

The novel is set in Congo during the period of Belgian colonization in the 19th century. The narrator, Marlow, is an English sailor working for an ivory trading company. In this scene, Marlow has just arrived in Africa and discovers the Company he will be working for.

“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 And this was the place where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die.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 clean 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 you¹ 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.

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1899)

¹ Marlow is telling his story to some of his fellow-sailors, hence the use of « you » here.

Suggested commentary for the passage from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

This excerpt from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* offers peculiar insight into colonial Africa, for it takes the reader behind the scenes as it were, staging a revolting portrayal of the gloomy backwaters where the real '*work*' of colonisation took place. This depiction is peculiar because throughout the passage the narrator's outlook remains ambiguous, and as readers we may wonder whether there even is any such a thing as a point of view in this passage.

Indeed, although this excerpt appears to call out the inhumanity of the British colonial empire, the narrator himself seems to contribute to the process of dehumanisation of the natives he describes. Besides, the artfulness of his depiction is such, his description of horror is so deeply aesthetic, that one can only feel uncomfortable in the face of a seemingly romanticised gaze on the woes of colonisation. We will therefore seek to explore how and why this ambiguity permeates the text, and how this provides insight into Conrad's singular prose, aesthetics, and outlook on the world.

Our study will first focus on Conrad's visual descriptive technique, seeking to show how Marlow, the auto-diegetic narrator, almost seems to be painting a canvas with words. We will then study how contrasts, paradoxes, and instability within the architecture of the passage contribute to the narrator's ambiguous outlook. Last, we will explore how this instability might actually mirror the narrator's own doubts and uncertainties, and therefore the author's.

1. The art of depicting horror

Strikingly, the passage begins by tying the depiction of horror to a classical aesthetic reference, with the capitalised word 'Inferno', line two. From that starting point, the narrator goes on to underline the picturesque and graphic nature of his experience, resorting to a conspicuous accumulation of essentially visual cues: 'shapes' (twice), 'dim light', 'attitude', 'eyes' (twice), 'glancing', 'eyelids', 'blind', 'orbs', 'hard to tell', 'pose', 'picture', 'sunlight', 'appearance'. This excessive insistence on the visual, right from the outset, establishes the passage as one focused on aesthetics and, one might venture, superficiality. Given the horrific subject-matter at hand, this mode of description cannot but create discomfort for the reader.

The seminal opening trickles on throughout the passage, as the narrator resorts more and more explicitly to pictorial references, most notably with his artful play on contrasts. The architecture of the passage itself is built on black / white, or darkness / light contrasts, and the reader is unequivocally invited to compare two worlds, that of the damned *versus* that of heavenly bliss. Beyond this, within each part of the passage, and especially within the description of hell on earth that covers two thirds of the text, the narrator explicitly references the chiaroscuro of classical Italian *terribilita* paintings with expressions such as 'half coming out, half effaced', 'distinguish the gleam', 'white flicker in the depths', 'sat up in the sunlight', 'reclined at full length with one shoulder against the tree', etc., as well as gothic aesthetics ('cliffs', 'greenish gloom', 'enormous', 'horror-struck', 'miracle', 'wonderfully odd', 'sort of vision').

Last, this aesthetic aspiration of Conrad's written canvas transpires from the almost exclusively metonymic descriptions of both worlds: the population dying in this 'Inferno' are 'shapes', 'eyes', 'face[s]', 'bones', 'shoulder[s]', etc., and even mere abstractions ('shapes', 'creatures', 'nothing', 'shadows of disease', 'air'). Only line twenty does the word 'man' appear, but even then, the narrator immediately reverts to his tired trope. Similarly, when describing 'a white man', Marlow seems just as obsessed with looks as the character himself, to the point that the chief accountant literally vanishes behind the artefacts of his colonial disguise ('collar' (twice), 'cuffs' (twice), 'jacket', 'trousers', 'necktie', 'boots'). Appearances undoubtedly dominate in the narrator's subjective outlook, and as readers we can only balk at the contrast between this obsession with aesthetics and the nature of the scene disclosed before our astonished eyes.

[Transition]

We therefore discern a pattern that seeks to create a distanced outlook. This provides insight into the narrator's constant need to compare this 'unfamiliar' world with familiar references, and shows his struggle to make sense of a deeply nihilistic experience, or at least of his thwarted expectations (line one: 'my purpose was to...' / 'but no sooner within than...').

2. Aesthetics of contrast, tension, and instability

Beyond pictorial or aesthetic references, the narrator's attempt at establishing his bearings also forays into literature, most explicitly with allusions to the type of Elizabethan cosmogony prevalent in Shakespeare's plays and sonnets. Mentions of 'the tearing pace of the launched earth', the slaves 'clinging to the earth', and the 'shudder of the soil under [Marlow's] feet' give an ominous tone to the scene, and suggest something is awry on a cosmic scale, echoing *King Lear's* words: 'These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us.' (Act 1, scene 2). This cosmogonic approach gives universal resonance to the narrator's individual experience, but also suggests his (or the author's) unstable bearings, as if he were frantically zooming in and out from *micro* to *macro*, from minute detail to the movements of the universe in a desperate attempt at creating meaning from what is unfolding before his eyes. This posits the scene as a reflection on human condition as a whole, and despite a highly aesthetic scene, the horror Marlow witnesses does appear as a journey into the heart of human darkness.

The structural separation on the page between the infernal condition blacks suffer and the heavenly station enjoyed by whites seems to confirm the notion that the narration relies on sharp contrasts of scale, environments, light, and colours, to amplify the resonance of the account. The same goes for the to-and-fro movement between life and death ('fresh air' vs 'thin as air', 'clean' vs 'pestilence', 'miracle' vs 'massacre', 'kept up his appearance' vs 'contorted collapse', 'backbone' vs 'overcome with great weariness'). More abstract contrasts reinforce this notion, with for instance order and the rational ('legality of time contracts', rhetorical questions at the end of the third paragraph, 'acute angles', 'clean', 'varnished', 'parted, brushed, oiled', 'book-keeping', 'teaching', etc.) *versus* chaos and the irrational ('mysterious', 'dim', 'slight', 'a charm', 'bundles', 'scattered', 'collapse', as well as the animalisation of humans: 'on all-fours', 'lapped', etc.).

Still, despite this accumulation of devices aimed at denouncing the horrors of colonial exploitation, the narrator's moral stance remains ambiguous. After all, he chooses not to dignify the slaves with a human touch in his descriptions, and his metonymic glance reifies them to the nth degree. This is all the more troubling than, by contrast, he seems to express nothing but admiration for the white chief accountant, and dignifies him with all the trappings of the so-called civilised world, while wondering why a black slave should wear any kind of 'ornament'. 'Horror-struck' as he may be, Marlow definitely maintains a form of detachment ('with them, it's hard to tell', 'I found nothing else to do but', 'I didn't want any more loitering in the shade') which resonates with the chief accountant's condescending outlook on 'native women, an outlook Marlow appears to admire ('he had verily accomplished something').

[*Transition*]

The troubling coexistence of acceptance and shock, or detachment and sincere concern in Marlow's mind leads us to question the true stakes of this passage. Is the subject-matter at hand a mere pretext for the narrator to sport his descriptive skills? Or is this horrific scene an opportunity to convey a point of view that goes beyond notions of good vs evil, or tormentor vs victim?

3. Beyond detachment, the impossibility of redemption

We can begin answering these questions by taking a closer look at one of Marlow's most dismissive sentences: 'you know with them it's hard to tell'. Beyond the detachment that transpires from such an expression, the narrator is confessing his own unreliability. A similar frame of mind can be identified in the anadiplosis at the end of the second paragraph, as if the narrator were seeking to rectify a slip of the

tongue, admitting that the word 'work' is deeply inappropriate. These, and the fact that we are actually dealing with direct speech (every paragraph begins with quotation marks), suggests we might be reading a confession of sorts, told by an extremely self-aware storyteller.

The effect produced by this singular narrative stance, is that of a subjectivity contaminated by the dominant, abject outlook of the time among white men, but well aware of this process of contamination. Besides, if we take into account the fact that this narration is actually a monologue, we are at a loss as to how the actual narrator of the novel has framed this monologue, and this definitely accounts, to a certain degree, for the ambiguity of the passage^[1]. It therefore seems tricky to speculate about what ideological or political interpretations ought to be drawn from this passage when it comes to colonialism and slavery. What can be established for certain however, is that Marlow, because he is a newcomer to this 'heart of darkness', casts a candid eye on what he discovers, a view that contrasts sharply with the chief accountant's. And as a newcomer, Marlow is made very aware of belonging to the category of the oppressor. The 'horror' he feels might therefore be less the result of seeing the condition of the slaves than the consequence of realising he is complicit in the process that crushes black lives.

Last, we may suspect a touch of irony in Marlow's words when describing a character who appears to embody colonialists. Indeed, although he is 'amazing', we are told that he is mentioned merely for the purposes of a coherent account ('I wouldn't have mentioned the fellow to you at all, only it...'). We also suspect that from the strict point of view of storytelling, his presence serves aesthetic purposes, as a white counterpoint, a notion we already addressed *supra*. In other words, the character is irrelevant. Besides, the focus on the chief accountant's attire is so overstated that we can wonder whether Marlow isn't giving off a little tongue-in-cheek humour. Similarly, we may detect some degree of irony in Marlow's insistent reference to Victorian values: 'that's backbone', 'achievement of character', 'verily accomplished something' when talking about a man's ability to dress well. Whether this irony is Marlow's or the narrator's at Marlow's expense is for every reader to decide, but it does confirm that we are dealing with an eminently self-aware account.

All in all, this passage definitely offers an ambiguous outlook on British colonialism at the turn of the century. But this ambiguity in no way condones the horrors depicted in the scene. Rather, it appears as a pathetic admission that imperialism is a form of power that crushes all, the oppressed and the oppressors, for indeed, as cogs in the colonial machine, even those who, like Marlow, would remain bystanders, are beyond redemption. This passage is thus an eloquent testimony to Conrad's work as a trailblazer for many more works to come, in which Western authors express both fascination and queasiness for the fantastic and horrific endeavours of colonial ventures.

[1] The narrative starting point of *Heart of Darkness* is Charles Marlow giving a retrospective account of his experience as a sailor, to other sailors, while his ship is docked in London. You do not need to know this, however, to come to the conclusions I outline in this part of the commentary.