

Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" <sup>1</sup> is set amongst the exploitation of the Congolese by the Belgian imperialists, where Marxian dualism of bourgeoisie and proletariat could be simplified to "an African thinking of 'coloured' against the 'white'".<sup>2</sup> What is striking and surprising in view of Conrad's obvious sympathy with the oppressed blacks, and abhorrence of the methods of the Belgian colonizers is that far from being a Marxist tract, or even espousing liberal humanist views, Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" reflects a conservative ideology and a reaffirmation of Western civilisation and its bourgeois mores, both at the level of travelogue, and at the level of the journey within; and this is seen in his treatment of the natives, of work, and of women.

In Conrad's attack of the conduct of the colonizers he concentrates on the means used as being cruel, absurd, inefficient and in the long view destructive to both native and oppressor. The absurd scene of French sailors dying aboard their ship as it shells a continent, the cruelty of the chain gang and the "mournful grove"<sup>3</sup> full of dying workers are concerned with unnecessary and inappropriate methods of colonization. But in spite of these and many further episodes recounted of the way imperialism worked in the Congo, Conrad does not make a blanket condemnation of the idea of bringing civilisation to the natives. Raskin quotes Conrad as saying that the idea of his book was "the criminality of inefficiency and pure selfishness when tackling the civilising work in Africa".<sup>4</sup> Raskin goes on to conclude that colonialism itself is the heart of darkness, whereas evidence in the novella suggests Conrad had considerable sympathy with the motives of the civilising work, even when attached to materialist motives:

Hunters for gold or pursers 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 a sacred fire.<sup>5</sup>

Although mercenary, Marlow has his heroes carrying the "sacred fire", civilisation, to the world. In a delicious turnaround to Roman Britain he advances this concept with Western civilisation coming to England via conquerors, and while he belittles their achievement as "robbery with violence, aggravated murder in a grand scale"<sup>6</sup>, it was this that allows Marlow to say "we live in the flicker" of "the light (that) came out of this river"<sup>7</sup>. Although this light came as a blazing fire it is still the light that banished Britain's darkness.

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<sup>1</sup> Conrad, J., "Heart of Darkness", *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature Vol. 2.*

ed. Kermodé, F. and Hollander, J. (OUP, New York, 1973)

All page numbers referred to in the essay above are from this edition.

<sup>2</sup> Feuer, L. S., *Marx and Engels* (Fountain, Aylesbury, 1984) p.13

<sup>3</sup> "Heart of Darkness", p. 1629.

<sup>4</sup> Raskin, J., "Imperialism: Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'", *Literature and Politics in the Twentieth Century* ed. Laqueur, W. and Masse, G.L. (Harper and Row, New York, 1967) P. 109.

<sup>5</sup> "Heart of Darkness", p. 1619.

<sup>6</sup> "Heart of Darkness", p. 1621.

<sup>7</sup> "Heart of Darkness", p. 1620.

The British now carry their torch, as Marlow sees on the map in the company offices in Brussels:

There was a vast amount of red - good to see at any time, because one knows that some real work is done in there.<sup>8</sup>

Amongst the colonizing of the British "real work" is done, the civilising work done while colonization occurs, and this appears to be the "idea at the back of it"<sup>9</sup> which redeems the enterprise.

The natives in the novella are drawn sympathetically enough but remain only "remote kin"<sup>10</sup> to Marlow, and remain closely associated with darkness. Conrad does give the natives an attractiveness and a sense of belonging to their homeland, the paddlers seen from the French ship for example, which none of his white characters approach. Even more striking is the description of the cannibals on the steam boat:

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 honor? .... Restraint! I would just as soon expect restraint from a hyena prowling amongst the corpses of a battlefield.<sup>11</sup>

The comparison between the restraint of the cannibals and the floundering hopeless pilgrims is striking, but perhaps more acute is the comparison with the great man Kurtz if as Reid suggests, the unspeakable rites were in fact cannibalism.<sup>12</sup> Even this sympathetic view however has to concede humanity to the cannibals, when the first instinct is to consider them as animals. This difficulty pervades the story, as the blacks are only presented in terms of their interaction with whites. This allows two main aspects only to be seen; that is they are either exploited in some way, or savages. The savage side is closely aligned with darkness as a natural flow on from Conrad's association of civilisation with light, leaving the natives associated with the motif for evil. As Raskin puts it:

Kurtz is decadent literally because he becomes like the Africans, and this conflict links up with the central ambiguity of the novella, for it describes evil both in terms of society and in terms of racial and pre-social forces. In fact, Conrad believed that blacks were a corrupting force.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed Kurtz's corruption, until he is like Gollum, physically and spiritually corrupted, crawling back to the ceremony from the boat, is the most extreme in the novella

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<sup>8</sup> "Heart of Darkness", p. 1624.

<sup>9</sup> "Heart of Darkness", p. 1621.

<sup>10</sup> "Heart of Darkness", p. 1627.

<sup>11</sup> "Heart of Darkness", p. 1649-50,

<sup>12</sup> Reid, S.A., "The 'Unspeakable Rites' in 'Heart of Darkness'", *Conrad*, ed. Mudrick, M. (Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 1966), p. 48.

<sup>13</sup> Raskin, p. 123.

specifically because he almost alone of the whites becomes part of the Africans' culture. Conrad is not surprisingly, therefore, while having taken the first step of humanitarian concern for the natives, still working from a position where the blacks are savages dangerous to civilised man and with their humanity merely conceded rather than beyond question. While they are in need of civilising, it must be a gentle process rather than trying to make them what they are not, as seen by Marlow's desire to see his fireman "clapping hands and stamping feet on the bank"<sup>14</sup> rather than at work in the foreign environment of the boiler and the boat, a plea for civilising while maintaining separateness and so not destroying the social framework supporting the blacks' culture.

The attitude of Conrad to work is a very traditional one, in which work possesses its own virtue. A Marxist would have difficulty finding a situation with more alienation between work and the products of labour than Marlow captaining a river boat for ivory merchants. Yet Marlow finds reality and himself in his labours, even though he does admit he dislikes work as such. Work is the framework he sticks to which stops him going "ashore for a howl and a dance",<sup>15</sup> When he feels "fine sentiments"<sup>16</sup> would have no influence, it is the need to keep the boat going and complete his job which keeps him on the rails by providing a surface truth. Kurtz the idealist is by way of contrast not prevented by his fine ideals in joining in with every measure of the rituals, becoming a God figure to the natives. Conrad will put his faith in simple work rather than the ideals of Kurtz divorced from restraining societal influences. Kurtz for all his plans and ideals is opportunistic politics taken to its logical extreme. His disparagement of the popular side of politics and Kurtz' ability to believe anything reveal a distrust of politics as a whole and extremism in particular:

Heavens how that man could talk! He electrified large meetings. He had faith you see - don't you see? – he had the faith. He could get himself to believe anything – anything. He would have been a splendid leader of an extreme party.<sup>17</sup>

Conrad's views on women in the "Heart of Darkness are no more radical than his views on work. Women live in a different world untroubled by reality and to be protected from it. Marlow's betrayal of Kurtz's true end to his beloved may have made him fear for his safety under the heavens, but really he could do little else with Conrad's view of women.

It's queer how out of touch with truth women are. They live in a world of its own ... Some confounded fact that we men have been living contentedly with ever since the day of creation would start up and knock the whole thing over.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> "Heart of Darkness", p. 1646.

<sup>15</sup> "Heart of Darkness", p. 1645.

<sup>16</sup> "Heart of Darkness", p. 1645.

<sup>17</sup> "Heart of Darkness", p. 1636.

<sup>18</sup> "Heart of Darkness", p. 1626.

It seemed to me that the house would collapse before I could escape, that the heavens would fall upon my head. But nothing happened. The heavens do not fall for such a trifle. Would they have fallen, I wonder, if I had rendered Kurtz that justice which was his due? ... But I couldn't. I could not tell her. It would have been too dark - too dark altogether.<sup>19</sup>

The "confounded fact" men live with is the darkness which Conrad would shield from women, another very traditional approach. The only woman of any strength in the novella, the magnificent native woman is presented with awe and fear, as in spite of her attractiveness she is a terrific threat to the men. For Conrad, much more comfortable the protected woman in her own little world, rather than the daunting prospect of women like the proud savage.

Conrad's conservatism as expressed by his traditional views of work, woman and blacks also is felt in the inner journey of the "Heart of Darkness". Conservatism has been defined as "a limited style of politics, based upon the idea of imperfection".<sup>20</sup> Conrad's distrust of politics has been canvassed, but this imperfection is conservatism's dispute with idealism and extremism. Because man is fallen by nature, without the control of traditional values he is in danger of returning to barbarism. Kurtz is Conrad's archetypal example of the imperfection even in a prodigy, who when left completely without external controls because of his hollowness destroys himself. The attractiveness Conrad gives to order amongst the chaos of the Belgian Congo in the form of the miraculous accountant and again to the order found in the book on seamanship, reinforce the desire for solidity amongst disorder, characteristic of conservative thought. The breakdown of social structures, anarchy, is a component of the barbarism of the heart of darkness.

This conservative stance puts his attack on the practice rather than the principle of civilising the natives in perspective. Reform, in this case of the savages, can be a justifiable aim even for a conservative, as explained by Burke:

Change alters the substance of the objects themselves, and gets rid of all their essential good as well as of the accidental evil annexed to them ... Reform, on the other hand, is not a change in substance or in the primary modification of the objects, but in a direct application of a remedy to the grievance complained of.<sup>21</sup>

Kurtz and the Belgians each in their own way inflict radical change upon the natives corrupting both themselves and the blacks in the process. Conrad's concept of civilising work, which he imagines to be going on in British colonies, would follow reform of the grievance of lack of civilisation with the remedy, civilisation, without primary modification of the blacks' own humanity.

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<sup>19</sup> "Heart of Darkness". p. 1679.

<sup>20</sup> O'Sullivan, N. *Conservatism* (Dent, London, 1976), p.13.

<sup>21</sup> Burke, E. quoted in O'Sullivan, p.12.

Conrad's anchorage to traditional views and conservatism in the face of the absurdity of the practice of imperialism is a challenge to Marxism and any other opponent of established Western civilisation and capitalism. By portraying colonization running off the rails due to loss of a social framework, far from satirising the capitalist ethos as suggested by Fleishem,<sup>22</sup> he requires materialism as part of the framework for efficiency and civilisation the West has developed. The "Heart of Darkness" promotes a humanitarian but conservative view on the problem of colonization, but in no way challenges the bourgeois impetus for the exercise.

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<sup>22</sup> Fleishman, A, *Conrad's Politics* (John Hopkins, Baltimore, 1967), p.122.

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