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**Moral Nihilism: Conrad’s Narrator and Reclaiming Kurtz**

In Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, many secondary critics have discussed a theme of moral nihilism present in the novel. These discussions often revolve, as many *Heart of Darkness* analyses do, around the enigmatic character that is Kurtz. In this essay, I propose a new way of analyzing the theme of nihilism. Rather than focusing on Kurtz, I argue that we should pay critical attention to the main character, Marlow, and his narration of the story to his peers. Viewed as a narrative which is subject to rhetorical choice, doubt, blind spots, etc, the theme of nihilism takes a new form; as having an attributed function within the narrative telling of Marlow. Rather than Kurtz being the subject of moral nihilism, Marlow becomes the subject. I argue that Marlow attempts to reclaim the vision of Kurtz through narrative history, painting him as a nihilist who is no longer subject to judgments of morality. Ultimately, I argue that this new context for understanding the theme of nihilism supports a way of interpreting the novel as containing significance as a representation of a moment of cultural and historical consciousness.

I will begin my argument by first attributing much of my model of interpretation to Charlie Wesley and his essay, *Inscriptions of Resistance in Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness*. Here, Wesley constructs a strong analysis about the meaning of moments of native resistance to the colonial power and their narrative functions within the novel. Wesley argues that these moments contain underlying anxieties, values, and assumptions that were central to the colonial project. To frame the development of his analysis, Wesley states, “the text is first and foremost a dialogue directed specifically at an audience that is receptive to the codes and assumptions of the colonial project writ large” (23). In my analysis, I will borrow from this model of Wesley’s in that I will analyze the inclusion of nihilist thought in Marlow’s narrative as a rhetorical choice of representation made by Conrad.

Central to my analysis of nihilism in *Heart of Darkness* is a way of reading the character Kurtz as a projection of the beliefs of other characters in the novel. It is important, first, to determine what we *know* about Kurtz as opposed to what we *are told* about him. After all, the various characters throughout the novel have a widely varying set of beliefs about the nature of Kurtz. In this analysis, I argue that Kurtz works, in a sense, as a mirror, having beliefs projected onto him which are indicative not of his own beliefs, but rather, of those of the characters viewing him. Thus, not only is Kurtz an enigmatic character as many literary critics have discussed, but is mostly inaccessible. We may view, then, Marlow’s beliefs about Kurtz as a reflection of what Marlow *wishes to believe/project onto Kurtz.*

My argument for how we should view Kurtz is perhaps strongest in Marlow’s dealings with Kurtz’ wife, The Intended. Upon visiting The Intended and discussing the death of Kurtz, she inquires to Marlow as to what Kurtz’ last word was. Marlow tells the Intended that Kurtz’ last word pronounced was her name, to which she responds, “I knew it -- I was sure!” and then proceeds to weep (93). Of course, the most widely quoted passage of *Heart of Darkness* has to be Kurtz’ “true” last words, “The horror, the horror!” (85). Does Marlow lie to the intended about his last words? After all, he admits that perhaps The Intended did know Kurtz best, as she insists to him (91). And Marlow, upon witnessing Kurtz’ last words, states that his cry was “no more than a breath” (85). Might it be possible that Marlow has projected onto Kurtz what he believes should be his last words -- in the moment in which Marlow imaginatively wonders, “Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge?” (85).

There seems to be a disconnect, as in the passage cited above, between what Marlow narrates has literally happened and what Marlow believes *the meaning* of these happenings is. When Marlow attempts to talk Kurtz into returning to the steamship, for example, he states that there is no good in repeating the phrases spoken in the discussion as they were, “common everyday words -- the familiar, vague sounds exchanged on every waking day of life” (82). Nevertheless, Marlow insists that, “They had behind them, to my mind, the terrific suggestiveness of words heard in dreams, of phrases spoken in nightmares. Soul!” (82). It is important to note that Marlow even qualifies his understanding of Kurtz’ words -- *to his mind*, they had terrifically suggestive power. And indeed, when Kurtz is lying on his deathbed, Marlow cedes that, “Sometimes he was contemptibly childish” (84). And despite Kurtz’ discussion of “My intended, my station, my career, my ideas,” Marlow nevertheless states that, “these were the subjects for the occasional utterances of elevated sentiments” (84). All of these cases considered, Kurtz’ literal statements are ‘common’, seemingly selfish, and even ‘contemptibly childish’, though Marlow finds them to be suggestive, soulful, and ‘elevated’. As such, I argue that we should view statements about Kurtz as reflections of what the various other characters think Kurtz *should* be like.

In furthering the idea of Kurtz as a mirror, I argue that Marlow’s inclusion of Kurtz within his narrative is indicative of a fixation/deep concern with nihilistic thinking. Moral Nihilism, in the sense that I will discuss, is the belief that nothing is intrinsically moral or immoral. Nihilism entails a deep skepticism about the entire value system which has been politically, religiously, or culturally instituted upon individuals. It is this type of thinking in which Marlow believes that Kurtz has, “kicked himself loose of the earth” (82). When Kurtz escapes the steamship and crawls towards the forest, Marlow believes that it is, “the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts … the memory of gratified and monstrous passions” that draws Kurtz to leave the ship. “This alone, I was convinced, had driven him out to the edge of the forest” (82). In attempting to convince Kurtz to come back to the ship without drawing the attention of the natives, Marlow states that he “could not appeal in the name of anything high or low” (82). If Kurtz works as a projection of Marlow’s beliefs, then perhaps these comments are indicative of what Marlow believes Kurtz *should be like*. In other words, to be such a powerful vision of success and to so-freely commit ‘morally depraved’ acts (Exterminate all the brutes!) *must* mean that Kurtz has undergone a deep meditation on moral nihilism. This is important, since nothing Kurtz says or does directly suggests that he has undergone this philosophical journey.

But why is it that Marlow wishes to believe that Kurtz has undergone a meditation of moral nihilism? What is it about Kurtz’ success within the company -- and the deep ties of that success to the willingness to commit horrible atrocities -- that suggests he has “kicked himself loose of the earth”?

Many critics have acknowledged the presence of moral nihilism in the novel, though the acknowledgment has not gone so far as to separate the theme from Kurtz himself. Critics have taken for granted the notion of Kurtz as a moral nihilist, and in doing so, have viewed Marlow’s opinions towards Kurtz as those of admiration. In his paper *“Heart of Darkness” and the Failure of the Imagination*, for instance, author James Guetti argues that Kurtz remains a “remarkable man” to Marlow in that he “has escaped the world of sound and unsound, because he has shown that these terms are inadequate as a measure of his experience” (495). Thus, when Marlow discusses Kurtz’ ‘unsound’ methods with the manager of the company, he “formally declares his sympathy with Kurtz” (Guetti 495). I agree that Marlow’s view towards Kurtz in this scene is sympathetic -- as I will discuss later -- though I think Guetti is mistaken in thinking that it is because Kurtz has freed himself of moral principles, as it is Marlow, himself, who has imagined these views. In Patrick Brantlinger’s essay *Heart of Darkness: Anti-Imperialism, Racism, or Impressionism*, Brantlinger makes a further claim, stating that Kurtz is Conrad’s “hero of the spirit” (319). For Conrad, Brantlinger claims, “Kurtz’s heroism consists in staring into an abyss of nihilism so total that the issues of imperialism and racism pale into insignificance” (319). But what if it is not, in fact, Kurtz who stares into this “abyss of nihilism”? What if it is instead Conrad’s narrator who has created the abyss?

In an essay called *The Moral Conditions for Genocide in Joseph Conrad’s “Heart of Darkness”*, author Michael Lackey makes an argument that the novel illustrates how morality can be shaped in a way as to justify genocide. Lackey states, “For Conrad, the problem is not defining true morality; the problem is that morality is an empty signifier, a semiotic vacuity that dominant political powers can strategically manipulate in order to justify crimes against humanity” (21). Lackey’s argument is convincing, as he supports it with two personal letters written by Joseph Conrad -- one written a year before the publication of *Heart of Darkness*, and the other written five months after -- which explicitly describe Conrad’s own rejection of morality (21). In one such letter, Conrad writes to his friend R. B. Cunninghame Graham, “There is no morality, no knowledge and no hope; there is only the consciousness of ourselves which drives us about a world that whether seen in a convex or a concave mirror is always but a vain and fleeting appearance” (*Letters* 71). If Conrad rejects morality as a result of his awareness of how it can be manipulated as a tool for justifying crimes against humanity, then his theme of moral nihilism in the novel takes on a new meaning. Nihilism becomes not a means of justifying atrocities through the rejection of moral principles, but the reverse: the rejection of moral principles due to their capacity to justify atrocities.

This changed context for understanding the theme of nihilism offers new insight. Marlow, in projecting nihilist views onto the behaviors of Kurtz, is not further obscuring Kurtz as an enigma. He is, in a sense, attempting to reclaim the vision of Kurtz. Posed as a question, how can Marlow reconcile the grandiose views of Kurtz with the horrible realities -- a man who puts the heads of his enemies on stakes outside of his hut? If Kurtz is no more than a man who had wholeheartedly bought into the company, building his success and reputation out of the systems of exploitation, violence, and moral corruption, then Marlow must recognize the flaws within the system and within Kurtz himself. If, instead, Kurtz is a man who has “kicked himself loose of the earth”, then his actions can be understood as the product of profound philosophical meditations -- meditations which undermine a system of corruption and lead him deep into an abyss where he must, “invoke him — himself — his own exalted and incredible degradation” (82). Kurtz is reclaimed as a “hero of the spirit”. In this new light, we better understand Marlow’s actions to appropriate the words of Kurtz, as the tears away the postscript “Exterminate all the brutes!” and tells The Intended that Kurtz’ last spoken word was her name. And further, the mere act of narrating becomes an attempt on Marlow’s behalf to reclaim Kurtz -- to control the narrative framing that structures how we view Kurtz’ actions.

That Marlow is attempting to control the narrative framework brings us to the question of why; that is, why does Marlow seem to exhibit an anxiety about how we view Kurtz? Many critics have pointed out how Marlow identifies with Kurtz in a profound way, which could help to explain his reclaiming of Kurtz’ narrative. In a paper called *White Skin, White Masks: Joseph Conrad and the Face(s) of Imperial Manhood*, author Jesse Oak Taylor sets forth an argument in which he analyzes the fetishization of the white male face as “the primary currency of the imperial endeavor” (191). In one section of his essay, Taylor analyzes Marlow’s encounter with the human head on a stake outside of Kurtz’ hut. He claims that, upon seeing the black native’s head, and as a result of the fetishization of the white male face as the “obfuscating magic whereby the commodities of empire are imaginatively cleansed of the violence that enabled their extraction” (191), Marlow empathizes not with the beheaded native, but with Kurtz. Taylor states that, “the knowledge that comes to unite Marlow and Kurtz is the shared encounter with the head on the stake in which Marlow can imagine Kurtz’s encounter with the skull based upon the experience of his own. Marlow and Kurtz become, in essence, two faces sharing one reflection” (202). The white male face, then, becomes an invitation for identifying through a shared set of experiences as a part of the colonial project. While there seems to be many other facets to the phenomena, Taylor’s analysis provides at least a partial framework for understanding Marlow’s identification with Kurtz -- despite finding him to be a “hollow sham” (Conrad 84). Thus, in identifying with Kurtz as “two faces sharing one reflection,” Marlow feels an empathy towards him which compels him to control the narrative understanding of Kurtz’ life.

Having laid all of the groundwork for my argument, I would like to make a claim for the historical insight contained in *Heart of Darkness*, and especially, with regards to our new conceptions of nihilism in the novel. In analyzing the rhetorical elements of Marlow’s narrative, and further, the choices of representation made by Conrad, we may view all of the claims I have proposed as representations of a moment of historical consciousness. Firstly, Conrad wrote during a period of increasingly pervasive views of nihilism. His contemporary, Friedrich Nietzsche, is often accredited as being the most historically significant nihilist thinker. While Nietzsche did not endorse any particular set of nihilist conceptions, his work nevertheless heavily influenced art in Europe during the time at which Conrad wrote. Conrad, in other words, was far from alone in his dealings with moral skepticism. Moral nihilism was an increasing cultural phenomenon, and its implications were critical. If the colonial project had been predicated on fabricated moral values, then the crimes of humanity committed were entirely unjustified. However, as Michael Lackey importantly points out in reference to Conrad’s skepticism towards morality, “Conrad is certainly not endorsing an inhumane philosophy rooted in moral nihilism; as a possessor of a conscience, he believes in taking personal and political responsibility for one's actions. The problem is that something intrinsic to morality makes socially responsible and politically just action impossible” (21).

So how does one take personal and political responsibility for one’s actions? How does one reconcile views of moral skepticism with participation in the colonial project? How are we to view the Marlows, Kurtzs, and Conrads of the world, who all identify with each other interchangeably -- as Jesse Oak Taylor helps us to understand -- and who all have enacted the policy of a morally corrupt, brutal, and self-serving imperial system? They are all, in ways, equally responsible, though the nature of that responsibility remains to be seen—the violation of a conscience? Regardless, it is the conscience that stirs an anxiety about their vulnerability to narrative framing. The colonial subject, having committed acts which *feel* wrong and yet simultaneously feel right as a result of the subject’s position within Empire, now wonders how their hands can remain clean -- or, if they *should* remain clean at all. The key, perhaps, is in the subjective consciousness of the subject -- the domain wherein the subject *has* remained clean, has been forced to reconcile a world of contradictions and expectations and desires with no straightforward answers, much like the abyss of nihilism itself. In other words, the key resides in the listener’s (and reader’s) ability to identify with the colonial subject, to empathize with them, to cleanse them of all injustices by maintaining that they are rational agents who have acted in ways that made sense given their unique historical situatedness.

Though it does not remain as simple as this. Conrad’s novel is not historical, simply demanding that the reader acknowledges his subjectivity as “fact”. And indeed, as colonizer, Conrad had the power to write the history that grants or denies agency to its subjects. Nevertheless, Conrad has created a fictitious text of literary representation, loosely mirroring aspects of his own experience. Why is it that Conrad would choose to detach himself from his experiences in this way? Perhaps it is indicative of a self-consciousness about his ability to control narrative history. Patrick Brantlinger, in the essay previously discussed, provides some additional context for understanding this question. Brantlinger writes, “Viewed one way, Conrad’s anti-imperialist story condemns the murderous racism of Kurtz’s imperative. Viewed another way, Conrad’s racist story voices that very imperative, and Conrad knows it … Conrad inscribes a text that, like the novel itself, cancels out its own best intentions” (321). Given Brantlinger’s insight, Conrad seems to self-consciously allow his own convictions to cancel themselves out, making for a novel that forces readers to reconcile seemingly contradictory views. The novel, in this respect, mimics the consciousness of the colonial subject -- aware of the many conflicting narratives, yet nevertheless inextricably tied to one narrative as a result of their interpellation within empire.

It is not by mistake that *Heart of Darkness* has been one of the most widely discussed novels within literary criticism. To engage with this criticism is to implicitly make a claim about the literary value of the novel (or lack thereof). Instead, I make my opinion explicit: Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* is incredibly valuable in its ability to self-consciously represent a moment of historical consciousness. In this moment, one must reconcile the corruption of a system of fabricated moral values that is capable of justifying crimes against humanity -- with the anxiety to dispense of the very system responsible for granting the construction of one’s subjective identity -- along with the capacity, and perhaps, the propensity to satisfy brutal instincts -- and finally, the unchecked power, and the accompanying anxiety, to control narrative history.

Despite my argument for the literary value of *Heart of Darkness*, it is ineffably important that we do not make the mistake of acknowledging only the subjectivity of the colonizer -- that we do not, too, look at the native head atop a stake and imagine Kurtz’ perspective as he experienced it. We should give tireless efforts to retrieve the subjectivity of all individuals who have been wronged by the injustices of colonialism, and to acknowledge those injustices. That aspiration, though, need not conflict with a more universal image in which every unique individual is granted subjectivity through acknowledgment of their humanity. This grander vision, free of moral judgments, remains *sturdy* in the face of the *abyss* of moral nihilism.

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