

## Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* – "some *Inferno*" (texte en fin de document)

*To what extent may we say that this sordid tale of a journey into the darkest recess of Africa may be read as an indictment of the cankerous nature of colonialism as well as an exploration of the universal darkness of a world deprived of moral sense altogether?*

### I. Story-telling: when a voice emerges from the darkness

#### A) A first-person narrator is telling a story: a voice speaks to us...

Punctuation makes it clear that this is a speech aimed at an unidentified audience directly addressed three times (l. 20, 44, 57) to tell this "you" a story of his past (l. 45 "the memories of that time): it is a first-hand account and testimony of the very beginning of his journey into the depths of Africa (as the paratext indicates) told with a view to establishing credibility and reliability since not only was he an eye-witness but also an actor (if not an active participant...) in the scene he recalls, selecting the adequate details he wishes his audience to know (l. 45-46) and discarding what he believes would not be interesting enough (l. 57).

Besides, note how his retrospective narration is strikingly efficient: long descriptive and complex sentences (to establish the very specific settings in which his story takes place) are actually combined with short to-the-point narrative sentences (e.g. l. 1, 16-17, l. 35), use of ternary rhythm and dynamic exclamation marks that propel the story forward. The assertive tone of voice (with many presentative sentences using the verb "be" for instance) makes the speech all the more compelling.

In other words, we have no other choice than be hooked!

B) However the impression of control and even straightforwardness is contrasted with the abundant use of verbs of impressions, adjectives, adverbs and similes, which all reveal the difficult task at hand: **how to represent the reality of what he lived through** to listeners who were not there and who may not know anything about Africa under colonial rule. Thus although this is a scene drawn from life, or at least drawn from Conrad's own experience in Congo under Belgian King Leopold II's rule about 10 years before where Conrad witnessed the violent exploitation of black workers, the narrator only represents that reality in a rather oblique manner. His resorting to mythic, mythological narratives and other literary and/or pictorial references may be his way of helping the listeners and readers picture what he went through, hence the explicit allusions to Dante's *Inferno*, an epic poem from the 14<sup>th</sup> century telling Dante's voyage through the nine circles of Hell and his spying a whole string of sinners being punished for their sins. But this explicit allusion is interwoven with more implicit references that an educated reader might pick up: for example the Homeric description of Odysseus's journey in hell (book 11 of the *Odyssey*) where Odysseus is confronted to "shades of the dead", Christ's harrowing of hell and other various representations of hell that are part of western cultural background (William Blake's "Dante Hell XXIV Thieves", Botticelli's

illustrations of the Divine comedy and in particular his map of Hell, or Hieronymus Bosch's "Circle", etc. to name a few)

C) **Yet it is noteworthy that *what* is represented may be of less important that the responses it generates**, which are very rarely expressed directly either. There are two different techniques that are used to do so.

Combination of the Fantastic (it is "wonderfully odd, the white man he meets is a "vision" and a "miracle") and the Uncanny (things are "strange"; the black workers are turned into "phantoms") generate tension and unease, probably translating the I's own uneasiness and discomfort. Note for instance how the earth is almost made human and is "shuddering" in his stead, indirectly /obliquely exposing his feeling of horror at the scene.

Second his very impressionistic style (borrowed from impressionist painters i.e. emphasis on changes of light, color and movement; thin, small brush strokes) evokes not the reality itself but rather its effect on the viewers: an effect that is as changing as the light and colour, wavering between disgust, pity, compassion and indifference...

= A voice emerges from the darkness and tells a story that is drawn from the narrator's life, the reality of which is subsumed into / absorbed by mythological narratives, literary allusions and an impressionist "haze", revealing not just the reality itself but rather the conflicting responses one may have when confronted to such "pictures of massacre and pestilence."

**II. "My purpose was to stroll in the shade for a moment": the journey into the shade is a journey into Euro-centered colonialist capital world of oppression, exploitation and dehumanization.**

**A) The passage is structured around sharp and compelling contrasts to expose - at first sight - the white man's supremacy over the "black shapes" ' dereliction, with an apparent praise of colonial rule.**

Indeed if the universe "in the shade" is negatively (to say the least) connoted – it is black, "gloomy", "confused", there are numerous negative prefixes and terms, it represents a universe where people are no longer human – the out-of-the-shade universe is full of light, whiteness (with the deliciously out-of-place "snowy trousers" l. 38) with an almost Christlike evocation ("miracle", "vision") but also simply of life (the "rushing rapids") and eventually of "work" being done, no matter what. In other words, it is a world of order, legality, and efficiency and "fresh air", which is a far cry from the world of "inefficiency", "disease", and "pestilence" the narrator has just gone through. Why such a deep clear-cut contrast? It extolls the triumph of colonial rule and capitalist concerns: the "vision" is in fact a "book accountant" who keeps his books in "apple-pie order". The very neatness of his appearances, the way he is dressed, attest to the man's success (l. 53 he "had very accomplished something, l. 49 "achievements of character") and by extension the success of what he represents: the "Company", which seems to be fully embraced by the narrator himself: "I respected the fellow" l. 46

B) Yet this interpretation - though as "very clear" as the fact the black "helpers" are "dying slowly" - loses sight of the subtle but **compelling ironic remarks** scattered in the narration. Is this irony intended by the narrator? It is hard to tell. But an acute reader and listener may pick up that there is something beyond these words of praise, something more grating and more critical. Indeed here is an accountant in need of "fresh air" in a universe deprived both of air (l. 4 "not a breath stirred") and freshness ("pestilence" l. 31). Likewise the "miracle" he is turns to be a mere "hairdresser's dummy" whose mere "achievement" is to dress well. I cannot help noticing as well the narrator's self-inflicted (and probably unintended irony) when he mentions that "I found nothing else to do but to offer him one of my good Swede's ship's biscuits": the littleness of the gesture (he is giving a biscuit to a dying man – a far cry from what Odysseus offered to the dead with his libation of milk and honey, his sweet wine and barley meal. No matter how "good" the biscuit is (with all its moral connotation), it will not do anything to alleviate the horror of what this shadow of a man is living. Also note, by the way, the inappropriateness of the pun "free as air and nearly as thin" in such a context, pointing out the narrator's inadequate response altogether.

**C) But what is this irony for? I believe it actually serves two different purposes.**

On the one hand it enables, as it were, the narrator to stand/bear what he is looking at by keeping the horror at bay, at some necessary distance. Irony is thus a coping mechanism, which, by the way, seems to be the narrator's default response to his actual surroundings. On the other hand irony is used here to help accuse/indict even more strongly the ill and evil effects of careless pitiless colonial rule with its capitalist concerns, embodied (as said before) by the accountant who is blatantly indifferent to the blacks' sinister predicament. Yes, this white domination is dehumanizing the blacks, but what the irony further reveals is the very failure of capitalist and colonial ideology combined, its inherently lethal nature. Instead of bringing civilization and progress (as colonial rulers promised) it only brings destruction, death and chaos, i.e. the very thing it said it wished to get rid of. The symbolic image of the "white *worsted*" around the black man's neck is symptomatic of the whites who are simply choking the blacks to death. But it also seems to point out that colonialism brings out the "*worst*" in everything and everyone.

**III. "The great demoralization of the land" (l. 47-48)! When universal darkness makes moral disappear altogether**

A) If the contrasts between inside the shade/outside the shade are easy to spot, it is however slightly less easy to see the connection and resonance between the two universes. Still, there are resemblances and echoes, which signal that **the clear-cut separation between the two parts of the station is probably just a mask, a façade.**

Note the reappearances of the same colours ("white *worsted*, white flicker" are echoed by the "white man" and "white cuffs"; the "greenish gloom" resonates with the "green-lined parasol" l. 39), the domestic and out-of-place evocation of "apple-pie" ironically recalls the "good Swede biscuit", the white man's "backbone" rhyme with the blacks' bones (l. 17) and "breastbone" l.34). To cap it all, the same feeling of unreality pervades

and overwhelms both parts of the station. If Marlow's perception of the blacks may still be defined as Eurocentric -- blacks are, as he says, difficult to "tell apart" – what strikes me is that the white man is not seen as an improvement either: he is just a show, a neatly well-dressed bully (l. 51-52) who is as empty as a "hairstylist's dummy". In other words, the usual Victorian dichotomy between the white man as a man of reason, work and action versus the primitive, impulsive uncivilized black man does not work in this context any longer.

**B) Thus no one is safe from the "great demoralization of the land": moral sense cannot be found anywhere.** The white man is a mere empty shell while the last "white flicker in the depths of the orbs" of the black man is "[dying] out slowly" (l. 20). If the eyes are direct access to the souls, this dying "white flicker" and the other "enormous and vacant" eyes are a clear sign that "souls" are to be cruelly missed in the universe. Note, by the way, that there is not the least reference to the white man's eyes, as if "his" soul had vanished a long time ago, if it had ever existed... Moral darkness, and even moral death, is indeed universal. The narrator (and by extension the readers and listeners) is in a country with no moral sense whatsoever: he is facing a monster, a monstrous universe embodied stylistically - to a certain extent - in those long complex nominal groups and the meandering and never-ending descriptive sentences. |

**C) "Midway in the journey of our life / I awakened to find myself lost in a dark wood / for I had strayed from the straight path"**

This is Dante speaking at the beginning of his *Divine Comedy*, in the first book *Inferno*. Clearly this is no mere name-dropping on the part of Conrad. The narrator's journey is a journey into hell, from which he is likely not to leave unscathed, all the more so as, despite what happened to Dante, Marlow has no guide to help him go through the hellish universe. In fact he is not guided because he is the one guiding the "caravan of sixty men" into the unknown, he is the leader of this journey into "moral darkness", the "heart of darkness" as the title of the novel suggests. The narrator is about to stray even further from the "straight path" and forget or at least discard some of his own moral values on the way. Unlike Christ, who in the harrowing of hell, managed to release the righteous people, Marlow will not release anyone. In fact Marlow is obviously no Christ but he is no Dante either. Marlow seems to be one of these lost souls rotting in hell, abandoned to their misery in one of the circles of hell depicted by Dante. He may well represent, for Conrad, humanity at large, no matter their skin colours, living a life of suffering and doom, from which no light can emerge, and through which no light can pierce.

CCI: This is a brilliantly written text – all the more brilliant when we remember that Conrad started to learn English in his early twenties – which reveals Joseph Conrad's dark and pessimistic outlook of the world at large. Contrary to Kipling's belief, there is no such thing as a "white man's burden", but what is truer for Conrad is that there certainly is an "all man's burden", which is called life and which he exposed relentlessly in his work.

'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. The rapids were near, and an uninterrupted, uniform, headlong, rushing noise filled the mournful stillness of the grove, where not a breath stirred, not a leaf moved, with a mysterious sound - as though the tearing pace of the launched earth had suddenly become audible.

'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. Another mine on the cliff went off, followed by a slight shudder of the soil under my feet. The work was going on. The work! 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. Brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest. These moribund shapes were free as air – and nearly as thin. I began to distinguish the gleam of the eyes under the trees. Then, glancing down, I saw a face near my hand. The black bones reclined at full length with one shoulder against the tree, and slowly the eyelids rose and the sunken eyes looked up at me, enormous and vacant, a kind of blind, white flicker in the depths of the orbs, which died out slowly. The man seemed young – almost a boy – but you know with them it's hard to tell. I found nothing else to do but to offer him one of my good Swede's ship's biscuits I had in my pocket. The fingers closed slowly on it and held – there was no other movement and no other glance. He had tied a bit of white worsted round his neck – 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.

'Near the same tree two more bundles of acute angles sat with their legs drawn up. One, with his chin propped on his knees, stared at nothing, in an intolerable and appalling manner: his brother phantom rested its forehead, as if overcome with a great weariness; and all about others were scattered in every pose of contorted collapse, as in some picture of a massacre or a pestilence. 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.

'I didn't want any more loitering in the shade, and I made haste towards the station. When near the buildings I met a white man, in such an unexpected elegance of get-up that in the first moment I took him for a sort of vision. I saw a high starched collar, white

cuffs, a light alpaca jacket, snowy trousers, a clear necktie, and varnished boots. No hat. Hair parted, brushed, oiled, under a green-lined parasol held in a big white hand. He was amazing, and had a penholder behind his ear.

'I shook hands with this miracle, and I learned he was the Company's chief accountant, and that all the book-keeping was done at this station. He had come out for a moment, he said, "to get a breath of fresh air." The expression sounded wonderfully odd, with its suggestion of sedentary desk-life. I wouldn't have mentioned the fellow to you at all, only it was from his lips that I first heard the name of the man who is so indissolubly connected with the memories of that time. Moreover, I respected the fellow. Yes; I respected his collars, his vast cuffs, his brushed hair. His appearance was certainly that of a hairdresser's dummy; but in the great demoralization of the land he kept up his appearance. That's backbone. His starched collars and got-up shirt-fronts were achievements of character. He had been out nearly three years; and later, I could not help asking him how he managed to sport such linen. He had just the faintest blush, and said modestly, "I've been teaching one of the native women about the station. It was difficult. She had a distaste for the work." Thus this man had verily accomplished something. And he was devoted to his books, which were in apple-pie order. (...)

'Next day I left that station at last, with a caravan of sixty men, for a two-hundred-mile tramp.

'No use telling you much about that. Paths, paths, everywhere.

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* ( 1902)