

A STUDY OF CONRAD'S *YOUTH* AND *HEART OF DARKNESS*

BY ETHEL M. GRAY

“...that infernal tale of ships and that obsession of my life, which has about as much bearing on my literary existence, on my quality as a writer, as the enumeration of drawing-rooms which Thackeray frequented could have on his gift as a novelist. After all, I may have been a seaman, but I am a writer of prose.”

This quotation is from Conrad's *Life and Letters*. It would be interesting to discuss this with reference to *Youth* and *Heart of Darkness*.

The fact that he writes about the sea, he seems to say, is merely accidental; his pride is that he is a *writer of prose* — a conscious artist in prose. Yet the sea, I think, with its solitude, the enforced life in the small community of the crew for weeks and months at a stretch, the vastness of the horizon and the physical challenge in moments of danger, all contributed to his formation as a writer, quite apart from the subject matter of his tales. The sea was not only the setting with which he was familiar. He could have chosen village life in Kent, or the subject of the landowner class in Poland, or life in France, which he visited frequently and for long periods. But although his subject was not sea, it is the sea or the thought of it that serves to spark off his genius as a writer. The sea, it is true, is only the environment of the man-soul he is examining, but it enabled him to carry out his particular study of moral qualities as affected by certain circumstances. The sea, too, is one of the elements which set his novels apart as unique, for we get first-

hand accounts of the life and characters on board told expertly and with the personal experience of the writer in such a way that no other writer, except perhaps Melville and Smollet, can compare with him.

The sea affords him the circumstances most favourable for the study of man in isolation, which is his real theme, because the isolated society on board an ocean-going ship is unaffected by contemporary events elsewhere. Conrad frequently emphasizes the isolation by references to the vast emptiness and silence of the watery expanse surrounding them. It is even the sea voyages which enable Conrad to contact that other setting of man in isolation – that of the European in distant tropical jungles – and the study of the psychological degeneration he almost inevitably undergoes.

One could almost add that it was the sea that gave Conrad his tone. There is something of its translucent calm and yet its depth, something of its voluptuous roll, in the periods, in the rich rhythm, in the wealth of his prose. I wonder if otherwise he would ever have attained that sonorous breadth. There is what might be called a sheer voluptuousness in Conrad's English prose which rises and swells like the waves of the Atlantic! One might even see an analogy in his idiosyncrasy of repetition. He uses the device more frequently than any other, and the words, the phrases and clauses rise in series and flow onward like the waves in their sameness and their fascination.

I may have been a seaman, he says, as though deprecating the fact, *but I am a writer of prose*. The present tense of the second clause might not have been but for the *have been* of the first. Had he not to face personally the challenge he is so fond of writing about, that triumph through ordeal by which manhood is found, he might have missed what became the keynote of his work. So I think the sea had rather more to do with his writing than the *drawing-rooms* on Thackeray's, or at least equally. It was in the drawing-rooms that Thackeray observed the society of his time and portrayed its superficiality. It was at the trading-stations or on such as the *Judea* or Marlow's river steamer boats that Conrad met and observed the life he portrayed.

But there is another point in the quotation that we may analyze. Conrad does not claim that he is a great novelist. He says only *I am a writer of prose*. This is justly claimed, and it is perhaps as a writer of prose, and not as a novelist that he attains the heights, although we must acknowledge that he experimented with new techniques and opened the door to a new type of novel-writing.

Though the present study is limited to his short stories *Youth* and *Heart of Darkness*, some splendid examples of his power as a writer of prose may be quoted. His introduction to the latter, like the first chapter in Hardy's *Return of the Native*, is in itself so beautiful a piece of prose that it stands on its own merits (quite apart from its relation to the story). I refer to that beautiful evocation of an imagined past, the history of the Thames River, which must surely be one of the perfect gems of the literature of the imagination.

Description in *Youth* of dramatic scenes such as the storm in the North Sea when the ballast shifted, and the fierce hurricane in the middle of the Atlantic, the fire on board, and the explosion, are full of vigour, realism, and shot through with dramatic vividness. The narrative is direct and gripping, told neither in a faked seaman's style, nor coloured by any idiosyncrasy of the narrator. The description of action — the pumping out in the North Sea and the pumping in when they are on fire — are convincing and dramatic, truthful, not only because they are told in the first person, but because of the realistic and colorful details. With it all, the prose draws attention to itself in certain passages for its quality as prose, and as beautiful use of language. A fine example is the paragraph: *And we pumped. . .*¹

The recognition of its beauty is at the same time an acknowledgement of Conrad's superiority as a prose-writer rather than as a novelist. Since the narrative is in the first person, it is a technical flaw to include what sounds incongruous within the frame of a supposed oral narrative. Other examples of this are the descriptions

¹ Joseph Conrad. *Youth*. In *Three Short Novels*. Bantam Books. New York. 4th. Edition. April 1963. p. 102.

of the Java bay at the end of *Youth*, which seem to depart from the narrator and the group of listeners around the table, and go off into a lyricism quite unconnected with either narrative or character. One wonders why Conrad did not tell the narrative *in propria persona*. The tone he uses would have been equally possible and convincing if he had written without the *frame*, and with it he risks incongruity if he loses the narrative manner even for a moment, which he does, frequently, gaining nothing, since the person of the narrator plays no part as prism or filter in the story other than that which Conrad himself plays.

Some of the most beautiful examples of his famous prose rhythm seem to be at the same time his most glaring faults as a novelist. In art, surely, if one of the elements or parts draws attention to itself, it is to the detriment of the whole, and that is what Conrad's prose does. It sometimes loses sight of the necessity of its playing a part in proportion to and in keeping with the narrative. Furthermore, even as a whole, the ebb and flow, the roll, and the roar of his prose continually act as a sound curtain between the ear of the reader and the object being described; it sometimes is so thick as to smother the image completely. Yet we forgive him, for the beauty of it. Was Conrad perhaps a little too proud of the fact that he was a *writer of prose*?² Such passages as the following must have been written for the pleasure of their rhythm, and not for their verisimilitude as oral narrative:

“...The great walf of vegetation, an exuberant and entangled mass of trunks, branches, leaves, boughs, festoons, motionless in the moonlight, was like a rioting invasion, of soundless life, a rolling wave of plants, piled up, crested, ready to topple over the creek, to sweep every little man of us out of his little existence. And it moved not”.²

“...seemend to beckon with a dishonouring flourish before the sunlit face of the land a treacherous appeal to the lurking death, to the hidden evil, to the profound darkness of its heart”.³

2 Joseph Conrad. *Heart of Darkness*. In *Three Short Novels*. p. 34.

3 *Ibidem*. p. 38.

“...On we went again into the silence, along empty reaches, round the still bends, between the high walls of our winding way, reverberating in hollow claps the ponderous beat of the stern-wheel”.⁴

Reverberating. Perhaps that was what he wanted to achieve — a vibration that continues in the air after the reading is done. In Marlow's words: *You remember it — you dream of it, you wake up at night and think of it — years after...*⁵

But to return to the subject of Conrad's study of the effects of solitude, the latter theme runs through many of his novels, and no less in these two short stories. It has even been said that loneliness is central in Conrad. This does not mean necessarily that the main character experiences a sense of solitude. In *Youth*, for instance, the isolation and the challenge bring a predominant sense of triumph and exhilaration; and in *Heart of Darkness* the loneliness is not entirely that of the central character. The study is the effect of it on the man he has gone to rescue, and only partially on the rescuer. But the fact of being isolated while undergoing testing, and of triumph or defeat through that trial, is the central theme in both stories.

Conrad was interested in the human soul. He is painstakingly analytical in his study of the soul in certain surroundings and under certain conditions; for this study it was essential that the character be isolated from ordinary civilized society. Our attention is drawn to the importance of isolation in *Heart of Darkness* as a necessary means for such an analysis, when he examines and explains the changes undergone by the man Kurtz living alone in the jungle with only the savages for company:

“You can't understand. How could you? — with solid pavement under your feet, surrounded by kind neighbours ready to cheer you or to fall on you, stepping delicately between the butcher and the policeman, in the holy terror of scandal and

4 Ibidem. p. 41.

5 Ibidem. p. 40.

gallows and lunatic asylums — how can you imagine what particular region of the first ages a man's untrammelled feet may take him into by the way of solitude — utter solitude without a policeman — by the way of silence — utter silence, where no warning voice of a kind neighbour can be heard whispering of public opinion? These little things make all the great difference. When they are gone you must fall back upon your innate strength, upon your own capacity for faithfulness".⁶

Cut off from intercourse with civilization, man must look only to his own integrity for strength to endure. If that integrity does not exist, or if there be any flaw in his composition, collapse is certain. Of Kurtz the narrator says:

"They (the heads on the fence posts) only showed that Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts, that there was something wanting in him — some small matter which, when the pressing need arose, could not be found under his magnificent eloquence. Whether he knew of the deficiency himself I can't say... But the wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance...".⁷

It is not a question of whether the will power is strong enough. It is a question of an inner rectitude which will decide the final stand or fall. If this inner lack is to be exposed, it requires that the character be stripped of companionship. He must be taken to the wilderness. *The wilderness had found him out early*. The narrator continues:

"I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude...".⁸

For the young second mate in *Youth*, the testing while in a lonely position of responsibility brought a sublime courage and a

6 Ibidem. p. 58.

7 Ibidem. p. 69.

8 Ibidem. Id.

wild exhilaration at the discovery of what the human heart can endure. For Kurtz the great solitude *echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core* . . .⁹

But in *Heart of Darkness* it is not only isolation, not only the experience of solitude that is studied. There is also occasion for the study of the physical and spiritual effects of the surroundings of primitive jungle and primitive man on the soul and mind of a civilized man. For Conrad the important value is the spiritual, not the physical. His rendering of setting and background is the means to his end: the final aim is the revelation of spiritual qualities. In *Youth* we have splendid descriptions of storm at sea or the blazing wreck, but it is not the physical trial that Conrad aims to show us. We see the truth he wants to convey in the significant details such as when the men obey the order and carefully make the *harbour furl* on a ship *doomed to go nowhere*, and when they quietly drop their bundles as the captain decides they will stay on the burning hulk. Through the narrator Conrad says:

“To an onlooker they would be a lot of profane scallywags, without a redeeming point. What made them do it? . . .’ What? They had no professional reputation — no examples, no praise. It wasn’t a sense of duty . . . They didn’t think their pay half good enough. No; it was something in them, something inborn and subtle and everlasting . . . There was a completeness in it, something solid like a principle, and masterful like an instinct — a disclosure of something secret — of that hidden something, that gift of good or evil that . . . shapes the fate nations”.¹⁰

The importance of the spiritual above the material may also be seen in *Heart of Darkness*. Marlow had brusquely interrupted Towson’s account of the ceremonious approach of the natives to Kurtz. He remarks:

“Curious, that feeling that came over me, that such details would be more intolerable than those heads drying on the

⁹ Ibidem. p. 70.

¹⁰ *Youth*. p. 115.

stakes... After all, that was only a savage sight, while I seemed at one bound to have been transported into some lightless region of subtle horrors, where pure, uncomplicated savagery was a positive relief...".¹¹

The atmosphere is presented through the setting which Conrad paints with masterly skill. He constantly emphasizes the silence on the journey up-river by Marlow and even on the two hundred mile tramp into the bush. The only sounds are mute, indistinct, faint:

"A great silence around and above. Perhaps on some quiet night the tremor of far-off drums, sinking, swelling, a tremor vast, faint; a sound weird, appealing, suggestive, and wild — and perhaps with as profound a meaning as the sound of bells in a Christian country".¹²

Marlow remembers the words of the doctor who medically examined him for the job: *It would be interesting for science to watch the mental changes of individuals, on the spot.*¹³ He feels *he is becoming scientifically interesting.* When he reaches the steamer (of which he is to be the captain), he finds it sunk in the river. Meanwhile he hears of Kurtz again and his strange personality is described to him. But above all he stresses the silence:

"Beyond the fence the forest stood up spectrally in the moonlight, and through the dimstir, through the faint sounds of that lamentable courtyard, the silence of the land went home to one's very heart — its mystery, its greatness, the amazing reality of its concealed life".¹⁴

And again:

"I had my shoulders against the wreck of my steamer, hauled up on the slope like a carcass of some big river animal. The smell of mud, of primeval mud, by Jove! was in my nostrils,

11 *Heart of Darkness*. p. 70.

12 *Heart of Darkness*. p. 22.

13 *Ibidem*. p. 23.

14 *Ibidem*. p. 29.

the high stillness of primeval forest... All this was great, expectant, mute, while the man jabbered about himself. I wondered whether the stillness on the face of the immensity looking at us two were meant as an appeal or as a menace. What were we who had strayed in here? Could we handle that dumb thing, or would it handle us? I felt how big... was that thing...".¹⁵

The further he penetrates into the forest, the more deeply he senses its primeval quality. They pass river stations; white men were there, who *had the appearance of being held there captive by a spell*. He feels they are *wanderers on prehistoric earth*. As a frightful contrast, impinging the more forcibly on them for the oppressive silence they have been coming through, he describes the river stations:

"... suddenly, as we struggled round a bend, there would be a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage".

He cannot tell if they are cursing or praying, but in spite of their weird howling, he feels his human unity with the savages:

"The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us — who could tell? We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings; we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled... We could not understand because we were too far and could not remember, because we were travelling in the night of first ages... We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there — there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly, and the men were — No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it... If you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you... the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it

15 Ibidem. p. 30.

16 Ibidem. p. 41.

which you — you, so remote from the night of first ages — could comprehend”.¹⁷

He meditates on *truth, stripped of its cloak of time*, and the manhood necessary to face it thus naked. Here he expresses frankly what the silence, the isolation and the surrounding savagery can do to a man. In imagination Conrad travels further than the present *in his search for surroundings to bring out this truth*. He penetrates into the dim reaches of a primitive era. In *Heart of Darkness* he makes several excursions into pre-historic times, and speculates on the effect of savagery and solitude on the earliest colonisers, the Romans. He concludes that the experience brings the revelation of the self and of the power of endurance or the capacity for failure.

The effects of the same isolation on primitive man is quite different: it is the experience of his *oneness* with nature. And only a very sensitive civilized mind can glimpse this. Through Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* we begin to realize it. The savage finds it easy. The civilized man must go back through all the layers of his inherited culture until the core of his real animal self is reached and then he discovers his oneness, his union with savagery and with nature. This discovery comes as a shock or it comes to soothe according to the mood of the moment of revelation. In the following passage Marlow is describing the frenzied dance of the natives in the bush as the boat approaches Kurtz's station:

“... 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 first ages — could comprehend”.¹⁸

17 *Ibidem.* p. 42.

18 *Ibidem.* p. 42.

Conrad's ultimate aim is the search for truth. Above and beyond and through all he is searching for the truth about the human soul, and the human mind. By getting his character away and making him suffer loneliness, he gets right down to the white bone of his subject — truth. He finds it to be something

“which you . . . could comprehend. And why not? The mind of man is capable of anything — because everything is in it, all the past, as well as all the future. **What was there after** all? Joy, fear, sorrow, devotion, valour, rage — who can tell? — but truth — truth stripped of its cloak of time. Let the fool gape and shudder — the man knows. . . . He must as least be as much of a man as these (savages) on the shore. He must meet that truth with his own true stuff — with his own inborn strength. Principles won't do. Acquisitions, clothes, pretty rags — rags that would fly off at the first good shake. No; you want a deliberate belief”.¹⁹

What, we might ask, was the effect on Marlow (and perhaps on Conrad) of the discovery of the truth about himself? He says *Droll thing life is. . . . The most you can hope from it is some knowledge of yourself. . . .*²⁰

Marlow tells of his return to the civilized world and we see the effect of his discovery of the truth:

“I found myself back in the sepulchral city resenting the sight of people hurrying through the streets to filch a little money from each other, to devour their infamous cookery, to gulp their unwholesome beer, to dream their insignificant and silly dreams. . . . They were intruders whose knowledge of life was to me an irritating pretence, because I felt so sure they could not possibly know the things I knew. . . . I tottered about the streets. . . . grinning bitterly at perfectly respectable persons”.²¹

19 Ibidem. p. 42.

20 Ibidem. p. 85.

21 Ibidem. p. 86.

But he had also learned pity. When the not-so-young *Intended* begs him to tell her Kurtz's last words, he does not tell her they were the hair-raising cry of: *The horror! the horror!* but — *The last word he pronounced was — your name*; and it seems to him that the house would collapse before he could escape and that the heavens will fall on his head for the falsehood.

I tell you, the youthful disciple of Kurtz had said, *this man has enlarged my mind.*²²

The gradual impress of the savage surroundings can be clearly traced in the personal comments of Marlow as he tells his story. To him at first the sights and sounds and silence of that strange dark jungle-country were seen or heard objectively, as when he asks why the former man had committed suicide. The answer to his question was: *Who knows? . . . The country perhaps.* But gradually the savagery, the primitiveness, exerts its hypnotic power and he feels in himself a strange unsuspected response. But there is more. What Conrad does not state but gradually develops is the influence on Marlow's mind and nerves as he proceeds farther and farther into the depth of darkness. Eight miles from Kurtz's station, he is delayed overnight because the navigation is dangerous. He was *annoyed beyond expression . . . most unreasonably too.* He acknowledges the absurdity of his fears of arriving too late to hear Kurtz discourse. He says: *My sorrow had a startling extravagance of emotion, even such as I had noticed in the howling sorrow of those savages in the bush. I couldn't have felt more of lonely desolation somehow, had I been robbed of a belief or had missed my destiny in life.*²³ Out of sheer nervousness he flings a new pair of shoes overboard - as if some inner reach of his mind wanted him to go barefoot like the savages. When Kurtz is discoursing of his ivory, his this, his everything, Marlow says: *It made me hold my breath in expectation of hearing the wilderness burst into a prodigious peal of laughter . . .*²⁴. Then he remarks on the power of ordinary civi-

22 Ibidem. p. 65.

23 Ibidem. p. 56.

24 Ibidem. p. 58.

lized life to keep us sane (*the solid pavement under your feet, ... the kind neighbours, etc*). He says:

“Of course you may be too much of a fodd to go wrong - too dull even to know you are being assaulted by the powers of darkness... Or you may be such a thunderingly exalted creature as to be altogether deaf and blind to anything but heavenly sights and sounds... But most of us are neither one nor the other. The earth for us is a place to live in, where we must... breathe dead hippo, ... and not be contaminated. And there ... your strength comes in, the faith in your ability... your power of devotion, not to yourself, but to an obscure, backbreaking business”.²⁵

The young Russian assistant of Kurtz, the *motley* youth whom he meets on Kurtz's station, is, he says, unscathed because of his *absolutely pure, uncalculating, unpractical spirit of adventure... this modest clear flame, the glamour of youth*. Kurtz had become the willing victim of that dark, evil fascination, and now Marlow is drawn into the orbit of Kurtz's power. He admires him blindly: *I turned mentally to Kurtz for relief... I think Mr. Kurtz is a remarkable man...*²⁶. Marlow realizes what power it is that has taken possession of Kurtz's soul. He feels the sinister weight of the primeval forest. When he discovers Kurtz had escaped from his rescuers and returned to the jungle, he says:... *the moral shock I received, as if something altogether monstrous, intolerable to thought and odious to the soul, had been thrust upon me unexpectedly*²⁷. As he watches Kurtz die, he sees how *the diabolical love and the unearthly hate... fought for the possession of that soul*²⁸ and felt *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 had beguiled his unlawful soul beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations*²⁹. His

25 Ibidem. p. 58.

26 Ibidem. p. 75.

27 Ibidem. p. 77.

28 Ibidem. p. 83.

29 Ibidem. p. 80.

soul had gone mad, being alone in the wilderness and looking into itself.

* * *

A civilized man's soul experience during physical isolation is the theme of Conrad's great story. It is, of course, a theme as old as literature, from Ulysses down. The isolation of the solitary seaman is the theme of another great story in English which pictures the soul's anguish and regeneration. Innumerable details of this story, an earlier one than Conrad's, which find a parallel in the later lead one to speculate on whether or no the Polish author consciously took the story as his model. I refer to Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*. The result of an analytic comparison of the two works is surprising.

In the first place it is not the story itself that really matters, but how it is told. We all agree that it is the sense of magic that pervades Coleridge's *Rime*, it is the supernatural atmosphere which surrounds the tale and is communicated to us that remains of value to us and is that for which we owe most gratitude to Coleridge — and to Conrad in his *Heart of Darkness*.

Conrad emerges as great a master in the creation of the mysterious and of magic as Coleridge. Did he take the older author as his master for language and incident as well as theme and style?

First let us take the sense of mystery, the fear induced by the undefined and the consciousness of some supernatural force pervading the scene. One of the most impressive factors about the narrative is its atmosphere, an atmosphere of vagueness and expectancy that grows until it becomes oppressive. The descriptions of the forest, the fog, the river and the environment as a whole is carried out with a masterly use of a vocabulary which suggests unreality and mystery. Something vague and undescrivable hovers over the foliage, something that is driving Marlow to madness. This strange atmosphere communicates to the reader the feeling that something hidden is lurking there, and we, like Marlow, want to find an answer to the questions we ask ourselves: What is it? What is the answer

to the profound silence which is at the same time a loud voice without sound? The reader continually comes across such words and phrases as the following, which stress the mysteriousness of the unknown, all outlines are blurred, and the human being begins to lose his hold on reality:

"...spectrally in the moonlight... faint sounds... its mystery..." (p. 30). "...bewitched pilgrims... dreamsensation..." that notion of being captured by the incredible..." (p. 31). "...like a rioting invasion of soundless life... A deadened burst of mighty splashes..." (p. 34). "...till you thought yourself bewitched and cut off for ever from everything you had known once... the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention..." (p. 39). "...had the appearance of being held there captive by a spell..." (p. 41). "...we glided past like phantoms..." (p. 42). "It was not sleep — it seemed unnatural, like a state of trance" (p. 46). "... the steamer... her outlines blurred as though she had been on the point of dissolving..." (p. 47). "...the playful paw-strokes of the wilderness..." (p. 49). "The bush began to howl" (p. 54). "...vague forms of men running bent double, leaping, gliding, distinct, incomplete, evanescent..." (p. 54). "This initialed wraith from the back of Nowhere..." (p. 59).

Even Kurtz has become incorporeal:

"And I heard — him — it — this voice — other voices — all of them were so little more than voices — and the memory of that time itself lingers around me, impalpable, like a dying vibration of one immense jabber..."³⁰

When he actually came into Kurtz's presence he was *that Shadow — this wandering and tormented thing*.³¹ *He rose, unsteady, long, pale, indistinct, like a vapour exhaled by the earth and swayed slightly, misty and silent before me*.³² As he lay dying, *the shade of the original Kurtz frequented the bedside of the holloy sham,*

30 Ibidem. p. 57.

31 Ibidem. p. 79.

32 Ibidem. p. 79.

*whose fate it was to be buried presently in the mould of primeval earth. But both the diabolic love and the unearthly hate of the mysteries it had penetrated fought for the possession of that soul satiated with primitive emotions.*³³

The sea is the setting for Conrad's story, and navigation, up a mysterious river. Coleridge's ballad is also set on the sea and includes navigation. In one fundamental respect the two authors differ. Coleridge's tale is told in the simplest language and in the simplest of verse forms — the ballad, while Conrad's tone has the rich voluptuous rhythm of tropical seas. Coleridge's magic is in the supernatural elements he employs — the spirits of sea, earth and air, the ghost ship, the figures of her crew, etc.; but also in the natural elements — the albatross, the calm, the sea-creatures, the lightning play, the moonlight, and so on; it is also in the mesmerism of the Ancient Mariner's glittering eyes and is emphasized by the occasional intrusions from the real world which serve as contrast during his narration, and perhaps as much as anything it lies in Coleridge's use of rhythmic variations.

A careful reading reveals over one hundred parallels, incidents, phrases, words, hints and other details which show such a close relationship and resemblance to Coleridge's poem that it is impossible to image it to have come about by chance.

To begin with there is the *frame*, a group of men listening to a mariner's story which is thrust upon them by the narrator who *resembles a seaman*, Marlow tells how his ship travels *all along the formless coast bordered by dangerous surf, as if Nature herself had tried to word off intruders...*³⁴ Coleridge, or rather his Ancient Mariner, tells how *...through the drifts the snowy clifts/... Nor shapes of men nor beasts we ken.*³⁵ As they progress they come to a place of terrible noises: *The rapids were near, and an uninterrupted,*

³³ Ibidem. p. 83.

³⁴ Ibidem. p. 85.

³⁵ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. In *Poetry & Prose*. Int. & Notes by H. W. Garrod. Clarendon Press. Oxford. 1960. Line 55.

uniform, headlong, rushing noise filled the mournful stillness... as though the tearing pace of the launched earth had suddenly become audible.³⁶

Coleridge's description of the region of unearthly sound is: *It cracked and growled, and roared and howled, / Like noises in a swoond!*³⁷

When Marlow is becalmed in the tropics the banks of the river *were rotting into mud...* (its) *waters, thickened into slime*³⁸, and Coleridge: *Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs/ Upon the slimy sea.*³⁹ *The very deep did rot: O Christ!*⁴⁰

When Marlow reaches his destination he finds that his ship is out of commission, useless, and he must wait an unendurable time. Weeks turned into months, and he could do nothing. Like the Ancient Mariner, he and his steamboat were *As idle as a painted ship/ Upon a painted ocean*⁴¹, in the jungle heat of the tropics, and now it is not the noise but the silence that assails him — *...the silence of the land went home to one's very heart — its mystery, its greatness.*⁴²

Coleridge describes it: *And we did speak only to break/ The silence of the sea!*⁴³

The *frame* is pierced periodically as the listeners pass a remark or two and then relapse into silence, just as the music of the wedding-feast serves to remind us that the young man is still there, spell-bound, listening.

The moon for Conrad's Marlow, meanwhile, had risen, it *had spread over everything a thin layer of silver — over the rank grass, over the mud... o'er the great river. I could see through a sombre gap glittering, glittering, as it flowed broadly by without a murmur*⁴⁴.

36 *Heart of Darkness*. p. 18.

37 *Rime*. L. 61.

38 *Heart of Darkness*. p. 15.

39 *Rime*. L. 125.

40 *Ibidem*. L. 123.

41 *Ibidem*. L. 117.

42 *Heart of Darkness*. p. 30.

43 *Rime*. L. 109.

44 *Heart of Darkness*. p. 30.

Coleridge's moon: *Her beams bemocked the sultry main/ Like April hoar-frost spread.*⁴⁵

Days passed on and Marlow could only watch how *On silvery sandbanks hippos and alligators sunned themselves side by side.*⁴⁶ In the *Rime*, the sea-creatures sporting in the shadow of the ship, *...moved in tracks of shining white/ And when they reared, the elfish light/ Fell off in hoary flakes.*⁴⁷

Then we also have the *ghastly crew*⁴⁸ in *Heart of Darkness*: *...twenty cannibals splashing around and pushing*⁴⁹, who helped the boat along when she could not float. These are also like Coleridge's water-spirits, for the Ancient Mariner describes: *Slowly and smoothly went the ship, / Moved onward from beneath.*⁵⁰

Gradually Marlow and his men *...penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness. It was very quiet there.*⁵¹ They were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet. *We could have fancied ourselves the first of men taking possession.*⁵² And Coleridge's Mariner says: *We were the first that ever burst/ Into that silent sea.*⁵³

The *blazing little ball of the sun*⁵⁴ hangs over the men in *Heart of Darkness*, while in the *Rime*: *All in a hot and copper sky / The bloody Sun, at noon, / Right up above the mast did stand, / No bigger than the Moon.*⁵⁵

Everything is so still for Conrad: *The living tress, lashed together by the creepers, and every living bush of the undergrowth, might have been changed into stone... It was not sleep, — it seemed unnatural, like a state of trance...*⁵⁶ And for Coleridge: *...the*

45 *Rime*. L. 267.

46 *Heart of Darkness*. p. 39.

47 *Rime*. L. 274.

48 *Ibidem*. L. 340.

49 *Heart of Darkness*. p. 40.

50 *Rime*. L. 375.

51 *Heart of Darkness*. p. 41.

52 *Ibidem*. p. 41.

53 *Rime*. L. 105.

54 *Heart of Darkness*. p. 46.

55 *Rime*. L. 111.

56 *Heart of Darkness*. p. 46.

*sky and the sea, and the sea and the sky / Lay like a load on my weary eye.*⁵⁷

Conrad says: *The night came suddenly, and struck you blind as well as deaf.*⁵⁸ In Coleridge's *Rime: At one stride comes the dark.*⁵⁹

After many days of loneliness the Ancient Mariner comes to the point where he finds that water-snakes which had formerly so disgusted him, had a beauty of their own: *Within the shadow of the ship / I watched their rich attire: / Blue, glossy green, and velvet black, / They coiled and swam; and every track / Was a flash of golden fire. / O happy living things! no tongue / Their beauty might declare: / A spring of love gushed from my hart, / And I blessed them unaware.*⁶⁰

Have we a parallel in Conrad's story? Here it is. The glossy-skinned cannibals had been eating disgusting rotten hippoflesh. It had been ordered thrown overboard but no provision having been made for their food, what, Marlow asks, was to prevent them from eating him? Suddenly:

"I saw that something restraining, one of those human secrets that baffle probability, had come into play there. I looked at them with a swift quickening of interest... in a new light, as it were... Yes; I looked at them as you would on any human being, with a curiosity of their impulses, motives, capacities, weaknesses, when brought to the test...".⁶¹

And he gets the revelation that these crude savages — *the many men so beautiful* — were capable of:

"...some kind of primitive honour?... Restraint! I would just as soon have expected restraint from a hyena... But there was the fact facing me — the fact dazzling, to be seen, like the foam on the depths of the sea...".⁶²

57 *Rime*. L. 250.

58 *Heart of Darkness*. p. 46.

59 *Rime*. L. 200.

60 *Rime*. L. 277.

61 *Heart of Darkness*. p. 49.

62 *Ibidem*. p. 49.

But relief does not yet come, even as the Ancient Mariner's penance continued after the sleep *that slid into (his) . . . soul*.⁶³

Unexpectedly, in the ballad, *the upper air burst into life!*.⁶⁴ In Conrad's story: *Sticks, little sticks, were flying about — thick; they were whizzing before my nose . . .*.⁶⁵ The Mariner says: *Like the whizz of my cross-bow!*.⁶⁶

Marlow says: *All this time the river, the shore, the woods, were very quiet, perfectly quiet.*⁶⁷ And in the *Rime*: *The loud wind never reached the ship.*⁶⁸

In Conrad's story: *I could only hear the heavy splashing thump of the stern-wheel and the patter of these things.*⁶⁹ *With heavy thump, a lifeless lump, / They dropt down one by one —* says the Mariner.⁷⁰

Then suddenly, instead of silence, Marlow's ears are assailed by sound — a flood of it. In the dead stillness of fog:

“Before it (the anchor chain) stopped running with a muffled rattle, a cry, a very loud cry as of infinite desolation, soared slowly in the opaque air. It ceased. A complaining clamour, modulated in savage discords, filled our ears . . . to me it seemed as though the mist itself had screamed, sosuddenly and apparently from all sides at once, did this tumultuous and mournful uproar arise”.⁷¹

Later, he says it was . . . *like a dying vibration of one immense jabber . . .*⁷² The corresponding passage in the old Mariner's tale tells of the sudden rush of sounds: *Sometimes a-dropping from the sky / . . . How they seemed to fill the sea and air / With their sweet jargoning! / . . . It ceased; yet still the sails made on / A*

63 *Rime*. L. 296.

64 *Ibidem*. L. 313.

65 *Heart of Darkness*. p. 53.

66 *Rime*. L. 223.

67 *Heart of Darkness*. p. 53.

68 *Rime*. L. 327.

69 *Heart of Darkness*. p. 53.

70 *Rime*. L. 218.

71 *Heart of Darkness*. p. 46.

72 *Ibidem*. p. 57.

pleasant noise till noon / ⁷³. The same words. The same magic change of tone and rhythm, and, daringly enough, the same device to mark the change: *It ceased*.

Even the ship Marlow is on is for a time on the point of disappearing like Coleridge's *spectre bark* — *With far-heard whisper o'er the sea*.⁷⁴ Marlow says:

“The steamer we were on, her outlines blurred as though she had been on the point of dissolving... The rest of the world was nowhere, as far as our eyes and ears were concerned. Just nowhere. Gone, disappeared; swept off without leaving a whisper or a shadow behind”.⁷⁵

In this weird unsubstantial mistiness of blurred outlines: *The faces twitched with the strain, the hands trembled slightly, the eyes forgot to wink; . . . as they hauled at the chain*.⁷⁶

In Coleridge's ballad: *They groaned, they stirred, they all uprose, / Nor spake, nor moved their eyes; / . . . The mariners all 'gan work the ropes, / Where they were wont to do*.⁷⁷

We shall get the *helmsman* later. Meanwhile *the ship moved on*. Marlow and his men had had to spend the night in midriver, impeded by the thick fog, which . . . *did not shift or drive; it was just there, standing all around you like something solid. At eight or nine, perhaps, it lifted as a shutter lifts*.⁷⁸ It was like the mist that suddenly lifted when the Albatross was killed: *In mist or cloud, on mast or shroud, / It perched for vespers nine; / While all the night, through fog-smoke white, / Glimmered the white Monn-shine*.⁷⁹ The Mariner turns pale as he confesses: *I shot the Albatross*, but soon after: *The glorious sun uprist; / Then all averred, I had killed the bird / That brought the fog and mist. /*

⁷³ *Rime*. L. 358.

⁷⁴ *Rime*. L. 201.

⁷⁵ *Heart of Darkness*. p. 47.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*. Id.

⁷⁷ *Rime*. L. 331.

⁷⁸ *Heart of Darkness*. p. 46.

⁷⁹ *Rime*. L. 75.

... *The fair breeze blew, the white foam flew / The furrow followed free.*⁸⁰ They are able to proceed on their way. *Sterr her straight,* Marlow said to the helmsman, ... *He held his head rigid, face forward ... but he kept on.*⁸¹ It was just at this point that the Ancient Mariner saw how *the souls* of the crew ... *did from their bodies fly, / ... And every soul, it passed me by, / Like the whizz of my cross-bow.*⁸² As they fell, *Each turned his face with a ghastly pang, / And cursed me with his eye.*⁸³

For Marlow it was much the same experience:

"The twigs shook, swayed and rustled, the arrows flew out of them... the arrows came in swarms... I threw my head back to a glinting whizz that traversed the pilot house... The man stepped back swiftly, looked at me over his shoulder in an extraordinary, profound, familiar manner, and fell... The man had rolled on his back and stared straight up at me; ... his eyes shone with an amazing lustre... I had to make an effort to free my eyes from his gaze..."⁸⁴

I could not draw my eyes from treirs, the ballad says.
When Conrad's helmsman died:

"... he frowned heavily, and that frown gave to his black death-mask an inconceivable sombre, brooding, menacing expression. The lustre faded swiftly into vacant glassiness⁸⁵ ... the intimate profundity of that look he gave me when he received his hurt remains to this day in my memory".⁸⁶

Coleridge's Mariner says: *The look with which they looked on me / Had never passed away.*⁸⁷

Meanwhile, Marlow is feeling his aloneness more keenly than

80 Ibidem. L. 98.

81 *Heart of Darkness*. p. 53.

82 *Rime*. L. 220.

83 Ibidem. L. 214.

84 *Heart of Darkness*. p. 53.

85 Ibidem, p. 55.

86 Ibidem. p. 61.

87 *Rime*. L. 255.

ever. He was responsible for his ship, he could not communicate to any of the passengers the predicament they were in, and now the man who had been his companion in the pilot-house lay dead at his feet. *I missed my late helmsman awfully.*⁸⁸ He now feels a *lonely desolation.*⁸⁹ The Mariner says: *Alone, alone, all, all alone, / Alone on a wide, wide sea, / And never a saint took pity on / My soul in agony.*⁹⁰

The ship in Conrad's story was now getting well away down the river, *when I saw, says Marlow, the outline of some sort of building. "What's this?" I asked. He (the manager) clapped his hands in wonder. "The station!" he cried... I steamed past prudently then stopped the engines and let her drift down.*⁹¹ Coleridge's mariner says: *Oh! dream of joy! Is this indeed / The lighthouse top I see? / Is this the hill. Is this the kirk? / ... We drifted o'er the harbour-bar.*⁹²

It is the end and home for the Ancient Mariner, but Marlow is still at the farthest point away. Like Coleridge's hero he falls into a swoon or trance and is unconscious of how he gets back. Like Coleridge's narrator, Marlow is interrupted during the account of his near death. *I fear thee!* — the wedding-guest said and the old man answered: *Fear not, fear not... / This body dropt not down.*⁹³

So also Marlow:

“... the pilgrims buried something (Kurtz) in a muddy hole.
And then they very nearly buried me.

However, as you see, I did not go to join Kurtz then and there. I did not. I remained to dream the nightmare out to the end...”.⁹⁴

“No, they did not bury me, though there is a period of time

88 *Heart of Darkness*. p. 60.

89 *Ibidem*. p. 56.

90 *Rime*. L. 232.

91 *Heart of Darkness*. p. 62.

92 *Rime*. L. 464.

93 *Ibidem*. L. 230.

94 *Heart of Darkness*. p. 85.

which I remember mistily, with shuddering wonder, like a passage through some inconceivable world..."⁹⁵

When he got back to the civilized world, Marlow said:

"I found myself back in the sepulchral city resenting the sight of people hurrying through the streets to filch a little money from each other... whose knowledge of life was to me an irritating pretence, because I felt so sure they could not possibly know the things I knew".⁹⁶

Like the Wedding-Guest, he was now a *sadder and a wiser man*,⁹⁷ and the Mariner himself, who told the story was under compulsion to do so: *That moment that his face I see, / I know the man that must hear me: / To him my tale I teach.*⁹⁸

Marlow will not tell his story to the Company director, or to the spectacled man in the city; he puts off the *cousin* who turns up, and to the journalist he gave only the bulky report written by Kurtz. It was to the *Intended* he went to tell his story, he knew not why: *Perhaps it was an impulse of unconscious loyalty, or the fulfilment of one of those ironic necessities that lurk in the facts of human existence. I don't know. I can't tell. But I went.*⁹⁹ Also at the opening of Conrad's story, while the four friends are waiting for the tide and Marlow starts his tale, the first narrator remarks: *We knew we were fated... to hear.*¹⁰⁰ In Coleridge's ballad: *The Wedding-Guest sat on a stone: / He cannot choose but hear.*¹⁰¹

* * *

Some important elements remain to be accounted for: the Albatross, the female figure *Death-in-Life*, the *spirits' converse* overheard, the fight for a man's soul, the spiritual crime that brought it all about, the lesson to be learned as the outcome of it all.

95 Ibidem. p. 86.

96 Ibidem. Id.

97 *Rime*. L. 624.

98 Ibidem. L. 588.

99 *Heart of Darkness*. p. 89.

100 Ibidem. p. 6.

Although we may trace such a close parallel between the plot of the two stories, several of the important elements, such as those listed above, do not come in the same chronological order. But they are there. What about the Albatross? It comes to the Ancient Mariner out of the thick mist and snow, supra-natural powers are attributed to its presence as well as to its absence, it is surrounded by mystery; once dead and hung around the Ancient Mariner's neck, it symbolizes his crime and perhaps his remorse when it drops off after he had *blessed* the *slimy* but now *beautiful* water-snakes. It is the killing of the Albatross that is the centre of the story, not the Albatross itself. This is represented as a spiritual crime against God's lower creatures. At the centre of Conrad's story we find the spiritual crime of Kurtz against the savages. He accepted or compelled their worship. Towson says in an awestruck whisper: *They adored him*¹⁰² . . . *They would crawl* . . .¹⁰³. This, Marlow remarks, was *more intolerable than those heads drying on the stakes under Mr. Kurtz's windows. After all, that was only a savage sight, while I seemed at one bound to have been transported into some lightless region of subtle horrors, where pure, uncomplicated savagery was a positive relief* . . .¹⁰⁴. He tells us later: *I tried to break the spell — the heavy, mute spell . . . This alone, I was convinced, . . . had beguiled his unlawful soul beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations*.¹⁰⁵

Death-in-Life is described by Coleridge as a voluptuous and evil woman: *Her lips were red, her looks were free, / Her locks were yellow as gold*.¹⁰⁶

When Kurtz is being taken away:

“ . . . from right to left along the lighted shore moved a wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman.

101 *Rime*. L. 17.

102 *Heart of Darkness*. p. 67.

103 *Ibidem*. p. 70.

104 *Ibidem*. p. 70.

105 *Ibidem*. p. 80.

106 *Rime*. L. 190.

She walked with measured steps... She carried her head high; her hair was done in the shape of a helmet; ... a crimson spot on her tawny cheek... She was savage and superb, ... there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress ... She came abreast of the steamer...".¹⁰⁷

In Coleridge's *Rime: The naked hulk alongside came*.¹⁰⁸

Though the woman's hair in Conrad's story could not have been *yellow as gold*, the colour is hinted at by the description of the *brass leggings to the knee, brass wire gauntlets to the elbow*, and a few lines farther on, *a glint of yellow metal*.¹⁰⁹ *She stood looking at us without a stir, ... with an air of brooding over an inscrutable purpose*.¹¹⁰

Over Kurtz's deathbed, ... *both the diabolic love and the unearthly hate of the mysteries it had penetrated fought for the possession of that soul satiated with primitive emotions, avid of lying fame*...¹¹¹.

In the ballad: *And the twain were casting dice: / "The game is done! I've won! I've won!" / Quoth she, ...*¹¹²

There are snatches of overheard conversation, too, as Marlow listens unwittingly in the dusk to the manager and his nephew discussing Kurtz and himself. Careful analysis would seem to suggest that sometimes Kurtz and sometimes Marlow is the *Ancient Mariner*.

Conrad is often obscure but the Mariner left his message clearly stated: *He prayeth best, who loveth best / All things both great and small; / For the dear God who loveth us, / He made and loveth all*.¹¹³

Marlow, too, has learned compassion. When at the close of his story he tells how he confronted Kurtz's *Intended*, he says: *My*

107 *Heart of Darkness*. p. 73.

108 *Rime*. L. 195.

109 *Heart of Darkness*. p. 73.

110 *Ibidem*. Id.

111 *Ibidem*. p. 83.

112 *Rime*. L. 196.

113 *Ibidem*. L. 614.

114 *Heart of Darkness*. p. 93.

anger subsided before a feeling of infinite pity,¹¹⁴ and, as we have already said, he told her a compassionate lie.

Many other details occur, although out of context in relation to the great original, or echoes of them, memorable as part of Coleridge's ballad. Some of these are: ... *in and out of rivers*¹¹⁵ and *in and out of the fireflags' sheen*;¹¹⁶ ... *Paths, paths, everywhere ... not a hut*¹¹⁷ for Marlow, ... *water, water every where, / Nor any drop to drink*, for the Mariner;¹¹⁸ ... *Day after day*, in both.¹¹⁹ *It ceased*, after a tumult of sound, in both narratives.¹²⁰ *Having the appearance of being held captive by a spell*, by Conrad, and for the Mariner, the spell under which he was held by the dead men's eyes, as well as the spell under which the Wedding-Guest was held by the Mariner's *glittering eye*, compelling him to listen.¹²¹ Marlow's trying to find the channel *till you thought yourself bewitched and cut off for ever from everything you had known*, has strong overtones of Coleridge's: *Nor shapes of men nor beasts we ken*, and the inference by the sailors, that they had been bewitched by the circling Albatross.¹²²

We find that plot and theme are very closely parallel, and that frequently the some wording is used. If Coleridge's power lies in his magic use of words, and if it is the devices of the story that make Coleridge's ballad immortal, to whom should we attribute the magic of *Heart of Darkness*?

Yet the magic, the fascination, is not only in the manner of telling after all, or in the language, the handling of the subject, in the subtle rhythms and suggestions alone. That which casts its spell over the reader in both cases is the perhaps unconscious realization that both writers set out to describe two journeys at once. Conrad not only describes Marlow's trip on his steamboat up the

115 Ibidem. p. 15.

116 *Rime*. L. 314.

117 *Heart of Darkness*. p. 21.

118 *Rime*. L. 119.

119 *Heart of Darkness*. p. 22. *Rime*. L. 115.

120 *Heart of Darkness*. p. 46. *Rime*. L. 367.

121 *Heart of Darkness*. p. 41. *Rime*. L. 13.

122 *Heart of Darkness*. p. 39. *Rime*. L. 57.

Congo river, but also his mental penetration into the heart of darkness. As the river course is full of snags which make navigation virtually impossible, so is the way to understand the impenetrable mystery which surrounds the white man among savages, isolated from civilization. There is something in all that darkness which attracts him — the attraction is evil — but at the same time he feels he can dominate it if his integrity holds. As he relies on his experience as a navigator to pilot the ship to her final destination, he considers that by using his inner strength and his moral resources he will conquer that darkness. It takes a great deal of self-restraint and calm not only to save the ship and her crew from shipwreck, but also to save his mind from insanity and his soul from perdition.

One part of the voyage is the description of what we call the geographical journey, that is to say, the description of the places they arrived at, their troubles with the steamboat, the strange characters they met, the various stages of their journey and the *stations*, the fight with the savages, and so on. But the most important is the voyage that appeals to our imagination, the inner voyage to the *heart of darkness*. One of the steps in this voyage is his becoming interested in the savages, in their humanity, in their behaviour, their souls. This is the journey to the *truth* that Marlow is seeking for, and he realizes afterwards that the answer to his quest was this discovery. The stages of his experience are recognizable the same as those of every man who attempts the arduous journey towards knowing himself.

ETHEL M. GRAY

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Escuela Superior de Lenguas
Universidad Nacional de Córdoba