

Thresholds, Transcendence, and Ethics in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

Abigail Marie G. Laurel
De La Salle University, Manila

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.
(Conrad 24-25)

Symbolisms of Hell

Marlow constructively describes the exposure of an imperialist to a literal and corporeal hell when he first depicts London's colonial history under Roman rule. He imagines the hardships faced by knights in an unknown land. Marlow imagines that they must have had "little to eat fit for a civilized man" with "nothing but Thames water to drink," "lost in a wilderness," and experienced the "cold, fog, tempests, disease, exile, and death" (7). He expounds on this idea by visualizing a decent young citizen in a toga:

Land in a swamp, march through the woods, and in some inland post feel the savagery, the utter savagery, had closed round him—all that mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs in the forest, in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men. There's no initiation either into such mysteries. He has to live in the midst of the incomprehensible, which is also detestable. (7)

The thematic and motivic role of darkness has called the attention of Conrad's critics. Comparative readings have been made vis-à-vis classic works ranging from discourse about its relation to the text's tone, the purpose of the frame narrative, the significance of Kurtz, Marlow's psychology and role in the plot, as well as issues of racism, class, gender, and other postcolonial sentiments. However, the investigation of this paper will begin with the idea of hell as a metaphorical occurrence as well as a personal or intimate experience.

Firstly, a reading provided by Robert O. Evans in "Conrad's Underworld" relates the plot structure of *Heart of Darkness* to Dante's *Inferno* and interprets Marlow's travels through the Congo as an exhibition to the underworld itself. In analyzing the epic machinery and techniques used by Conrad, Evans detects a number of similarities that demonstrate Marlow's descent to hell and back as a method of achieving enlightenment. For example, Evans notes Kurtz's function as Marlow's "agent of knowledge," making Marlow's pursuit a quest for insight. More, he looks at the resemblance of the Congo River to the River Styx, where he encounters the different agents of hell and their function as conspirators to its cause. Evans also examines the lengthy diversion of Marlow's encounter with Kurtz as geographically avoided by constant deflections just as Dante narrates a journey through the "Circles of Hell" before reaching a summit. This association with *Inferno* is worthy of attention because it refocuses Marlow's literal concept of hell to the figurative in his encounters in Africa (189-95).

Secondly, a reading in association with Evans's would be Lillian Feder's "Marlow's Descent into Hell," which brings the metaphorical notion of hell to Marlow's moral conflict in the story. Feder affiliates Marlow's discovery of evil and attainment of self-knowledge with the epic descent of pursuing an agent of truth in Virgil's *Aeneid*. Kurtz, purported to be an emissary of light, demonstrates a grinding truth of an existing gap between the aspirations of imperialism and the brutality of its actual practices. Marlow's discord is then found in his realizations concerning the complexities and dimensions of evil, and the capacity of man to resist it (280-92).

Interconnections made by prior criticisms between *Heart of Darkness* and hell or the underworld lead to conclusions of Marlow arriving at a certain ethical realization in effect of his journey, although to what ethical realization or how it is arrived at is not explicitly investigated. Mircea Eliade's concept of the modalities of religious experience: the cosmos, chaos, and thresholds may be appropriated to Marlow's inner pilgrimage to his ethical consciousness.

Cosmos, Chaos, and Thresholds as Modalities of the Self

In *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, Eliade creates a distinction between the sacred and the profane (or amorphous) space. He remarks a break in this "homogenous space" through signs that indicate a sacredness of a place that puts an end to the unknown (21). It is through this sign that space becomes relative, and the delineation of a cosmos and chaos is created. According to Eliade, a cosmos may be defined as a well-ordered and inhabited universe that is created by those who belong to it (29). The sacred universe then becomes a cosmos, and the profane world may only be the chaotic disarray it is isolated from. Although the concept of the sacred-profane and cosmos-chaos is initially applied to describe religious behavior, Eliade relates this idea to the non-religious (and arguably modern), contending that these modalities are existential situations assumed by man (24-26). This extensive observation may then be taken from an understanding of the physical world to the abstract and intangible world of the Self.

A device that may be used to distinguish between Marlow's modalities of being is his circumstantial emotional states. When in a cosmic and familiar space, Marlow's emotional state is reflective and calm, firstly evident during his stay at a station for ten long days: "I lived in a hut in the yard, but to be out of the chaos I would sometimes get into the accountant's office" (Conrad 27). He feels a preference and prejudice for physical spaces that resemble home when he first meets the Company's chief accountant and observes his appearance: "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." (27) Here, Marlow experiences higher states of emotions in the face of order and comfort in the midst of the disarray of his externalities.

In dissent, his habitation in the wilderness of Africa elicits a stark contrast of emotions for Marlow. He begins with the realization that "instead of going to the center of the continent, [he is] about to set off for the centre of the earth" (18). Through language and word-use, he creates an image of utter chaos throughout the novel such as: 'unknown,' 'uncivilized,' 'savagery,' 'incomprehensible,' 'detestable,' and 'abomination.' Dwelling in externally chaotic space mirrors its negative effect on Marlow, specifically feelings of disgust and detestation, expressing a suppressed need to be away from it. In these statements, he clarifies a distinction that 'this chaotic space is not I,' and is averted to the idea of being consumed by it.

However, in Eliade's concept of the chaos and the cosmos, there lie thresholds that separate the two modes of being and spaces, 'grey areas,' which are also evident in his emotional responses (25). When Marlow ceases to possess clarity and verbosity in his sentiments when he

attempts to relay his story to his companions, he consistently admits to his ambivalence. For example, in his visit to the office of the French Company, he says: "It was just as though I had been let into some conspiracy –I don't know –something not quite right" (Conrad 14). What truly captivates Marlow is the mystery surrounding the absent figure of Mr. Kurtz. He speaks of Kurtz's effect on him in the real-time of his narrative:

He was just a word for me. I did not see the man in the name any more than you do. Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream –making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is of the very essence of dreams. . . . No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence –that which makes its truth, its meaning –its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream –alone. . . . (42-43)

Divulgences such as these are spread throughout the novel when Marlow begins to address his companions and fails to truly express what he remembers of those moments. He then results to alienate his audience and emotionally withdraw from the situation, for the reason that he feels that these experiences and its effect on him will never truly be understood. Marlow's emotional responses then cease to be validated, and his emotional distance from his account leads to ambiguous interpretations. His audience may then assume that Marlow himself is not truly cognizant of his own feelings or thoughts, other than his conviction that his encounters have left a trace. Marlow's ambivalence may lead to more questions, particularly a) how may his desire for an encounter with Kurtz be explained? b) and what kind of ethical consciousness has Marlow arrived at?

Transcendence and Ethics

A great part of *Heart of Darkness* is expended on Marlow's journey to the middle of the continent to encounter Mr. Kurtz, who he feels compelled to meet. Merely from the collection of stories he has heard from his prior meetings, Marlow gains a level of respect and reverence for the man he has yet to come face to face with. His pilgrimage to the Inner Station is then clearly driven by his desire for an encounter with an emissary of light, so that he may materialize his image of the archetypal wise man. This desire to engage with Kurtz is what drives Marlow into the thresholds of his being, where there is discomfort and nausea. Although nausea is typically physiological, social and political situations also bear the potential to nauseate.

In an enactment of the fulfillment of his desire for an encounter, Marlow experiences an initially nauseated response:

The fact is I was completely unnerved by a sheer blank fright, pure abstract terror, unconnected with any distinct shape of physical danger. What made this emotion so overpowering was –how shall I define it? –the moral shock I received, as if something altogether monstrous, intolerable to thought and odious to the soul, had been thrust upon me unexpectedly. This lasted of course the merest fraction of a second, and then the usual sense of commonplace, deadly danger, the possibility of a sudden onslaught and massacre, or something of the kind, which I saw was impending, was positively welcome and composing. It pacified me, in fact, so much, that I did not raise an alarm. (107-08)

In Levinas's *On Escape*, he looks into the idea of man's experience of the dissolution of things in the world from the angle of the embodied self and the intentional ego as expressed by physical and affective states such as 'need,' 'pleasure,' 'shame,' and 'nausea' (55). He associates

these affective states with a dynamic need to escape oneself, or a desire to step out of existence, and it is through this that Marlow contends with his disappointed transcendence.

However it is in Marlow's first encounter with Kurtz that he first experiences transcendence, in what Levinas would call as the onset of the other:

I was struck by the fire of his eyes and the composed languor of his expression. . . . The volume of tone he emitted without effort, almost without the trouble of moving his lips, amazed me. A voice! A voice! It was grave, profound, vibrating, while the man did not seem capable of a whisper. (Conrad 100-01)

Levinas explains that without human affair, there is no transcendence. Because of Marlow's drive to meet his emissary of light, he is stirred by the expression of Kurtz's face and the vibrating effect of his voice, and experiences transcendence. It is possible that through his recollected thoughts, he realizes that a desire for transcendence is exactly what he had sought for in his journey.

Levinas elaborates in his work *Totality and Infinity* that pure expression in the onset of the other first affects before time of reflection. The power of the expression commands and summons in its nudity and defenselessness, and becomes a passive resistance to the desire that is the receiver's freedom (51). Prior to his encounter with Kurtz, Marlow faces an even more powerful confrontation with the other that has brought him to transcendence, and it is here that he comes to conclusions about his travels:

No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it –this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity –like yours –the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you –you so remote from the night of the first ages –could not comprehend. . . . Let the fool gape and shudder –the man knows, and can look on without a wink. (Conrad 58)

This is where Marlow begins to reveal to his comrades a glimpse of what ethical consciousness he has arrived at from his journeys. Although not explicitly clear, his thoughts about a common humanity with the men that “made horrid faces” (58), communicate an idea that ultimately, in each face of a human that creates an affective expression is mercy demanded.

According to Stein, the recurring image of Marlow sitting in a lotus position is a symbol of his “self-mortification,” “introversion of consciousness,” and arrived form of “religious discipline” (167-70). Since Marlow has retrospectively focused on his descent into the aspects of his internal underworld, he has surpassed the Self and has transcended his powerful experiences and presents to his companions a new kind of awareness, specifically an ethical consciousness. The reader/audience then follows Marlow in his journey to enlightenment and is given the opportunity to come to his own intersubjective conclusions about it.

Works Cited

- Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. <https://www.aub.edu.lb/fas/cvsp/Documents/reading_selections/204/Spring%202013/CS-204-ReadingSelections-Conrad-HeartDarknestDarkness.pdf>
- Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. New York: Harper & Row, 1959. Print.
- Evans, Robert O. "Conrad's Underworld." *Joseph Conrad: 'Heart of Darkness.'* Ed. Robert Kimbrough. New York: Norton, 1963. Print.
- Feder, Lillian. "Marlow's Descent into Hell." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 9 (1955). Print.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *On Escape*. Trans. Bettina Bergo. California: Stanford U, 2003. Print.
- . *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979. Print.
- Stein, William Bysshe. "The Lotus Posture and *Heart of Darkness*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 2 (1956-57). Print.

Abigail Marie G. Laurel is currently an undergraduate student of the Literature Department at the De La Salle University, Manila. Her interests include performance, music, visual arts, environmental activism, and reading up on naturopathy in her free time.
