

THE LIGHT AND THE DARK; IMAGERY AND
THEMATIC DEVELOPMENT IN CONRAD'S
HEART OF DARKNESS

CONRAD once said of one of his women characters, "She thought in images." This comment was intended to illustrate the naïveté, the simplicity of this woman, but it need not necessarily have unfavorable connotations, since Conrad also thought in images and often made use of visual imagery to develop themes within his novels. One of his most frequently used images was that of contrasts in light and darkness, sunshine and shadow, dark night and bright day. One cannot read his short stories ("The Lagoon," for example) or some of the novels (such as *The Nigger of the Narcissus*) without becoming aware of the symbolic significance of the sun in the thematic development of these narratives.

In *Heart of Darkness* Conrad makes use of this type of imagery to develop a threefold theme, each aspect of which is inherent in the ambiguity of the title. There is the heart of the darkness in which the narrator (Marlow) tells his story, a darkness which surrounds a group of men aboard a small ship lying at anchor in the Thames. This physical darkness furnishes a suitable setting for a narrative full of hints of something sinister, mysterious, and evil—a narrative which leaves his listeners in a state of awed suspense. There is also the heart of the great continent into which Marlow journeys, a land largely unexplored and still commonly thought of as the "Dark Continent." One important part of this aspect of Conrad's theme is the narrator's journey toward the darkness of savagery. When he finally reaches the heart of the Dark Continent, he is at the core, the center, the heart of the darkness of a primitive society. This inscrutable, dark

primitivism is symbolized by the infrequent, shadowy appearance of the natives whom Marlow encounters on his freshwater voyage. They are seen fleetingly through the infrequent breaks in the foliage of the dense jungle, through which the river winds its sluggish way. The natives, therefore, are always dimly seen, never in complete darkness, yet never in the bright sunlight, which, in spite of its joyless intensity, cannot penetrate the deep shade of the jungle which is their home.

Of still more significance to Conrad's narrative is the third aspect of the theme, and this one is symbolized by the first two. As the darkness deepens about the narrator and his listeners, Marlow proceeds farther, in his story, up the muddy, glistening river toward the heart of the Dark Continent; and he moves deeper into the mystery of Kurtz. The shadowy, mysterious nature of Kurtz, and of humanity which he comes to symbolize, is a darkness which also deepens as Marlow approaches his destination. At first there is only a reference to this remarkable man, who by means unknown to the Company, manages to send out more ivory than all the other agents together. As Marlow meets more and more people who know of Kurtz, the nature of the agent becomes more and more obscure, until at last, when Marlow sees him face to face, the narrator is as incapable of penetrating the darkness of the heart of Kurtz as he is of penetrating the darkness of the heart of the dark jungle and of the savagery which it nourishes. When Marlow finally meets Kurtz, "several weeks later and a thousand miles farther," the figure of the man takes on reality; Kurtz is no longer an unknown person, a phantom, about whom people speak but say nothing which gives a clue to the mystery surrounding him. He is at last flesh and blood, but his inner nature, the reality behind the veil of flesh, becomes more shadowy as Marlow

becomes better acquainted with the outer man. The savagery which surrounds Kurtz has appealed to some primitive, evil instinct in his nature, and the "deep damnation" of his response is darker than savagery itself. He has moved into realms where men like Marlow, ordinary, "normal" men who dwell in the sunlight of civilization (however thin the cultural veneer may be), cannot follow. Marlow perceives his degradation and has a vague understanding of its import; Marlow's audience cannot comprehend it, but listen "for the sentence, for the word, that would give . . . the clue to the faint uneasiness inspired by this narrative. . . ." The narrator has arrived at the heart of the darkness which surrounds a lost soul just as he has arrived at the heart of the darkness of the Dark Continent; but he is alien to both regions, and in the end the river bears him away from those things which he has perceived but has not comprehended.

The theme of this novel, therefore, is developed on three levels; each of these levels is supported by the central image of contrasts in light and darkness. There is the contrasting light and deepening darkness of the physical setting in which the narrative is told; there is the contrast of the light on the river up which the steamer moves with the darkness of the bordering jungle, as Marlow and his companions travel toward the heart of the Dark Continent; and there is the contrast of the light in which men like Marlow move with the darkness which surrounds Kurtz and, potentially, every man, since, in the thematic development of the novel, Kurtz represents the ultimate possibility of degradation in mankind. This last aspect of the theme is the center, the heart, of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and the first two aspects form the matrix for it.

Conrad begins the narrative by describing the brilliance of the evening on which Marlow and his friends meet:

. . . The day was ending in a serenity of still and exquisite brilliance. The water shone pacifically; the sky, without a speck, was a benign immensity of unstained light; the very mist on the Essex marshes was like a gauzy and radiant fabric, hung from the wooded rises inland, and draping the low shores in diaphanous folds.¹ (p. 491)

The serenity and brilliance of the late afternoon was broken by a peculiar gloom to the west, which was "brooding over the reaches" and became "more somber every minute, as if angered by the approach of the sun." Thus the tone of the narrative and its framework, too, are set at this moment. The brooding gloom to the west presages the coming of the dark night in which the narrative is told; and it also foretells the darkness, the mystery, of Marlow's journey into the heart of darkness and the spiritual gloom and darkness in the heart of Kurtz.

As the sun approached this peculiar gloom in the west, as it descended "in its curved and imperceptible fall," it changed from a glowing white to a dull red, "without rays and without heat." Even the brilliance of the sun seemed "to go out," to be "stricken to death" by that gloom which was "brooding over a crowd of men," as if this gloom, this darkness were always ready to close about man and turn what is brightest in his nature and his surroundings into darkest night.

As the sun went down, the river became tranquil and rested at the close of day, leading "to the uttermost ends of the earth." We move, therefore, from the familiar to the unfamiliar, from the light of the known to the darkness of the unknown. Lights appeared on the shore and penetrated the dusk surrounding the little group of men on the ship. Lights appeared everywhere—the strong light of Chapman's lighthouse, moving lights of ships in the stream, "a great stir of lights going up and going down." These lights in the deepen-

ing dusk made a cheerful sight, but their cheerfulness was offset by the scene farther west, where "on the upper reaches the place of the monstrous town was still marked ominously on the sky, a brooding gloom in sunshine, a lurid glare under the stars" (p. 493). This peculiar brooding gloom impressed itself on the senses and prompted Marlow to begin his story:

"'And this also,' said Marlow suddenly, 'has been one of the dark places of the earth.'" (p. 493) As he talked the traffic of the great city went "on in the deepening night upon the sleepless river." As he began his journey into the "heart of darkness," the shadows deepened and night fell, as if nature were lending verisimilitude to his tale.

The somber, ominous gloom in the west, which was juxtaposed to the lights of the city and harbor, seemed to symbolize to Marlow the entire effect which his remarkable freshwater voyage had upon him. What happened to him there, at the "farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of [his] experience," seemed somehow to "throw a kind of light on everything about [him]—and into [his] thoughts. It was somber enough, too—and pitiful—not extraordinary in any way—not very clear either. . . . And yet it seemed to throw a kind of light." (p. 496)

As Marlow described his experiences—the meeting with the owner of the Company, the journey up the muddy river, the sight of the emaciated natives lying in the gloomly shade of the first outstation, and the climactic, yet indecisive meeting with Kurtz—as his boat penetrated farther into the heart of the Dark Continent, and as he went deeper into the mystery of Kurtz, the voyager was given a proportionately deeper insight into humanity, into the darkness at the heart of every man—a darkness which is ready to break through the thin layer of culture that covers civilized man like threadbare mantle. Marlow's experience threw a "kind of light" on the

innermost workings of the human heart, and what he saw there was "not very clear" but pitiful and somber.

The deepening darkness of the evening contributed a suitable background for Marlow's narrative; it enhanced the mystery of the whole, a mystery which the narrator never fully disclosed, upon which he never cast full light. The result was that the audience "listened, . . . listened on the watch for the sentence, for the word, that would give . . . the clue to the faint uneasiness inspired by this narrative that seemed to shape itself without human lips in the heavy night air of the river" (p. 527).

Marlow began his narrative by describing his visit to the city which "always reminded [him] of a whited sepulcher." His purpose was to secure a position as the skipper of a river-boat in Africa. Upon his arrival, the mystery, the gloom, the darkness through which he was to move immediately surrounded him. His first stop was at the headquarters of the Company which he was to serve; and he was introduced to the darkness through which he was to walk as soon as he entered the shadowy street where the business house stood. The gloomy appearance of the street outside; the dim, somber rooms and offices inside; and the humorless, dark-clad figures of the women, clerk, and owner (all of which had been prefigured by the "brooding gloom" setting of the framework) foretold the nature of Marlow's coming adventure and left him with a sensation of impending disaster as he began his voyage southward.

As he proceeded toward the Dark Continent, as the ship moved slowly down the African coast, the narrator became conscious of the sun, which burned fiercely down upon the white beach as it moved slowly by. The bright ferocity of the sun was accentuated by the contrasting dark green of the jungle, "so dark-green as to be almost black." There was no

joy or comfort in the light of the sun or the dark shade of the jungle.

This contrast is central to Marlow's description of the scene at the first of the company stations, which the river-boat reached as it made its way up the muddy river. He saw the station first at a moment when its devastation was drowned in blinding sunlight:

At last we opened a reach. A rocky cliff appeared, mounds of turned-up earth by the shore, houses on a hill, others with iron roofs, amongst a waste of excavations, or hanging to the declivity. A continuous noise of the rapids above hovered over this scene of inhabited devastation. A lot of people, mostly black and naked, moved about like ants. A jetty projected into the river. A blinding sunlight drowned all this at times in a sudden recrudescence of glare. (p. 508)

He climbed the hill toward the buildings, passed a stack of rusty rails, and noted on the left a clump of trees which made a shady spot in the blinding glare. Underneath "dark things seemed to stir feebly." A chain gang passed him, toiling up the hill, driven by a grinning guard. He turned and made for the trees, intending to remain in the shade until the chain gang was out of sight. Suddenly, as he walked through the fierce and blinding light, he seemed to see clearly into the future and to be able to predict the outcome of his strange voyage:

. . . I foresaw that in the blinding sunshine of that land I would become acquainted with a flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly. How insidious he could be, too, I was only to find out several months later and a thousand miles farther. For a moment I stood appalled, as though by a warning. Finally I descended the hill, obliquely, toward the trees I had seen. (p. 510)

The "rapacious and pitiless folly" is mankind at its depth, as symbolized by Kurtz, and it is significant that this scene of inhabited devastation, drenched in blinding and comfortless

sunlight, should have forewarned Marlow of the darkness of the human heart which he was to see.

He continued to walk toward the shade.

At last I got under the trees. My purpose was to stroll into the shade for a moment; but no sooner within than it seemed to me I had stepped into the gloomy circle of some inferno.

...
Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair. . . . And this was the place where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die.

They were dying slowly—it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now, nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. . . . While I stood horror-struck, one of these creatures rose to his hands and knees, and went off on all fours towards the river to drink. He lapped out of his hand, then sat up in the sunlight, crossing his shins in front of him, and after a time let his woolly head fall on his breastbone.² (pp. 510-512)

These dark, shadowy, starved, emaciated figures are symbolic of the inscrutable mystery of the Dark Continent through which Marlow traveled; they also emphasize the darkness of the heart of humanity, which is capable of casting some of its members out to survive or die in the gloomly shade of a clump of trees. This latter darkness, the darkness at the heart of humanity, became apparent to Marlow when he saw the “exalted degradation” of Kurtz, who was foreshadowed by these dark shapes creeping about in the gloom. They were shadowy figures, as dimly understood as seen, and they, like the natives who carried Kurtz’s stretcher later, were never brought into clear focus. When one of them did drag himself to the river to drink and sat dejectedly in the fierce sunlight, the blinding glare only accentuated the misery of the man and his dying companions.

Throughout this scene contrasts of light and dark are used

to emphasize the horror of this extreme degradation. Another example is the bit of white worsted tied about the neck of one of the poor creatures. Marlow was unable to understand the reason for its being there. "Why? Where did he get it? Was it a badge—an ornament—a charm—a propitiatory act? Was there any idea at all connected with it? It looked startling round his black neck, this bit of white thread from beyond the seas." (p. 511)

A sharper contrast in light and dark, and consequently a deeper insight into the darkness of the human heart, particularly the heart betrayed by the surface aspects of civilization, was emphasized when Marlow met the clerk of the company, as the former left the depressing sight in the shade of the trees and walked up the hill toward the buildings. This man was first seen by Marlow in the bright sunlight and was dressed in unexpected splendor—high collar, white cuffs, snowy trousers, light alpaca jacket, clear necktie, and varnished boots—all glittering and shining in contrast to the miserable black men in their dim shade. "In the great demoralization of the land he kept up his appearance." (p. 512)

The thin mantle of civilization covering this man's inhumanity is symbolized by the white and brilliant perfection of his dress, which is juxtaposed to the devastation of the station and the misery of the black men who creep about in the gloom of the trees. It is also symbolized by the condition of his books, which were in "apple-pie order." The callousness which underlay this fantastic outward manifestation of his culture is emphasized by the irony of his greatest accomplishment: he had taught one of the native women, who "had a distaste for the work," to starch and iron his snowy white shirts. He was sensitive only to the amenities of the civilization of which he was a part and was conscious of the sufferings of the natives only when their noise disturbed his

concentration on his books. Thus, he exhibited no sympathy for the dying man who was brought to the station and placed outside his window. In his strict adherence to the superficialities of his culture, he was isolated from the rest of mankind; his humanity had been forgotten in the process of keeping up appearances in the great demoralization of the land.

The miserable state of the natives, brought emphatically to the attention of the reader by the contrasting brightness of the sunlight and the whiteness of the clothing of the fantastically attired clerk, is also prophetic of the degradation of Kurtz, whose name Marlow first heard spoken by the clerk. He was still unable to grasp the true nature of Kurtz, however, and could get from the man only the statement that Kurtz "will go far, very far." The agent became a part of the shadow-peopled mystery, part of the darkness of the Dark Continent into which Marlow traveled.

The clearings around the various stations Marlow reached, clearings that were drenched in blinding sunlight, held some reality for him; but when he looked about him he had to ask "what it all meant." There were men strolling aimlessly in the bright sunlight, and "outside, the silent wilderness surrounding this cleared speck on the earth struck me as something great and invincible, like evil or truth, waiting patiently for the passing away of this fantastic invasion" (p. 520). As he continued his journey up the river, he felt that he was going back to "the earliest beginnings of the world," to prehistoric nature, when "vegetation rioted on the earth," into a primeval and impenetrable forest, silent, brooding, where the air was thick, sluggish, and heavy, where "there was no joy in the brilliance of the sunshine."

The sun, too, is a symbol of the mystery through which Marlow moved. It burnt without comforting, as the shade of the forest darkened the world without giving any real relief

from the ferocity of the sun. The sun, brilliant as it was, failed to penetrate a white fog which settled over the river. When the mist lifted, Marlow was conscious of the dark forest, the matted jungle, and "the blazing little ball of the sun hanging over it. . . ." The sun could penetrate the fog and the matted jungle no more easily than Marlow could penetrate the darkness of Africa and the mystery of Kurtz, who was as shadowy, as indistinct a figure to Marlow, as the dismal, starving black men in the dim, unholy shade of the trees of the first station where he saw the bright and glittering white clerk.

The sun also emphasized the inscrutable nature of the natives who attacked the steamer (on orders from Kurtz, as it later turned out). They were seen fleetingly as they ran through the infrequent open spaces in the jungle, places which the sun could penetrate, on which it could shed its joyless luster. They became as shadowy as the jungle they inhabited and were seen intermittently and vaguely, like figures in a dream. They were almost always in the darkness of the jungle, never for long in the bright sunlight. They were "dark human shapes" which flitted "indistinctly against the gloomy border of the forest."

As Marlow drew nearer to his destination, nearer to the mysterious Kurtz, the man, the outward, bodily form of Kurtz, became more real; but the spirit, the nature, Kurtz's impenetrable, impervious dark nature, became more difficult to understand, less real, less palpable. The heart of the darkness of the continent as well as the darkness surrounding Kurtz closed more tightly around Marlow.

The meeting with the Russian, whose patched clothing gave him a harlequin-like appearance, did not cast light on the mystery of Kurtz. The Russian had lived with the man, had listened to him talk, and had fallen under his spell; and

as he attempted to tell Marlow of the attitude of the natives toward Mr. Kurtz, he was cut off sharply, for Marlow did not want to learn of the ceremonies used when approaching the agent. He felt that the details of such rituals would be more horrible than the sight of certain heads drying on poles under Mr. Kurtz's window. These latter, after all, were only a savage sight, but the implications of the Russian's speech, the undercurrent suggestive of something more debased than simple savagery, seemed to have transported Marlow ". . . into some lightless region of subtle horrors, where pure, uncomplicated savagery was a positive relief, being something that had a right to exist—obviously—in the sunshine" (p. 574).

When Kurtz was first seen, borne by a group of natives wading waist deep in weeds, he was reminiscent of the dying creatures of the dilapidated station at which the steamer stopped early in the voyage. He was emaciated, long, ungainly, horribly sick. As Marlow listened to him talk, the speaker was engulfed in gloom—he was only a voice speaking from the oppressive dimness about him—a voice speaking from a ruined hovel fronted by a row of stakes with human heads drying on them, while Marlow's companions on the steamer were yet in the sunlight, and "the stretch of the river abreast of the clearing glittered in a still and dazzling splendor, with a murky and overshadowed bend above and below. Not a living soul was seen on the shore. The bushes did not rustle." (p. 575)

In this appearance of Kurtz we have the first real suggestion of his extreme degradation—a degradation so deep that it could not be compared with simple savagery that "had the right to exist—obviously—in the sunshine." The realm in which Kurtz moved was devoid of the sunlight in which ordinary men, even savages, wander.

Kurtz's degraded condition was made abundantly clear to Marlow (and to the reader) in a climactic scene which occurred before the narrator and his companions (the "pilgrims") began their voyage out of the dark Continent on the river boat. Marlow had just been told by the Russian about Kurtz's attempt to forestall the coming of the steamer by ordering the natives to attack it. When he awoke, shortly after midnight, Marlow remembered the Russian's words, and "a hint of danger" came to his mind. He went out into the night and looked about:

On the hill a big fire burned, illuminating fitfully a crooked corner of the station house. . . . But deep within the forest, red gleams that wavered, that seemed to sink and rise from the ground amongst confused columnar shapes of intense blackness, showed the exact position of the camp where Mr. Kurtz's adorers were keeping their uneasy vigil. (p. 582)

Kurtz had left his bed in the ship's cabin, and Marlow began to follow his trail through the tall grass toward the camp of the natives. Marlow came upon him as he was crawling toward the fires, glowing redly in the dark night, and as Kurtz rose, "unsteady, long, pale, indistinct, like a vapor exhaled by the earth," he appeared as shadowy, as nebulous, as mysterious as the jungle itself. The gloom, the darkness of the jungle, which was penetrated here and there by the fires of the natives, was a suitable setting for the episode which followed. Marlow could not "appeal to anything high or low" in the man because Kurtz was no longer of this world—he had isolated himself in his own incredible, exalted degradation:

I tried to break the spell—the heavy, mute spell of the wilderness—that seemed to draw him to its pitiless breast by the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts, by the memory of gratified and monstrous passions. This alone, I was convinced, had driven him out to the edge of the forest, to the bush, towards the gleam of fires, the throb of

drums, the drone of weird incantations; this alone had beguiled his unlawful soul beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations. And, don't you see, the terror of the position was not in being knocked on the head—though I had a very lively sense of that danger, too—but in this, that I had to deal with a being to whom I could not appeal in the name of anything high or low. I had, even like the niggers, to invoke him—himself—his own exalted and incredible degradation. 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. . . . If anybody had ever struggled with a soul, I am the man. And I wasn't arguing with a lunatic either. Believe me or not, his intelligence was perfectly clear—concentrated, it is true, upon himself with horrible intensity, yet clear. . . . But his soul was mad. Being alone in the wilderness, it had looked within itself, and, by heavens! I tell you, it had gone mad. I had—for my sins, I suppose—to go through the ordeal of looking into it myself. No eloquence could have been so withering to one's belief in mankind as his final burst of sincerity. He struggled with himself, too. I saw it, I heard it. I saw the inconceivable mystery of a soul that knew no restraint, no faith, and no fear, yet struggling blindly with itself. (pp. 585-587)

Kurtz and the fantastically dressed clerk of the first station were, in a sense, kindred beings. They had both succeeded in isolating themselves from mankind, in kicking themselves loose from the earth. Kurtz had accomplished this end by casting aside that which was most noble in his culture, by allowing the dark, primitive, evil instincts to respond to the savagery around him; and he had succeeded in going beyond mere savagery; his evil was something that could not exist in sunlight. The clerk, too, had cast aside the noble aspects of his culture, but instead of substituting the darkness of primitivism, he had taken refuge in the superficialities of civilization, symbolized by the glittering whiteness of his attire and the apple-pie order of his books, which were kept in top shape at the expense of sympathy for the suffering natives connected with his station.

Kurtz's callous isolation became apparent as the magnificent native woman stood on the shore extending her bare arms over the water toward the river-boat, which was bearing the near-dead agent away from the scene of his triumph and degradation. He was isolated from her as surely as he was isolated from his "intended" at home. His own extreme and incredible debasement had made it impossible for him to communicate with another mortal.

The river bore the voyagers out of the Heart of Darkness faster than it had borne them in, and the life of Kurtz, whom Marlow was taking out, seemed to ebb as fast as the stream. Marlow had at last dissolved the outward mystery of Kurtz. He knew the man, the emaciated, sickly body of Kurtz; and he knew that the brute deep within the man had responded to the savagery of his surroundings—had been awakened and had responded with a completeness that had caused Kurtz to kick himself loose from the earth, to cast himself into the darkness of complete isolation. The darkness through which Marlow moved culminated in the heart of Kurtz, and as the voice from this emaciated form flowed from the pilot house of the steamer, Marlow saw into "the barren darkness of his heart. . . . But both the diabolic love and the unearthly hate . . . fought for the possession of that soul satiated with primitive emotions, avid of lying fame, of sham distinction, of all the appearances of success and power." (p. 589)

Toward the close of his miserable existence, Kurtz recognized his own failure, recognized the darkness in which he wandered, and he said to Marlow, "I am lying here in the dark waiting for death." (p. 591) Marlow stood as if transfixed and watched him die. And at last Kurtz's being was laid bare in all its pride, ruthless power, craven terror, and darkness. The voice came as a whisper, repeating the words, "The horror! the horror!"

Later, while Marlow was trying to eat his dinner, the announcement was made: "Mistah Kurtz—he dead." All the pilgrims rushed to see while Marlow remained behind. For thus neglecting to rush to Kurtz's bedside, he was considered callous. He stayed behind because there was light, a lamp, where he was—and "outside it was so beastly, beastly dark. I went no more near the remarkable man who had pronounced a judgment upon the adventures of his soul on this earth." (pp. 591-592)

Marlow's task was not over, however. There was still Kurtz's "intended" to see—to face with the burden of the knowledge of Kurtz's extreme degradation. She, too, was a shadowy figure, dressed in black, seen in the dusk. As Marlow spoke to her the room darkened and "only her forehead, smooth and white, remained illumined by the unextinguishable light of belief and love." Like everything else associated with the man, she was a dim, almost spectral figure. As Marlow listened to her she became, like Kurtz, only a voice, which "seemed to have the accompaniment of all the other sounds, full of mystery, desolation, and sorrow . . . the whisper of a voice speaking from beyond the threshold of an eternal darkness" (pp. 599-600).

This girl had been anticipated by the tragic figure of the native woman who stretched her bare arms over the water toward the departing steamer, just as the emaciated Kurtz had been prefigured by the dying natives in the deep, dim shade of the company station. The girl, like the native woman, "put out her arms as if after a retreating figure, stretching them black and with clasped pale hands across the fading and narrow sheen of the window" (p. 602). The girl and the native woman are kindred spirits, because each had lost the man who, in the darkness of his existence in the

heart of the Dark Continent, could not trust or be trusted by any other human being.

In the end Marlow could not tell this woman the truth about Kurtz. His last words, said Marlow, were the young woman's name. To tell her what he had actually said "would have been too dark—too dark altogether," would have opened the bleakness of his heart to her view; and she would have known the depths to which he had sunk.

She would also have seen something more sinister, for she would have seen that which Kurtz had perceived even before he reached the debased state in which Marlowe found him. Kurtz had expressed his perception in a painting which he had left at one of the stations before he went into the heart of the Dark Continent. This painting was a "sketch in oils, on a panel, representing a woman, draped and blindfolded, carrying a lighted torch. The background was somber—almost black. The movement of the woman was stately, and the effect of the torchlight on the face was sinister." (p. 523) Significantly, Marlow saw this painting in the light of a single candle. The sketch only increased the mystery of Kurtz at the time, and prompted Marlow to make further inquiries about the agent. When the darkness surrounding Kurtz is partially dispelled, however, the reader (and perhaps Marlow) sees what Kurtz intended the painting to mean; it symbolizes mankind, groping blindly through the darkness of his existence, seeking his way with what light civilization can offer. But this light also emphasizes the somber, sinister nature of man, just as the fierce sunlight beating down on the starving native, as he crept from the shade of the trees, emphasized his abased state. In a sense it betrays man, as it had betrayed the white clerk, who had mistakenly identified its superficial, dazzling whiteness with reality. To Kurtz,

however, the light illuminated that which is most sinister in the heart of man; it enabled him to see through the mask and perceive, perhaps too clearly, how thin the surface layer of civilization really is. Kurtz knew of the blackness, the darkness which is at the heart of humanity; he knew the depths to which man is capable of sinking; he knew that the light of civilization could not penetrate this darkness, could only emphasize its sinister pervasiveness; and worst of all, he knew that he had turned away from this feeble light, so that he had been enveloped in the darkness which is at the heart of every man. He had, in the end, "pronounced a judgment upon the adventures of his soul on this earth." Kurtz was a remarkable man because he had perceived this darkness, and since Marlow had vicariously partaken of Kurtz's revelation, he was the only person associated with the agent who could come near to penetrating the meaning of Kurtz's summing up: "The horror! the horror!" He could understand the meaning of Kurtz's stare as the man lay dying—a stare "that could not see the flame of the candle, but was wide enough to embrace the whole universe, piercing enough to penetrate all the hearts that beat in the darkness" (p. 592). To explain all this to Kurtz's fiancée would have been "too dark—too dark altogether." Only he who has "peeped over the edge" himself can understand it in all its horror.

Marlow finished his tale, and a silence fell upon the group of men on the ship. Perhaps they had also "peeped over the edge" and had learned something of the revelation which came so forcibly to Kurtz. This fact seems to be implied in Conrad's conclusion to *The Heart of Darkness*, in which he focuses the reader's attention again on these friends who heard Marlow's tale, thus completing the framework to his narrative. As they gazed westward they were conscious that

"the offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed somber under an overcast sky—seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness" (p. 603).

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NOTES

1. All quotations are taken from *The Portable Conrad*, ed. Morton Dauwen Zabel (New York, 1954), and are identified in the text of this article by page reference only.
2. See Lillian Feder, "Marlow's Descent into Hell," NCF, IX (1954-55), 280-292. Miss Feder calls attention to the similarity of this and other passages in *The Heart of Darkness* to the "descent into Hell" tradition of the classical epic.