslave. This self-serving behaviour is meant to increase the yield of the natural resources of the Congo, which goes against the rhetoric of the 'noble cause': the only desire of the Europeans is "to tear treasure from the bowels of the land...with no more moral purpose at the back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe." (Conrad 30) Conrad's portrayal of Belgian colonialism in the Congo does not glorify the violence, but shows it to be the result of moral

corruption and degradation. Similarly to other sources from the 19th century, Conrad seems to suggest that Belgian imperialism is damnable, but it needs to be distinguished from British imperialism, which seems to be superior. Despite Marlow's lack of interest in understanding the natives, he still regards them as human, though as less developed in accordance to Darwinian theory. The way the African characters are constructed was part of the reason why Conrad was accused of racism: their language is incomprehensible and there is no effort on Marlow's part to delve into tribal culture and rituals. On the other hand, the natives' primitiveness is seen as vibrant. The same type of liveliness seems to be imbued in Kurtz, who has gone native. In effect, Conrad is not focused on the portrayal of the natives because their savagery is not the point of interest in his text; what Conrad is concerned about is the atavism of the Europeans, the latent savagery within those who claim to be civilised and civilisers.

In addition, Achebe's own words when he talks about the "desire—one might indeed say the need—in Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe, a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest" (Achebe 337) can be used to argue that if Africa is Europe's foil, it is actually Europe that comes off worse in the comparison. The Europeans are meant to be civilised and superior, yet they fail in upholding their standards as seen through Kurtz's degeneration. When Conrad was writing *Heart of Darkness*, "the word racism did not exist," while the word race denoted something different, a meaning that would now be "replaced by terms like *nation* and *ethnic group*" (Firchow 4; 5) and it mostly referred to culture. In Edward Said's view culture has the power "to authorize, to dominate, to legitimate, demote, interdict, and validate: in short, the power of culture to be an agent of, and perhaps the main agency for, powerful differentiation within its domain and beyond it too." (Said 9) The superior civilization sets the rules of engagement and controls the inferior one. Despite indictments of pro-imperialism from critics, at the time of publication Conrad was delighted to find out that "his good friend, R. B. Cunninghame Graham, not only liked it but read it as anti-imperialist." (Collits 105) Therefore, readings of the text are steeped both in the time when it was written and published and anchored in the time when it was read.

Marlow thinks of his journey as "travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world" (Conrad 35) when it is in fact a voyage into the dark recesses of the self. The move beyond the boundaries of Western civilization allows Marlow to better

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understand the degenerate self of Europeans driven by greed and a desire for power. Since he is away from civilization, the world he encounters and the people he meets are not restrained by law or moral norms. Additionally, to some extent, they cannot be said to be part of a community. This solitary existence is grounded in the need for competition in the colonial territories, but this leads to disaster and destruction, at least in terms of identity. Kurtz's ambition: "I had immense plans", "the colossal scale of his vile desires" (Conrad 65, 73), is not achieved in the end, instead he transforms into someone unrecognizable. In part, the responsibility for this transformation could be assigned to the isolation and lack of contact with civilization, as Conrad states "We live, as we dream, alone." (Conrad 27) The solitary existence has taken a toll on Kurtz, since he is removed from any humanizing influences. Moreover, Kurtz has been stripped of the limitations of reason and conscience. The freedom and solitude of the jungle allow Kurtz's primitive instincts to gain the upper hand.

Throughout the text, Marlow is doing his duty as the captain of a ship and in the process becomes an observer of the cruelty and unfairness of colonialism. His participation in the imperial project is limited and marginal at best. He observes and offers some comments that indicate he is not entirely behind the way the subjects of colonialism are treated in the Congo. Nevertheless, this does not impede him from believing in the civilizing mission of imperialism. Western civilization's assumptions of moral superiority translate into a rationale for dominating others in the interest of so-called civilizing values. The novel starts with a parallel between London and Africa and the claim that London was once too an unexplored, dark, primitive wilderness, representing the unknown for the Roman colonists. Conrad had spent six months in the Congo, in miserable conditions, and felt that this time had "enormous physical and moral impact". (Najder 250) As a witness to European exploitation, Conrad creates a mouthpiece that reveals the ruthlessness and hypocrisy of the imperial enterprise. *Heart of Darkness* characterizes Belgian colonialism in opposition to the British and the Roman ones.

The colonial enterprise stands at the core of *Heart of Darkness*, the text gravitates towards a negative view of colonialism. But it oscillates between descriptions of Roman and Belgian colonialism, skirting around mentions of British colonialism. The Belgian colony of the Congo and the colonial practices of King Leopold II are specifically indicted, but no mention is made of British colonies in particular, yet there are subtle mentions of British explorers and of the Thames

becoming the source of enlightenment and religion, but also of violence and greed: “*Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame they all had gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire.*” (Conrad 5, my italics) So British imperial practices are also implied, yet a positive spin is put upon them, as an attempt for Conrad to retain his readership. Conrad took colonialism with a grain of salt, while Marlow seems to be distrustful of the so-called civilizing mission, given that the colonisers are devoid of the necessary qualities to achieve it.

Conrad revealed that the religious and moral justifications used in support of the imperial project were employed to conceal the reality: namely, that colonialism was rooted in greed and that the oppressed were controlled through brutality. He hoped to reveal the miserable situation in the Congo: “*Heart of Darkness* thus has its important public side, as an angry document on absurd and brutal exploitation.” (Guerard 326) The deception used to place greed and exploitation under the guise of a so-called ‘noble cause’ of educating, civilizing and christianising the natives was endemic. But the natives were in fact starved, mutilated or even murdered in the Congo.

These justifications were grounded on the assumption that the African race was inferior to the white race, which led to the construction of a discourse of power that provided Europeans with a rationale for their incursions into colonial territories: “Such an obviously inferior culture as the Europeans found in Africa must result from an inferior race, and such an innate inferiority justified imperial intrusion.” (White 30) To further validate the imperial project of a variety of Western nations, imperialism turns supposedly benevolent and paternalistic:

The image of the white man (...) is of a benign, even benevolent father figure and agent of improvement. (...) The moral superiority [Speke] attributes to the imperial endeavor and its hero justifies, even necessitates, their incursion into Africa, for while being commercially advantageous to the British, it is morally beneficial to the African, an extremely convenient equation. (White 33-4)

Supposedly creating a win-win situation, the imperial project is pushed forth since the British Empire had something to gain financially, while the situation of the Africans would improve from the perspective of education and civilization. However, the negative aspects of Africans were exaggerated so as to gain more

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support on the home front: “missionaries were strongly tempted to exaggerate ‘savagery’ and ‘darkness’ in order to rationalize their presence in Africa, to explain the frustrations they experienced in making converts, and to win support from mission societies at home.” (Brantlinger 60) Thus, the discourse of colonialism and imperialism becomes destructive in that it polarizes the Africans and Europeans. However, *Heart of Darkness* partly subverts this dichotomy, since the European colonisers suffer and degenerate.

The discourse employed by Conrad does not make use of the term imperialism and it barely mentions the word colonists as a contrast to conquerors in the discussion of the Roman conquest of Britain: “They were no *colonists*, their administration was merely a squeeze, and nothing more, I suspect. They were *conquerors*, and for that you want only brute force” (Conrad 6-7, my italics). Here ‘colonists’ is clearly meant to be thought of favourably and ‘conquerors’ unfavourably. Ironically, of course, the very word *colonist* is of Roman derivation.” (Firchow 14) Conrad’s discourse, like any imperial discourse of power, establishes Africa as a place of darkness, savagery and lack of knowledge, which serves “the extension of empire, [given that] the African needed the white man’s help if he was to progress towards a more civilized and truly liberated state.” (White 29) But there was no true exchange of knowledge, since the Victorians did not feel they had anything to learn from the Africans. (White 29) Moreover, in imperialist discourse, it is only the dominant culture that is expressed: “in imperialist discourse the voices of the dominated are represented almost entirely by their silence, their absence.” (Said 9)

Thus, the establishment of the dichotomy is the purview of the Europeans, without any input from the Africans. Lopsided though the construction of the discourse of power may be, there is a purpose to it, since it reveals the desire to make the Africans invisible and easily controlled. According to Patrick Brantlinger, “Discourse – that most subtle yet also inescapable form of power – in its imperial guise persists, for example, in the most recent assumptions about the antithesis between ‘primitive’ or ‘backward’ and ‘civilized’ or ‘advanced’ societies.” (Brantlinger 81) Aside from this persistence, the imperial discourse in *Heart of Darkness* is also imbued with irony and it reveals the hypocrisy of the imperial project:

The French ship was conducting one of their wars by shelling enemies; the natives of the chain-gang are *criminals*; a debased native is *one of the reclaimed*;

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the workers are generally destructive rather than constructive, and often slothful as well; Kurtz's victims are *rebels*; and Kurtz's megalomaniac depravity is, according to the manager, the *vigorous action* for which the time was not ripe: *an unsound method*. If the Europeans were presented as consciously hypocritical, the tale would be less disturbing, for conscious hypocrisy entails the recognition of the truth. But what we see is a credited lie, a sincerity in the use of purposive jargon for destructive action. (...) repeatedly we are shown men for whom the world is re-created in the image of the falsehoods that sanction destruction and callousness, and whose falsehoods cohere in a logical structure. (Watts *Darkness* 112)

Cedric Watts reveals that the hypocrisy of spin doctoring the discourse related to imperialism demonstrates that colonialism was a morally bankrupt project. It was grounded in falsehoods and exaggerations and it led to oppression and brutality. This is further shown in the use of phrases such as "'weaning those ignorant millions', 'enemies criminals, workers ... rebels', 'unsound method' or 'leader of an extreme party' [which] are invested with sardonic irony." (Watts *Heart* 57) The use of such language in the 19th century however was not usually invested with irony, it is Conrad who is ahead of his time in revealing the transgressions of colonialism through language. In general, the discourse of power in the 19th century was purposefully employed to validate and consolidate the position of empires. The claim of the imperial power was bolstered by privileging one pole of the dichotomy at the expense of the other:

The discursive power here, as well as its proliferation, works to manufacture attitudes but also, as Said argues, to render the machinery itself invisible. Speke's imagery promotes his readers' acceptance, silently; as covering nakedness is a commendable action to this discourse's Victorian audience, so must be opening markets and clearing the way for those unquestionably privileged goals of civilization and enlightenment. (White 33)

The mechanisms of power are concealed through discourse with the aim of attaining new colonial territories. The objective was to obtain power under the guise of the noble cause of educating and christianising the natives. Kurtz's eloquence uses this same strategy, but he undermines himself when concluding the pamphlet with the exclamation: "Exterminate all the brutes!" (Conrad 50) The

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power of discourse goes both ways, yet in a text written in the 19th century, the dominated are never given a voice, as opposed to the representatives of the colonial centre, such as Marlow and Kurtz.

Taking a steamer up the Congo to the Inner Station, Marlow had hoped to soon meet up with Kurtz, of whom he had heard before reaching Africa. Rumours regarding Kurtz's plans to civilize the natives had reached even Marlow. But the encounter with Kurtz is constantly postponed and it feels as if the readers are taken along on a quest, creating a portrait of Kurtz out of the textual clues provided prior to the meeting. Marlow's reluctance to meet Kurtz might be due to his own fears since Marlow recognizes in Kurtz certain impulses towards savagery that he himself has. Both Marlow's and the readers' expectations are set up, enhanced and subsequently disappointed when it comes to meeting Kurtz. Marlow expects to meet a powerful, charismatic figure, but that is not the case. If initially Kurtz was in fact such a figure, once he loses ground in terms of morality and civilization, it seems he is also physically diminished, as if his mental state has an impact in physical realm. When the meeting finally occurs, Kurtz is described a mere shadow of himself, as a result of an ailment.

The information about Kurtz, collected by Marlow along the way, is scarce and scattered and it is a difficult endeavour to imagine Kurtz: "The thing to know was what he belonged to, how many *powers of darkness* claimed him for their own. That was a reflection that *made you creepy all over*. It was impossible—not good for one either—trying to imagine." (Conrad 48-9, my italics) Kurtz is seen as belonging to the darkness after years spent in Africa, which creates a feeling of uneasiness in those who encounter him. The powers of darkness seem to be able to sink their hooks into Kurtz as a result of his alienation from his culture. The isolation of the self from one's culture becomes paramount in the telling of the story of a civilised man who arrives at a disillusioned discovery in terms of the brutality that lies beneath the thin layer of civilization.

Newly arrived in Africa, Marlow feels that uneasiness, since he is still grounded in the culture he hails from, whereas Kurtz has severed that connection through his degeneration: "There was nothing either above or below him—and I knew it. *He had kicked himself loose of the earth*. Confound the man! he had kicked the very earth to pieces. He was alone – and *I before him did not know whether I stood on the ground or floated in the air*." (Conrad 66, my italics) In Kurtz's case it feels as if he is no longer anchored in Western civilization, but given Conrad's word choice it sounds as if he had excised it voluntarily. On the other hand, Marlow seems to

be unable to get his bearings as a result of Kurtz's influence. For Kurtz, the colonial territory represents a space of freedom, of absolute power and of control over those he oppresses. Thus, his self-discovery is partly due to a lack of restraint and an atavistic desire for a more primitive self. Kurtz reverts to a more barbaric self, partly through his 'going native', in other words, his constant contact with the Africans.

Going back, for the Victorians, would mean abandoning "the cultural acquisition of 'civilization'", risking degeneration. (Griffith 4) The journey towards primitivism is not only a geographical one, but rather a psychological one. As Michael Levenson puts it, the movement through physical space is not as important as "the journey into self", the "introspective plunge", the "night journey into the unconscious" and what is found at the center of it, namely Kurtz "as a suppressed avatar lurking at the core of the self." (Levenson 56) Victorians were rather anxious about any contact they had with those they regarded as inferior, due to their fears of "degeneration and atavism [which] inevitable accompanied colonization." (Griffith 5) The most prevalent fear was that due to such contact, they would devolve in a manner similar to Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, being unable "to maintain their cultural identities". (Griffith 6) Kurtz's devolution is understandable since he has most contact with the natives, few interactions with other Europeans and seems to be involved in a relationship with an African mistress, which indicates miscegenation.

By the time the encounter occurs, Marlow understands that Marlow has fallen short of his ideals and has come to commit barbarous acts. Before this realization, Marlow had believed Kurtz to be remarkable due to his idealism, learning and eloquence and had hoped to witness the latter's achievements. When Marlow reaches Kurtz, nothing is left of that idealism: Kurtz is now insatiable in his greed for ivory and power, so much so that he has "taken a high seat among the devils of the land." (Conrad 49) Kurtz, who was initially an idealist, was described as well-educated, charismatic and eloquent. For the natives, he becomes godlike, but in light of Victorian morality, he turns demonic. He embodies the process of transformation undergone by civilized men as they delve into the heart of darkness. Conrad tells us that "All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz." (Conrad 49) He is constructed as a paragon of European virtue, through the words of those who describe him to Marlow. In the novella, Kurtz reverts to primitivism, failing to uphold his European customs and ideals. This "reversion to savagery" (McClure 132) marks Kurtz's metamorphosis as "a strange and ominous transformation had taken place in Mr. Kurtz's personality; like a snake shedding

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its skin, he had cast off all his fine European habits and ideals, revealing a creature whose condition of moral degradation and animal primitivism made him indistinguishable from the savages for whom he had once expressed such touching concern." (Meyer 156) The discrepancy between the Kurtz described by his European acquaintances and his Intended, in other words between the Kurtz prior to his African experiences and the one Marlow encounters, is blatant and compelling in understanding just how far the degeneration of the civilised European may go when he is uprooted from his native soil and left rudderless.

According to Cedric Watts, Max Nordau, in his essay "Rabies Africana, and the Degeneracy of Europeans in Africa" (1891),

distinguishes between two opposed European attitudes toward Africa, which he identifies as either that of the 'Hypocrites' or the 'Cynics:' 'The former say: 'We take Africa in order to improve the condition of the natives;' the latter state, 'We pocket Africa for our own profit.' The Cynics have at least the merit of sincerity' (Nordau 70). Nordau's Hypocrites are Conrad's shams; and his cynics are Conrad's madmen. (Watts *Darkness* 112)

Kurtz turns from hypocrite to cynic within the pages of *Heart of Darkness*, though his hypocrisy is not intentional initially. Later in the text he focuses on profit to the exclusion of everything else. The initial idea of Kurtz's psychology might have been prompted by a section of Max Nordau's *Degeneration*. Conrad was in contact with Nordau, having received a written tribute to *The Nigger of the Narcissus* in 1898. Nordau's work had already been in print for three years. (Watts *Darkness* 113-4) Nordau sought "lingering survivals of the savage, primitive and pre-moral within the natures of civilised men". (Nordau 261n) This is prevalent in the way Kurtz's character is constructed. The latent primitivism is revealed once Kurtz is immersed in the wilderness of Africa, as if a previously hidden aspect of his personality emerges. According to Cedric Watts, Kurtz fits the typology of the highly gifted degenerate, which seems to be the psychological basis for the character of Kurtz

Conrad emphasises an atavistic response to man's evolutionary heritage (rather than some complex resulting from traumas in his upbringing) as the key to Kurtz's decline. Kurtz, true to type, has the traits of meanness and pettiness, co-existing with brilliant qualities; he has the salient quality of genius without moral stability; and he even appears to have the gigantic bodily stature that Nordau mentions, for, to Marlow, he looked at least seven feet long. (Watts *Darkness* 115)

Max Nordau discusses this typology and there are evident parallels with Kurtz, especially in the way he is able to use his faculties in service of the imperial project and how he manages to corrupt and delude those he interacts with. Kurtz is initially an active force in the so-called progress of mankind, until his insanity makes itself known when he turns into a “will-of-the-wisps” guiding his followers into a wasteland. (Nordau 22-4) Ultimately, Kurtz turns into a corrupting influence: “Nordau, for instance, claimed that civilization was being corrupted by the influence of people who were morally degenerate; and his account of the ‘highly gifted degenerate’, the charismatic yet depraved genius, may have influenced Conrad’s depiction of Kurtz.” (Watts *Heart* 46) From the idealist believing in the noble cause of imperialism and trying to civilise the savages, Kurtz turns into the cynic focused on profit, who reveals the truth about the imperial enterprise’s true purpose. Kurtz turns away from civilization and reverts to primitivism; his transformation is evocative of the existence of a latent primitive self within civilised men. The primitive self is revealed within a setting that is marked by darkness, savagery and wilderness, suggesting the importance of the environment and of those one interacts with. Kurtz’s corrupting influence is, however, limited since he does not interact with other European agents sufficiently.

Kurtz’s arrival in Africa is marked by his yearning to assist in the spread of civilization. At the very beginning of his stay, he is asked to write a report for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs. Kurtz’s discourse on civilization and on redeeming the savages is quite eloquent, but his eloquence is meant to control and manipulate and hides his own savagery. The report on savage customs, which sounds promising and compelling initially, is undermined by Kurtz’s note at the end: “Exterminate all the brutes!” (Conrad 50) The bluntness and callousness of the exclamation reveal Kurtz’s devolution and indifference. The journey into the unknown, away from everything that is familiar, can lead to a loss of identity since the self is no longer firmly planted in the native soil, but rather seems to float or be set loose:

the stability of an individual’s sense of identity depends directly on the ‘innumerable identifications’ he has established with the familiar, personal and impersonal, concrete and abstract, animate and inanimate objects of his past and present existence. When these many identifications are threatened, as for example when an individual’s social or physical environment changes rapidly, his sense of identity will be challenged. (Wengle 153)

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The Europeans travelling to Africa are spatially displaced and alienated from their culture. In fact, travelling to faraway, unknown lands gave shape to fears related to the loss of self and to becoming decivilized, fears that were connected to the unfamiliarity of the colonial territories and to the belief that the colonial subjects were “inherently debased”. (Griffith 20; 72)

Kurtz has an undeserved reputation of striving to redeem the colonial enterprise and civilize the savages, in accordance to his moral ideals. Yet Marlow discovers there is nothing noble in Kurtz’s interactions with the natives. Indeed, such ideals were part of Kurtz’s mission initially, yet he soon casts them aside: partly, to compete with the other agents and become the one who sends in more ivory than all the others put together, and partly because he comes to enjoy his sense of superiority. Once he becomes accustomed to power, he discards his mission and even his morals fade away. Primitivism takes root and he devolves in committing casual cruelty:

“But,” as Marlow says, “*the wilderness had found him out early and taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude—and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating. It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core...*” (Conrad 57-8, my italics)

In a sense, Marlow seems to suggest that the so-called wilderness had taken revenge on Kurtz for the fact that he dared to invade the wild geographical space of Africa. This idea that the personified wilderness might take revenge on the invaders is further supported by Marlow’s words, when later reflecting on the moment of Kurtz’s death, reminiscing of “*the heart of a conquering darkness. 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.*” (Conrad 73, my italics) Therefore Kurtz’s intrusion, as an embodiment of European interference, condemns him to live in the wilderness, in isolation and that solitariness turns Kurtz introspective, which in turn allows him to make certain self-discoveries and attain self-knowledge. Additionally, the transformation revealed to Kurtz things he did not know about himself, including the fact that he was a hollow man, lacking a moral/spiritual core. It is implied that Kurtz gained a terrible self-knowledge. In interacting with Kurtz, Marlow also gains that same

knowledge and, perhaps, Conrad hopes for his contemporaries, the Victorian readers to reach the same understanding without undergoing the same experiences.

The way Kurtz is constructed as a character suggests that he is an epitome of virtue, yet he becomes corrupted. But if someone with Kurtz's qualifications fails to uphold morality, then who would not succumb to temptation? The duration of his stay in the jungle and the constant contact with the natives have taken a toll, since his individuality is predicated on his desire for power and on his greed, as well as the adulation and terror of those he oppresses. This, in turn, leads to his insanity. Without restraints to weigh him down, either in terms of law or in terms of conscience, Kurtz is free to act as he likes. Kurtz confers himself the status of a god to emphasise his superior standing and, perhaps, feels that mere constraints in terms of social and moral norms no longer apply to him. His madness reveals itself through his violence as well as his obsession with possessing everything: "my ivory...my intended...my river...my station". (Conrad 48) The insane arrogance displayed by Kurtz becomes a symbol for European colonisers and their degeneration: moving from a supposed desire to improve the backward territories and their population to their exploitation and destruction. Kurtz's savagery implicitly indicts the imperial project and questions the assumption that a supposedly superior, more civilised nation is capable of civilising less fortunate people.

Running amok in a lawless land, Kurtz is consumed by his primitive instincts, which is reflected in the brutality with which he suppresses the natives. Accordingly, he has the natives make sacrifices to him and kills them off in great numbers, as evinced by the row of impaled human heads surrounding his hut:

I had been struck at the distance by certain attempts at ornamentation, rather remarkable in the ruinous aspect of the place. Now I had suddenly a nearer view and its first result was to make me throw my head back as if before a blow. (...) These round knobs were not ornamental but symbolic; they were expressive and puzzling, striking and disturbing – food for thought and also for vultures (...). Only one, the first I had made out, was facing my way. I was not so shocked as you may think. The start back I had given was really nothing but a movement of surprise. I had expected to see a knob of wood there, you know. I returned deliberately to the first I had seen – and there it was black, dried, sunken, with closed eyelids – a head that seemed to sleep at the top of that pole, and with the shrunken dry lips showing a narrow white line of the teeth, was smiling

too, smiling continuously at some endless and jocose dream of that eternal slumber.
(Conrad 57)

Marlow's expectations of meeting a cultured European, a leader among the other agents, a symbol of successful imperialism, a man he was there to save, are revealed to be delusions the moment he sets his eyes on what Kurtz chooses to use as decorations for the enclosure of his cabin. He can no longer regard Kurtz as someone to be admired or followed as a leader, and, perhaps, he might also realize that though he might be able to save Kurtz's body by taking him away from the wilderness, the mind and soul have already been corrupted. Marlow's illusions of imperialism as a force of positive influence are also shattered. Conrad's choice of words – "throw my head back as if before a blow", "expressive and puzzling, striking and disturbing" – are a sincere revelation of Marlow's reactions to what he perceives as a mark of Kurtz's degeneration, and by implication, a stain on the positive image of the imperial enterprise. Marlow then tries to mitigate the strength of the initial reaction "not as shocked as you may think", "the start back I had given was really nothing but a movement of surprise" suggesting that Marlow's surprise was only due to his mundane expectations of seeing inanimate, wooden ornaments, when in fact what he was seeing were fleshy ornaments, albeit still inanimate in the stillness of death. Marlow closely observes one head in particular, which seems to be smiling because of the shrunken lips: "smiling continuously at some endless and jocose dream of that eternal slumber", that smile seems to make a mockery of Marlow's shattered illusions, of the tarnished reputation of European imperialism, of Marlow's disappointment in Kurtz. Whether the natives can be regarded as inferior to the Europeans and can be regarded as needful of the latter's 'civilising' influence no longer has a bearing on how Marlow regards the 'noble cause' or Kurtz as an incarnation of it. The rotting flesh becomes symbolic of the decaying morals and ideals behind the imperial enterprise. No matter how degenerate the native, the degeneration of Europeans that Marlow glimpses in that moment of revelation is far more worrying.

The degenerate nature of the Africans "provided (...) a perfect excuse for the rehabilitating influence of Europe," since they were incapable of governing themselves and this justified the need for foreign domination; however, it was also a double-edged sword, since "the ability of Europeans to rule was founded upon their resistance to degeneration." (Griffith 73) Thus, if Europeans fell prey to degeneracy, they would no longer be fit for the role they had assigned to

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themselves. Marlow comes to the realization that Kurtz's degeneration makes him unfit to lead, to civilise others and to take responsibility for the lives and improvement of the natives. As an embodiment of Empire, Kurtz's degeneration becomes a warning that even those who are educated, civilised, and cultured can revert to primitivism, barbarity and savagery. Even more problematic was the belief that the so-called savages had been civilised in the past and that they had reverted to a state of barbarism, as this could provide a warning for what might happen to Western civilization as well: "Contrary to the impression of the Victorian era as confident and melioristic, the exploration of other cultures such as Africa mirrored back to the Victorians disturbing images of recidivism that sometimes shook their faith in the very idea of progress." (Griffith 77) This preyed upon Victorian anxieties prevalent in the 1890s and the belief that civilizations are cyclic.

Unrestrained by law or conscience, Kurtz's behaviour culminates in evil and appalling acts. His madness and his moral corruption are caused partly by alienation and isolation, but also by primitive instincts that can be found in all men. It is only at the time of his death that Kurtz realizes how degraded he has become. His death scene marked by his last words: "The horror! The horror!" provides a clue to the fact that Kurtz has come to realize his moral depravity:

It was as though a veil had been rent. I saw on that ivory face the expression of sombre pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror – of an intense and hopeless despair. Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision – he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath: 'The horror! The horror!' (Conrad 68, my italics)

The metaphor of unveiling or shedding light or illuminating appears several times in *Heart of Darkness*. The very darkness of the title could refer to the reality of colonialism which needs to be unveiled. As stated earlier, however, things remain shrouded in mystery in terms of the meaning of Marlow's and Kurtz's experiences in Africa. In this instance, too, there is no conclusive explanation. What was hidden behind the veil that is rent is still unclear. Why Kurtz feels craven terror and intense and hopeless despair is never revealed fully. Even in his storytelling, Marlow is clearly groping in the dark. He tells the story in order to make sense of his experience, but the account is convoluted and it includes pauses and gaps. It

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feels as if Marlow has a hard time grasping the full meaning of either Kurtz's words or his own experiences in Africa. Marlow also has a hard time accepting that his illusions have been shattered. It appears that Kurtz attains some profound knowledge at his time of death and the way to react to that is to utter the words "The horror! The horror!" But the meaning is never explained, therefore readers and critics can only make assumptions about the possible meaning of the complete knowledge Kurtz has reached. The interpretations of Kurtz's final words are varied – they might refer to Kurtz's degeneration and corruption, or to a life poorly lived or to a meaningless universe: "Perhaps they refer to Kurtz's corruption, perhaps to the horror of a senseless universe. But there may be another meaning: no final resolution is offered." (Watts *Heart* 57) It is possible that, while Kurtz never gets the chance to reveal what knowledge he has attained, the knowledge is, in a sense, transferred to Marlow who has witnessed Kurtz's utterance.

Marlow feels a sense of kinship with Kurtz and grasps the similarities between the two of them. Perhaps he understands that living under the same conditions as Kurtz, he too might succumb to moral corruption and might become degenerate. In a sense, Kurtz's realisation becomes universal for the colonisers. Living in the wilderness and dealing with the darkness, primitiveness and savagery of both land and people, Marlow believes that his own savage nature might emerge. Kurtz's death occurs as Marlow tries to bring him back to civilization. Marlow is unable to rescue Kurtz, especially since the latter tries to resist and the two wrestle. Marlow's mission, to return Kurtz to civilisation, can be understood both literally – bringing him out of the jungle – and metaphorically – trying to make him shed his corruption and degeneration. But Kurtz's death suggests that once degeneration and corruption occur, a return to normality, to civilization, is impossible. There seems to be no protection against corruption and degeneration. The primordial journey into the jungle reveals the thin veneer formed by civilization, whereas greed and the desire for power break through that veneer to reveal the savagery and cruelty beneath.

Marlow recognises himself in Kurtz, turning the latter into a possible double for Marlow. Thus, Kurtz is set up as a symbolic double. Marlow's initial admiration for Kurtz is predicated on the latter's quest to civilize the savages. Kurtz's current madness serves as a final warning for Marlow in terms of the effects of the wilderness on European colonisers. The impact of colonialism on those who are alienated from their culture as a result of the isolation involved in the work undertaken in the colonial territories is one that cannot be easily

forestalled or impeded. His expectations regarding civilization are shattered beyond redemption, despite his hopeful ideals at the onset. The effect emerges from within the heart, soul and mind, though there are physical effects as well. The doctor's words at the beginning of *Heart of Darkness* can be recalled at this point, since he mentions that "moreover the *changes* take place *inside*". (Conrad 11, my italics) The statement comes right before asking Marlow if there "'Ever [was] any madness in your family?'" (Conrad 12) Another warning comes in the form of an account of Captain Fresleven's death and the recounting of the change from a gentle creature to one who reacts with extreme violence at the slightest provocation. Even before Marlow's departure towards Africa, Conrad foreshadows the possible changes that might occur on the level of the psyche and of identity.

However, the first signal that something might go wrong during the journey to Africa is represented by the women at the company's headquarters, who seem to stand in for the Fates (*Moirae/Parcae*) who control the thread of destiny:

uncanny and fateful. Often far away there I thought of these two, guarding the door of Darkness, knitting black wool as for a warm pall, one introducing, introducing continuously to the unknown, the other scrutinising the cheery and foolish faces with unconcerned old eyes. 'Ave! Old knitter of black wool. Morituri te salutant.'

The warnings abound in this short excerpt, since the women use black wool to knit a pall, preparing for the deaths of more than half of those who depart. Additionally, the women introduce the potential agents into the unknown by guarding the door of Darkness, and those who pass through the door salute them saying: those who are about to die salute you, as the gladiators did the Roman emperor. The knitting women become the mythic references that universalize Marlow's individual journey, turning it into a descent into the underworld. The underworld is represented by the wilderness, on the one hand, and by the primitive self and its capacity for savagery and evil, on the other. We can assume that other agents travelling to the Congo had gone through the same ritual of being invited into the unknown by the knitting women, Kurtz included. Despite the descent into the underworld of both Marlow and Kurtz, neither is reborn or redeemed in a strict sense, and they both suffer physically and mentally. Marlow, however, is lucky enough to return from his ordeal, whereas Kurtz, who had not

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retained his moral/spiritual integrity and his civilized identity pays the ultimate price. Thus, the mythic references become ironic.

In the aftermath of having his illusions shattered, Marlow returns to civilization and renders Kurtz a final service, by visiting his acquaintances and his Intended. At this point, the realization he has come to is not fully articulated and therefore it is unspeakable. It is only later, by telling the story of his adventures in Africa, that Marlow can start to make sense of the events that transpired. His visits reveal a lionized Kurtz in the words of his friends – they all believe Kurtz to have been a noble man, devoted to christianising and civilizing the savages. The Intended harbours the same delusions about Kurtz's character. Marlow is appalled by the conflicting images of Kurtz, who was in fact unfaithful, violent, lustful and arrogant. However, he feels that revealing all of this to her would serve no purpose and would be hurtful so he reassures her and lies about Kurtz's last words. The Intended stands in for civilization: "The ending of the novel and Marlow's infamous lie to the Intended, who is metonymic of 'civilization', is a typically Conradian attempt to shore up the fragile edifice that is the false concept of civilization or culture." (Griffith 94) The young woman's fragility is echoed by Marlow's realization that civilization, too, is fragile, easily shattered. Marlow's delusions regarding the true meaning of being civilised are also effortlessly crushed. So, Marlow is in part rejoicing that he has been able to return to civilization, but he is also aware of the hypocrisy of his position in bowing his head to social convention and upholding the lies believed by the Intended:

Having witnessed the horrible truth of an 'uncivilized' Kurtz in the root sense of a man isolated from society, Marlow returns to the *civis*, the 'sepulchral city', to cast flowers at the foot of the tomb of civilized lies: 'bowing my head before the faith that was in her, before 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 have defended myself' (Conrad 75). In an obviously sexist formulation, women are the upholders of the beautiful lies of civilization because so few of them have been acquainted with the worlds where such lies are exposed the world of colonialism. (Griffith 94)

The Intended remains a symbol of civilization, that, in its fragility, needs to be protected. Marlow tells his lie since he realizes that his repressing the truth will allow her to not suffer the same disillusion he did. Marlow now knows that

beneath the veneer of civilization lies darkness and feels compelled to protect the Intended from that darkness and the knowledge of it. Moreover, to be civilised is to repress savage instincts and primitive behaviours and to adhere to norms of conduct, meaning that civilization, in a sense, means to lie to oneself, too. In believing Marlow's words and continuing her delusion regarding Kurtz's supposed nobility, the Intended embraces the righteousness of Western imperialism and she can remain a symbol of civilization.

In conclusion, the journey into the Dark Continent, and implicitly, into the heart of darkness becomes a test for the Europeans who dare to venture there. Conrad had looked into the darkness, was unsettled by what he saw there and tried to bring that awareness to others. Conrad chronicles the mental degeneration and moral corruption that breaks down identity and that makes Europeans unfit to civilise others. In *Heart of Darkness*, the self comes apart, when subjected to sufficient stress and insufficient restraint. Another factor that participates in the loss of identity is the isolation and distance from one's own culture. Additionally, the contact with primitive cultures can lead to a devolution. The lack of connection to civilization and the immersion into primitive culture creates an initial anguish, which later turns into a pursuit of a life without restraints. Without rules and laws, the identity of the European slowly melts away, revealing what lies beneath, perhaps the real identity that had been repressed. In Kurtz's case, underlying the cultured European persona, there is corruption, madness and degeneration. Yet, Kurtz stands for the whole of Europe, since it was the whole of Europe that contributed to his existence. Thus, the degenerate Kurtz, as the embodiment of Western civilisation and of European imperialism, essentially reveals Europe's own heart of darkness.

The text speaks to prevalent fears in the Victorian Age regarding the cyclicity of civilizations, fears of degeneration and the dissolution of the self. As Conrad aptly reminds his readers, Britain too had been one of the dark places of the earth, during the Roman subjugation. Thus, from the savagery and wilderness of Britain as a Roman colony, to a time when the British Empire was at its peak, Britain had evolved. However, the fall of the Roman Empire functions as a warning: "This is a rebuke to empire-builders and to believers in the durability of civilization; it invokes a humiliating chronological perspective; and it may jolt the reader into circumspection." (Watts *Heart* 58) Britain was to the Romans in the past, what Africa was to the Europeans in the present. From the peak, the only way to go is down, towards a decline of the British Empire, hence, anxieties regarding moral

corruption and degeneration ran rampant at the time. The 1890s reveal such anxieties and other similar ones regarding the menace of science, reversed colonialism, inner demons of the primitive self, effeminate masculinity, masculine femininity, devolution, degeneration and the like – all posing a threat to the British Empire and its future prosperity – through a plethora of gothic novels such as Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and Herbert George Wells' *The Island of Dr. Moreau* and *The Time Machine*, to name but a few. In a sense, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* inscribes itself in this trend of locating the perils and threats not in the geographical space (in the aforementioned texts it is not the physical landscape that makes them gothic) but within the human mind and body, which are revealed to be mutating and decaying leading to corruption and degeneration, which has further implications on the possibility that civilization might be in a state of decline.

Marlow had embarked upon this journey beyond the limits of Western civilization with a sense of wonder, hoping for a chance to explore the formerly "blank spaces" on the map of the Dark Continent, only to discover that "it had become *a place of darkness*." (Conrad 8, my italics) Therefore, what he discovers in Africa is terror, cruelty and savagery, and it is not the natives who perpetuate it, but the so-called civilisers. Marlow embodies Victorian values and tries to preserve them, but in encountering those who have flouted the rules of society and civilization, he also undergoes a spiritual crisis. Marlow becomes mentally aware of the (im)moral implications of the imperial project and starts to better understand the discourse propounded as well as the impact of colonialism not only on the natives, but also on those who venture into the unknown: "I couldn't have felt more of *lonely desolation* somehow, had I been *robbed of a belief* or had *missed my destiny* in life". (Conrad 47, my italics) This newly acquired awareness makes him feel desolate and isolated as well as unsettled. The wilderness affects those who live in it and turns them into *deracinés* who have lost their bearings. The darkness of Africa is predicated on the presumed light of Western cultures: "Africa grew 'dark' as Victorian explorers, missionaries, and scientists flooded it with light, because the light was refracted through an imperialist ideology that urged the abolition of 'savage customs' in the name of civilization." (Brantlinger 43) This darkness is grounded on the imperialist discourse and the dichotomies it sets up.

Heart of Darkness deals with the economic exploitation and, ultimately, the power, that are intrinsic aspects of colonialism and imperialism. Kurtz, the idealist,

did not yearn for power, but Kurtz, the competitive agent of Empire, who had gone native, lives for it. His story is steeped in the discourse of colonial power, which privileges those who have power at the expense of those who do not. So, *Heart of Darkness* posits “the adoption of a demeaning attitude to colonized people in the attempt to vindicate the exploitative actions of the colonizer.” (Watts *Heart* 57) The very yearning for power at the expense of what makes one civilised is alarming. The imperial discourse of power favours the view that advanced nations can take on the responsibility to educate, christianise and civilise the backward peoples of the colonial territories. But first, the natives of those territories have to be revealed to be inferior, and to have a need to be guided towards ‘the light’ of civilization. In this insidious manner, they are shown to require the help of Western civilization, and the Europeans are eager to take on this endeavour. It is after all in their interest to gain access to the colonial territories for their resources, but the rhetoric used for this to be accomplished is one that reveals the Europeans’ hypocrisy, making colonialism a morally bankrupt project.

As it is defining itself over and against the savagery and inferiority of the primitives, civilization becomes preoccupied with its frenzied acquisition of wealth. With their focus on profit, the Europeans develop a blind spot – they fail to notice when the primitiveness and savagery insidiously permeate civilization and their moral sense. Secure in their belief of their own superiority, they cannot conceive of the possibility that the contact with the wilderness can influence their sense of self and their identities and that the boundary is a shifting and porous one. The aggrandizing discourse of power and the condescending view of the primitive enhance Kurtz’s confidence in his abilities to attain wealth, imparting to him a restless drive towards expansion and conquest. Yet in the end they prove to be not only his *hubris*, but also that of the European civilization he incarnates. Just like Kurtz, who is “hollow at the core” (Conrad 58), Western civilization proves itself to have an inner emptiness – there is a void where their core values should be located. The West/Occident proves to be the source of darkness, especially considering the etymology of the word *occident* (> Lat. *occido* – to fall, to kill, to slay, to torture, to ruin). The city Marlow returns to is described as sepulchral, suggestive of death – if not a literal, then a metaphorical demise. Kurtz’s hollowness substantiates the Western crisis of identity rooted in alienation from core values and in irrational anxieties. Kurtz’s demise is meant to preclude his return to civilization as he was contaminated by the degeneration and primitiveness of the wilderness. If he were to return, he could turn into a source of

contagion, and this threat needs to be dispelled. Thus, the impact of colonialism can be regarded as a mirror Caliban holds up to see his own reflection. But the mirror does not reveal what is expected (Europe's superiority and prosperity), and what *is* reflected can be appalling (European cruelty, hypocrisy, degeneration and primitiveness). *Heart of Darkness* reveals an image of colonialism that is difficult to bear since it becomes a comment on European civilization and its imperfections.

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