

The Encounter with the Primordial Snake: An Archetypal Reading of *Heart of Darkness*

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Abstract This essay approaches Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* from the angle of Jungian archetypal analysis. Reading the novella with this theoretical framework in mind, Marlow's prophetic vision of the Congo River as a primordial snake at the beginning of the story becomes the symbolically charged starting point of his night journey. A journey within his own self through which he encounters Mr. Kurtz, the remarkable man who has freed himself from society's restraints: the personification of his suppressed desires and his Jungian shadow. Through the retelling of his travel experience, Marlow (the awakened one—or Buddha) takes on the role of a spiritual guide.

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“Every epoch has its bias, its particular prejudice, and its psychic malaise. An epoch is like an individual: it has its own limitations of conscious outlook, and therefore requires a compensatory adjustment. This is effected by the collective unconscious when a poet or seer lends expression to the unspoken desire of his times and shows the way, by word or deed, to its fulfilment—regardless whether this blind collective need results in good or evil, in the salvation of an epoch or its destruction.”

— Carl Gustav Jung (CW15 para. 153) ¹

Literary scholars have approached *Heart of Darkness* from many different angles, drawing on various theoretical backgrounds. The most common interests of scholars lay in the domains of society (Hawthorn), ideology (Parry), politics (Jameson) and psychology (the psyche of Kurtz [Haugh]),

Marlow (Hewitt) and respectively their relationship (Guerard)). This paper focuses on Marlow's retelling of his travel experience as a spiritual night journey (Guerard 15): an archetypal descent into the underworld, the domain of evil, followed by an ascent (return) to the light, the domain of good. Special emphasis is laid on the symbolic significance of the description of the Congo River as a snake.

On a literal level, the novella is an adventure story about Marlow, the captain of a steamboat, who leaves his homeland to explore a continent unknown to him. On a psychological level, the novella depicts a character's acquisition of transcendental knowledge through his spiritual night journey experience (Parry 20). In archetypal terms, it is the story of the knight who ventures out to slay the dragon of chaos who threatens the sacred kingdom's safety. At the end of the novella, one might claim (as this paper will do) that Marlow's retelling of his journey experience is intent on playing the same role as the traditional slaying of the dragon: he is on a sacred mission to fight the evil threatening his society. At the beginning of the novella however, this interpretation might seem far-fetched or constructed because the hero does not venture out fully aware of a special mission entrusted to him alone in any way. It is the journey itself that exacts this role from him. It is one of this paper's aims to convincingly argue this case.

Furthermore, Marlow is forced, on a moral level, to be an accomplice to the unmasked hideousness of imperialism: civilization's brutal savagery unleashed upon the people of Africa.² On a societal level, Marlow leaves the known world to enter unexplored territory. At first, Marlow is fascinated by the Congo River and its strange allure. He is like a knight bewitched to set foot into the witches' enchanted castle. Later in the novella however, one might argue that the retelling of his travel experience takes on an entirely new perspective: it becomes his coping mechanism to process his experience (his complicity in the cruel exploitation of foreign lands). Through this reframing of his narrative account, his whole journey

can yet again be conceptualized as a mission to reconfigure society for the better through the crucial insights he attained during his adventure. Thus, the novella becomes a retelling of the archetypal story of the heroic knight who ventures out into unknown territory and is confronted therein by the dragon of chaos threatening the kingdom's security. Kurtz, civilization's shadow, plays the role of the dragon. He is the ruthless, savage, megalomaniac monster that slumbers inside of every man, regardless of how civilized he thinks he may have become.

Through his confrontation with Kurtz, a man once civilized who has been consumed by the unspoken desires of his time, Marlow attains transcendent knowledge which bears the same psychological effect as the heroic knight's good deed for his community: the unknown territory, the unconscious world of every man, is mapped out and Marlow is now able to share his gruesome discovery—every man has the potential to become like Kurtz—through the narration of his experience with society at large. Thus, Marlow has robbed the beast of its magic powers: he transformed it from an unconscious threat, deeply buried in the heart of darkness (of our soul) from where it exerts its influence and coerces our behaviour, to something that can consciously be fought. Marlow attempts to adjust the conscious outlook of his society to grasp the unspoken desires of his time. As the prototypical hero myth is an encouragement to everyman to live a life full of virtue, Marlow, by word, leads the way to the battlefield of the unconscious and the threats that lurk in its depths.

Since this paper reads the novella as Marlow's night journey, questions as to the reliability of his narration—its foundation on real events or a truthful depiction of reality—will be omitted. Other scholars have argued this point (especially Marlow's account of the Africans) extensively, presenting contradicting results (McClintock 49f, Watt 232f, McClure 137ff). As Adelman argues, Marlow is psychologically reframing his journey experience through his narrative: a great deal of his 'perceived reality' comes from the projection of his own emotions onto his

surroundings (57). At times, it may seem as if the African country and its people caused the corruption of his soul, but they are clearly innocent victims of his distorted perspective. The substance that corrupts Marlow is within him from the very start: his narrative is a symbolic account for the brute force unleashed from his repressed unconscious via projection onto the unknown territory.

The structure of this essay closely follows the novella’s original sequence of events. To familiarize the reader of this essay with some of the key categorizations and important concepts for the archetypal reading of this essay (as for example the different domains in which events occur, the known and unknown world), a figure is added to this introduction. **Figure 1** displays the most important incidents of the story that were selected to be discussed in this paper. Readers are encouraged to use the illustration as the guiding principle to this reading of *Heart of Darkness*.

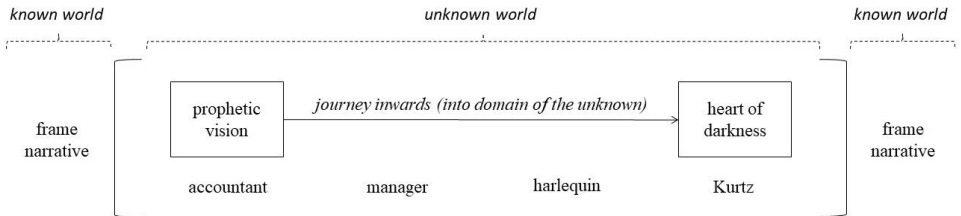


Figure 1: The Narrative Structure of *Heart of Darkness* (my own illustration)

1. Topological Analyses: Known and Unknown Territory in the Frame Narrative

To begin the archetypal reading of *Heart of Darkness*, it is wise to focus on the meaning of the different locations visited throughout the novella first. In the frame narrative, Marlow and the narrator are aboard the *Nellie* on their way to London along the Thames. They are within the known world (within explored territory). The frame narrative does not

indulge in any lengthy descriptions of the known world. It focuses instead on portraying the known civilized territory from the perspective of an estranged outsider who feels threatened by the unknown land before him. As Marlow reminds his listeners, “darkness was here yesterday” (106): the sun is sinking “as if about to go out suddenly, stricken to death” (104) by the air “condensed into a mournful gloom, brooding motionless” over the men’s destination (103). On deck, a man is playing with the “bones” (103).

Through this change of perspective, Marlow reveals that underneath every sense of familiarity and order chaos (the unknown) lies. The boundaries of familiar and unfamiliar, known and unknown territory are crushed. The men on the *Nellie* find themselves drifting within chaos again: the safety, which is associated with the domain of the known (culture), is atmospherically deconstructed. The culmination point of this technique is Marlow’s account of the Roman soldier who colonizes English soil, the familiar home of the Englishmen on board (Lothe 25). The soldier arrives in the alien English landscape. He is enclosed by “savagery, [...] utter savagery” around him; Marlow asks his listeners to imagine “the growing regrets, the longing to escape, the powerless disgust, the surrender, the hate” one must feel when facing the unknown (106). Through his narrative, the men on the *Nellie* are forced to experience the point of view of the Roman soldier. They are seeing their known territory from a new perspective, as if it were unmapped, dark land—still untouched by civilization. The central metaphor of darkness within the known—in other words: the shadow within our psyche, the Kurtz inside of every man—is introduced here.

Within Marlow’s narrative, the story inside of the story, he travels from England to the African country—from the domain of the known to the unknown—and back. Thus, the archetypal underworld Marlow must descend into is the unmapped territory of the Congo. What Marlow describes, however, is not the country in realistic proportions, but his impressionistic nightmarish version of the landscape and people created

through the projection of his own feelings (Adelman 71). His feelings in the domain of the unknown are characterized by fear, by the threat of regression to savagery and insanity: the central danger of losing control over oneself caused by the terrible monotony of the colonizer's life. Time is spent waiting for something to happen, a miracle, the delivery of rivets (133) or straw (126), materials needed to start one's work (the activity that keeps people sane in the insane environment of the unknown). Marlow feels the claustrophobic isolation amidst people who are plotting to improve their position by any means possible (122f), dreaming of being "appointed to a trading post where ivory was to be had" (126). Moreover, there is the physical discomfort of a "two-hundred-mile tramp" through "a stumped-in network of paths spreading over the empty land, through long grass, through burnt grass, through thickets, down and up chilly ravines, up and down stony hills ablaze with heat [...] miles away from the least bit of shade and water" (121f) and, lastly, there is the necessity to interact with the natives: "the inefficiency and breakdowns inevitable in a situation where the master is an ignorant alien and his servants, virtually slaves, have little incentive but fear to obey orders" (McCure 134).

The Congo represents the unknown world—in mythological terms, the underworld or hell—to Marlow. It is a land characterized by its "mighty big river, that you could see on the map, resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country, and its tail lost in the depths of the land" (108). It is this snake-like river that fascinates and enchants Marlow—the reader is reminded of the Edenic myth. The snake is the guide to the unconscious and the nightmarish dream that Marlow experiences. Simultaneously, it is a symbol of prehistoric life, the precosmogonic world: in myth, the primordial chaos of the world is often represented as the uroboros, the "hermaphroditic, all-encompassing, self-devouring and nourishing serpent of chaos" which will be divided into "earth/matter and sky/spirit" through the emergence of a hero or god (Peterson 139). Marduk, champion of Gods,

the hero of the oldest creation myth, the *Enuma Elish*, kills Tiamat, the goddess of salt water who threatened to destroy the gods, and splits her in two, creating heaven and earth, and in consequence, the world (Frye 146).

In the Congo, there are still traces of the precosmogonic serpent of chaos: namely, the river. The description of this river is interesting to note as well; it seems like the snake is at first glance a sea creature with “its head in the sea”, while at the same time feeling at home on the land with “its body at rest curving afar over a vast country, and its tail lost in the depths of the land” (108). The snake is part of the land and part of the sea, its description mirrors the dual nature of the uroboros who encompasses all.³ Marlow’s spontaneous fantasy in response to the map, his prophetic vision of the serpent of chaos, sets the tone for the rest of his journey inside of the heart of darkness that is so heavily marked by the uroboros, the river being the guide to the Inner station and the setting on top of which most of the journey takes place:

The uroboros symbolizes the union of known (associated with spirit) and unknown (associated with matter), explored and unexplored [...]. The uroboros stands for, or comprises, everything that is as of yet unencountered, prior to its differentiation as a consequence of active exploration and classification. It is the source of all the information that makes up the determinate world of experience and is, simultaneously, the birthplace of the experiencing subject. (Peterson 141)

It is no coincidence either that the traces of the uroboros are left in water. As Jung notes, the way of the soul that has lost its orientation turns inwards, leading to water, the “living symbol of the dark psyche” (CW9.1 para. 33). If we cannot find the answer in the territory of the conscious mind, we need to descend into the domain of the unconscious: we need to look into the dark mirror at the bottom of the sea (para. 33). The reflection of this mirror “faithfully shows whatever looks into it; namely, the face we never show to the world because we cover it with the persona, the mask of the

actor” (para. 43). Thus, our search brings us to ourselves, not as we want to be perceived by others, but as we really are. Encountering our true selves like this is “the first test of courage on the inner way, a test sufficient to frighten off most people, for the meeting with ourselves belongs to the more unpleasant things that can be avoided so long as we can project everything negative into the environment” (para. 44).⁴ The snake with its “head in the sea” (108) hints at this archetypal image: the individual who is searching for something needs to descent into himself (dive into the waters of the unconscious) and face his own reflection in the mirror at the bottom of the sea (his own self deeply buried within his unconscious) to find what it is that he seeks. Only inside of ourselves, the answers to our innermost questions can be found.

2. Marlow’s Prophetic Vision and Arrival in the Congo

After having just returned from a six-year long engagement with the Eastern sea, Marlow is searching for a new workplace. He is repeatedly turned down and cannot find a new ship to board. It is in this state that he is captivated and enchanted by the snake-like river on the Congo map. It is “fascinating—deadly—like a snake” (110). The river embodies the ambivalent nature of novelty as both a threat and promise, a source of anxiety and hope. Marlow is obsessed: he must get to the river “by hook or crook” (109). Thanks to the “glorious affair” of a man’s death (Captain Fresleven), Marlow is hired by the Company (110).

At the office, he meets two women, reminiscent of the moirai of Greek mythology, “knitting black wool” and “guarding the door of Darkness”: their gaze is all-knowing, and Marlow feels that their meeting is “uncanny and fateful” (110f).⁵ Even though death plays a big role in the description of the two women—“*Ave!* Old knitter of black wool. *Morituri te salutant*” (111)—, the third woman (tasked with cutting the thread of life and thus determining the length of a mortal’s life) is missing. Marlow’s thread is, thus, uncut—there is still room for potential change and self-

determination. As this net of explicit and implicit symbolic references to the threat of death tightens, Marlow is examined by a doctor who warns him of the additional danger of insanity “out there” (112). Not only Marlow’s life is in danger but also his sense of self and sanity.

Before Marlow finally departs on his journey, he feels obligated to meet his aunt again. Unlike her, he does not see himself as “an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle” tasked with the mission of “weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways” (113).⁶ He reminds her that the Company is run for profit. Marlow’s reasons for journeying to Africa are not ideological or political, they are personal and psychological. On one hand, Marlow, as a seaman and explorer, seeks a new adventure. On the other, Marlow is attracted by his own unconscious associations with the river. His spontaneous fantasy (as Jung would call it) is an invitation of his unconscious to journey inwards: “[i]n view of the compensatory relationship known to exist between the conscious and the unconscious, [...] it is of great importance to find a way of determining the value of unconscious products” (Jung CW8 para. 17). Marlow needs to find out why his unconscious is pushing him to journey to the snake-like river.

At the beginning of his journey, Marlow is not fully able to grasp or deconstruct the significant and dense symbolism with which his fantasy emerges. All he understands is that there is a strong urge inside himself to visit the special place on the map. As the story moves forward, the fantasy turns into a prophetic vision: Marlow penetrates the boundary to the unknown, journeys inwards (deep into the realm of the unconscious) along the body of the snake and faces himself in the reflection of the mirror at the bottom of the sea (the end of his journey narrative). What he sees at this point has significant importance: from this experience he can extract the transcendent knowledge he needs to ward off evil and slay the mythological dragon. He will integrate the knowledge at the bottom of his prophetic vision into his realm of consciousness. He will learn that, all

along, it was not about the serpent on the map but the one inside of himself: the animal inside of his unconscious.

This is not to say, however, that Marlow has not been somewhat conscious of the symbolic underlay of his vision at all: as he departs, he seems already somewhat aware that his real destination is not “the centre of a continent” but “the centre of the earth” (113)—a journey inwards, into the domain of Mother Nature (the eternal unknown). Marlow has not even set foot in the alien African country when another voyager on his ship has already hanged himself (116). The seamen are already in the grip of the unknown: the domain of chaos and fear. Everything unknown is to be feared: “fear is not secondary, not learned; security is secondary, learned” (Peterson 57). Insanity is not far from the individual in unknown territory: order is a necessary precondition for psychological and emotional stability: “[f]or a time I would feel I belonged still to a world of straightforward facts; but the feeling would not last long. Something would turn up to scare it away” (114). As Marlow watches the coast slip by, it becomes alive: “smiling, frowning, inviting, grand, mean, insipid, or savage, and always mute with an air of whispering, Come and find out” (114).

The feelings the river on the map had previously evoked are now displaced on the jungle and its inhabitants. They become vividly alive in his imagination. It is important to note that at this point an interesting twist in the landscape of symbolic reference is introduced to the established mythological allusion to the unconscious in the form of water. As the story unfolds, also the forest is brought to life and becomes another reference point for the unconscious and unknown. It seems that Conrad uses the river as a guide to the realm of the unconscious (as the river Styx mythologically represents the passageway to the realm of the dead). Since the Congo River penetrates the land however, it merges into it and becomes part of it. This constellation seems to mirror yet again the dual nature of the uroboros.

In this sense, the Congo represents the ideal ‘fair’ battleground of conscious and unconscious mind—the best possible starting point for the

individuation process (Jung CW9.1 para. 522ff). The unfamiliar surrounding represents unmapped territory. In this environment, the individual projects his feelings in response to the unknown landscape back onto it. That is why in unknown territory, the unconscious gains tremendous power: it gains the means to express itself. Thus, the whole scenery Marlow perceives seems threatening and strange—“seemed to keep me away from the truth of things, within the toil of a mournful and senseless delusion” (114). The only thing giving him pleasure is the “voice of the surf heard now and then [...] like the speech of a brother” (114). In other words, the coast (the foreign land, Mother Nature) and water, “the commonest symbol for the unconscious” (Jung CW9.1 para. 40), are talking to him like long-lost relatives. As Marlow first encounters the Congo’s nature, he realises his familiarity with it, but also his estrangement from it. The central theme of rediscovering his animalistic roots in the forest is introduced in this part of the novella.

The terrible circumstances under which Marlow must journey inwards, towards the heart of darkness, are all contributing to the dismantling of his conscious defence mechanisms. He comes face to face with the “black shadows of disease and starvation” (i.e., African men) who he watches creep into the jungle to die (118). It slowly dawns on him that he has descended into the underworld: “the gloomy circle of some Inferno” (118). The threat of insanity is weighing on his mind. It is under these circumstances that he encounters the Company’s chief accountant (119). He is the one who shows him that keeping his sanity is possible in the insane environment of the unknown. In Marlow’s eyes, the accountant represents a “miracle” because of his “backbone”—the fact that he has managed to keep up his physical appearance in the great demoralisation of the land (119). In other words: Marlow understands that he needs to become thick-skinned like the accountant, able to ignore death (the dying man in the office, the corpses in the grove of death). It is here too that Marlow hears the name of Kurtz for the first time, “a very remarkable person [...] who

will go far, very far” because he is meant to be “a somebody in the administration before long” (120f).

3. Marlow’s Journey Inwards to the Heart of Darkness

At the next station, the location of the steamboat Marlow is supposed to take charge of, he meets the manager after a twenty mile walk in the abominable heat. He feels he is becoming “scientifically interesting” (122), the exact words the doctor had previously used in his examination to hint at the threat of insanity. The manager impresses Marlow deeply. He represents another mystery: he too is somehow able to keep himself together, “keep the routine going” (123). A suspicion creeps into Marlow’s mind: what if the manager is unimpressed by his nightmarish surroundings (the threat of insanity and death) because “there was nothing within him” (123), no values, no sense of morality, no “entrails” (124). What if to survive in the unexplored territory, like the manager or the accountant, one had to surrender one’s self?—give in to the darkness?

As Marlow turns to observe the other men of the station, his suspicion is reinforced. Their only concern is being appointed to a trading-post where percentages on the ivory trade were to be had. They are “backbiting and intriguing against each other”—as “unreal as everything else—as the philanthropic pretence of the whole concern, as their talk, as their government, as their show of work” (126). As Marlow is fighting with his suspicions about the nature of the colonizing white man, the manager starts talking about Kurtz again. Talking to the brickmaker, Marlow is captivated by a painting by “Mr. Kurtz” (127). It depicts a draped and blindfolded woman holding a torch against a sombre background, almost black. In this dark sketch, *Justicia* loses her air of righteousness, her integrity and sanctity. In an environment of darkness, even the goddess of justice takes on a “sinister” expression (127). Affected by the painting, Marlow even goes as far as to lie and deceive the brickmaker, even though he detests lies because of their “taint of death, [...] flavour of mortality” (129). The

environment is slowly invading the sailor's heart, it is changing him from deep inside.

To counteract the changes that are happening inside of him, Marlow plunges himself into his duty and work as captain of the steamboat. He likes what is in the work: "the chance to find yourself" (131). By working, he escapes the wilderness and summons the known into the unknown in which he is trapped, so as to not lose track of himself. What Marlow seeks through his work is to become the man he once was again. He fears what exploring the unknown, encountering the unknown inside of himself, entails. He does not want to be coerced into displaying even more unfamiliar behaviour (like lying and deceiving). He is scared that he might be the same as the accountant or manager: a man without entrails who is doomed to gradually lose himself to the wilderness.

Already at this point, Marlow is captivated by the entity called Kurtz. His thoughts return to the name time and time again (133, 136). Overhearing a story about Kurtz, Marlow is able to conceptualise him more thoroughly for the first time: "the lone white man turning his back suddenly on the headquarters, on relief, on thoughts of home—perhaps; setting his face towards the depths of the wilderness, towards his empty and desolate station" (135). He is at home in the unknown territory to the point where he even prefers it over Europe. Maybe Kurtz is the one man who has overcome the darkness of the unknown without losing himself—has overcome the darkness through the submersion of himself in his work (an idea that can be derived from Kurtz's reputation as the Company's best ivory collector).

Approaching the heart of darkness, following the path of the river, Marlow feels like he is traveling back "to the earliest beginnings of the world" (136). The primordial nature has "bewitched" him, and he feels cut off from everything he had once known "—somewhere—far away—in another existence perhaps" (137). The jungle that had been "smiling, frowning, inviting" (114) has become a landscape of lurking death and

most frightening hidden evil (136). Marlow is growing increasingly aware that he is penetrating deeper and deeper into the “heart of darkness”, the heart of a “prehistoric earth,” an “unknown planet” (138). He is reunited with nature, the living environment as it has been before civilization’s intervention.

He understands the conditions of the exploratory process: the journey must take place “at the cost of profound anguish and [...] excessive toil” (139). Marlow feels as if he was cut off from the comprehension of his surroundings—looking at the world as it had once been at the “night of first ages” (139). The unknown territory seems “unearthly”: Marlow is not used to seeing the earth—only known to him as a conquered monster—in its unshackled and monstrous form (139). Marlow encounters nature unmasked: the source of all life, the womb from which everything, including him, has been birthed. This is the “truth” that reveals itself to the exploratory hero in the Congo—a truth he has to face “with his own true stuff—with his own inborn strength” (139).

Marlow is still obsessed with Mr. Kurtz. Every tree along his path becomes an instrument to measure the boat’s progress towards him. Journeying deeper into the realm of the unknown, Marlow seems to have understood that he is increasingly losing control over his situation—the “essentials of this affair lay deep under the surface, beyond my reach, and beyond my power of meddling” (142). In this environment, every cultural artefact seems like a valuable item because it can summon some of civilization’s familiar atmosphere into the domain of chaos. Marlow finds a book on seamanship and can’t stop reading it because it feels like tearing himself “away from the shelter of an old and solid friendship” (142). It is also deep within the wilderness that Marlow encounters cannibalism for the first time not only as an external but an internal threat. He faces the “devilry of lingering starvation, its exasperating torment, its black thoughts, its sombre and brooding ferocity” (146). He realizes how hard it is to “fight hunger properly” once one is far away from society and its

means of providing food (146).

As the boat moves further to rescue the “enchanted princess sleeping in a fabulous castle” (by which Marlow refers to Kurtz), he and his companions are attacked by savages (147). Marlow, after having previously admitted his “remote kinship” with these men (139), is now even able to read the emotions behind their actions (147). Their attack was a desperate and “purely protective” attempt at keeping the intruders away from Kurtz (147). Marlow must meet the remarkable man, however. The thought that he might be dead causes him to feel “extreme disappointment” (151) with a “startling extravagance of emotion” that reminds him of the howling of the savages in the bush (152).

Through his quest and identification with Kurtz, Marlow comes closer to the unknown, is captivated by it. He realizes that his emotions towards Kurtz stem from the fact that he has become the voice “from the heart of an impenetrable darkness” (152)—the voice of Mother Nature (the unknown) and, thus, his unconscious. In a way, it is Kurtz’s voice that has been talking to Marlow from the beginning (in his prophetic vision and through the coast and water). Or in other words: Kurtz is the entity inside of Marlow that had pushed him to journey to the Congo River in the first place. Still without having met the man at the heart of darkness, Marlow has already realized his significance and psychological importance as his Jungian shadow (Guerard 39). He is the man who had faced the powers of darkness “by the way of solitude—utter solitude without a policeman – by the way of silence—utter silence” and was able to overcome them through the power of devotion to something bigger than himself (154). Kurtz was educated, dedicated, able to bewitch and charm other people in his honour, blessed with the “unbounded power of eloquence” (154ff).⁷ However, there is a darkness creeping into the description of Mr. Kurtz: Marlow speaks of “unspeakable rites” and a craziness that had befallen the man (155).

Before reaching the Inner station or Kurtz, there is another character

Marlow encounters: the harlequin, a man wearing clothes covered with patches and a beardless, boyish face that “was like the autumn sky, overcast one moment and bright the next” (158). His existence “was improbable, inexplicable, and altogether bewildering”; “[i]f the absolutely pure, uncalculating, unpractical spirit of adventure had ever ruled a human being, it ruled this be-patched youth” (161). Through every aspect of his being, the harlequin embodies the archetype of the child (Jung CW9.1 para. 274): he is ruled by quickly changing emotions, adventurousness, an “unreflecting audacity” (161) and most importantly his devotion to the parent (Mr. Kurtz). He is not yet a unified moral consciousness, typical of the plurality of the child archetype (Jung CW9.1 para. 279). From Marlow’s perspective, the harlequin represents another approach he could take to face the darkness of the unmapped territory: he could devote himself to someone else entirely, giving himself up to the seductive dream of living thoughtlessly without taking up any moral responsibility. Mythologically, the motif of the child represents the potential future by embodying a potential hero who could change the world (Jung CW9.1 para. 278). Enveloped by the “glamour of youth”, the harlequin offers to sacrifice himself (stay behind) so that Marlow and the others can “take Kurtz away” to Europe again (161).

4. Marlow’s Encounter with the Heart of Darkness

As Marlow approaches Kurtz’s house, he sees heads impaled on poles all around it—symbols showing that “Mr Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts, that there was something wanting in him” (164). Having seen this, Marlow projects his own experience in the domain of the unknown onto Kurtz:

the wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. 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—and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating. It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core. (164f)

In other words, Kurtz has looked into the mirror at the bottom of the sea and was made to realize that he is hollow at the core: without the mask of the persona (his social role), there is nothing left of him. Both men, Kurtz and Marlow, have been irresistibly fascinated by the call of the wilderness. Marlow's worst fear has become a reality: not only the accountant, manager or harlequin, but also the remarkable man, Kurtz himself, is without entrails: hollow at the core. Still, faced with the option to side either with the manager or Kurtz, Marlow chooses the man he had journeyed to meet at the Inner station—not because of the man himself, who was “as good as buried”, but because the whisper of the wilderness had reached both and formed a bond between them (169). It is no surprise, then, that Marlow goes alone to retrieve Kurtz after he has escaped from the steamboat. He pursues the remarkable man, mistaking the beating of the natives' drums for his heartbeat, circumvents him “as though it had been a boyish game” and confronts him, as he is slowly coming back to his senses (172f).

He tries to “to break the spell—the heavy, mute spell of the wilderness” that seemed to draw Kurtz to the forest and had awakened within him “forgotten and brutal instincts,” “monstrous passions [...] beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations” (173f). Marlow realizes that Kurtz's soul has gone mad, “alone in the wilderness, it had looked within itself” (looked into the mirror at the bottom of the sea) and realized that it knew “no restraint, no faith, and no fear” (174). Through the hollowness of Kurtz's soul, his shadow (his savage side buried deep in the unconscious) had crept to the surface and taken hold of him.⁸ Even though Kurtz represents the voice at the heart of darkness, the Jungian shadow, he is still an individual able to display multifaceted behaviour that stems from a different source

than his unconscious. Because of this, Marlow is able to convince him to return to the steamboat.

As Jung notes, the unconscious compensates for any deficiency (exaggeration, one-sidedness or absence) in our realm of consciousness through suitable supplementation (CW10 para. 446). Any conscious deficiency is, thus, met with a suitable counterforce in the unconscious. It is a necessity for the act of self-realization (individuation) that individuals integrate their unconscious contents into their realms of consciousness to bring balance to their psychological landscapes (para. 451). To do this, they must look into themselves; otherwise the forces lying dormant in their unconscious will accumulate and cause neurosis, even psychosis, and influence their behaviour from within (para. 448).

As an example, Jung argued that the unconscious of the German population compensated the world-wide confusion and disorder after the First World War through the emergence of the archetype of order in the unconscious (para. 451). The German population felt weak, non-existent, and utterly crushed by the aftermath of the war, exploited by the demanding German labour market. This led to a burning desire for power—for the have-nots to desire everything—on one side, and a strong longing for a supreme order and a powerful leader—onto whom these fantasies could be projected—on the other (para. 453). For Jung, this mechanism is to blame for the international emergence and incredible success of totalitarian social order in the twentieth century (para. 451). In the person of Hitler, Jung saw the embodiment of all this evil, a representation of the shadow, “the most prodigious personification of all human inferiorities, [...] an utterly incapable, unadapted, irresponsible, psychopathic personality, full of empty, infantile fantasies” that resonated with the unconscious desires of the public (para. 454).

Now, from what kind of deficiency did the people of Marlow’s time suffer that the unconscious had to counteract? Nietzsche observed that the culture created by “adherence to a life-denying ethic” and the “ascetic ideal

with deep roots in the Christian world view” had fostered individuals who had lost touch with their animal nature (Renner 148).⁹ To compensate for the conscious suppression of his natural impulses, Marlow is sent by his unconscious to rediscover his animal nature and self. In this regard, it is to no surprise that his vision takes the form of a snake. He is meant to encounter his Jungian shadow, Kurtz, “a megalomaniac in search of further power” (Murfin 128)—a man whose “savage career is every man’s wish-fulfilment” (Murfin 125).

What Kurtz seeks is supremacy over all: things, people, even values, the gratification of all his forbidden desires free of civilization’s restraints (Murfin 129). Kurtz is the “personification of the nihilistic urge, of the darkness within the civilized ego, that when uncontrolled expresses itself in an insatiable, atavistic appetite for sensation and power” (Adelman 78) against all that civilization stands for. Kurtz represents the entity inside of every man that seeks to overcome all restraints, which is why all the characters sense the great allure of power that originates from him. Marlow too is seduced by Kurtz, “readily accepting the latter’s ruthlessness as preferable to the bland hypocrisy of the station manager” (Murfin 125). Having descended into the deepest realms of his unconscious (the heart of darkness), Marlow stares into the mirror at the bottom of the sea, and encounters his shadow, Kurtz, who shows him what he really looks like underneath, without the persona, the mask of the actor (CW9.1 para. 43).

Adelman uses Freud’s death-wish theory as theoretical background to develop the interpretational hypothesis that *Heart of Darkness* illustrates how imperialism’s atrocious acts of violence are inevitable by-products of civilization (48). The aggressive instincts of individuals are perverted through civilizational restraint into feelings of guilt and suppressed violence that culminate to form a Freudian death wish: the whole enterprise of imperialism, in this line of argument, becomes the opportunity “to open the throttle for a nihilistic joy ride, and so vent a little of the darkness within” (Adelman 48). However, Marlow cannot think of a better

alternative to civilization and thus must support the necessary evil of imperialism's hideousness.

Some aspects of this Freudian reading remain true for the Jungian reading of the text: civilized life demands concentrated, directed conscious functioning, which entails the risk of dissociation from the unconscious with undesirable consequences (Jung CW8 para 139). Individuals may display atrocious behaviour (Freud calls this a death wish, Jung would speak of an imbalance in the unconscious). In the Freudian reading, Marlow is forced to accept imperialism's atrocious acts as part of civilization. The Jungian reading, however, offers another conceptual approach to this dilemma: individuals must confront their own shadows (inside of them and outside in form of projections) and overcome them—the same way that Marlow fights against the temptation that Kurtz represents. They must face their ugliest innermost feelings and find ways to cope with them.

This process is not a mere fight however, it is a continual struggle over a lifetime, which is why Marlow, after all the years that have passed between his night journey and his retelling on the *Nellie* is still bound up with his experience—that is why he still sees Kurtz before him as he visits the Intended (183ff). “He lived then before me; he lived as much as he had ever lived—a shadow insatiable of splendid appearances, of frightful realities; a shadow darker than the shadow of the night, and draped nobly in the folds of a gorgeous eloquence” (182). He knows that he will see Kurtz for as long as he lives (185).

Marlow's lie to the Intended represents his victory over the temptations of his shadow (an entity he has realized will be with him as long as he lives). He could have easily used the power dynamic of the situation to utterly destroy everything the woman held dear in her heart: “the faith that was in her, [...] that great and saving illusion that shone with an unearthly glow in the darkness, in the triumphant darkness from which I could not have defended her—from which I could not defend myself”

(185). Unlike Kurtz, “a cannibal gone mad, one whose appetite [...] is beyond restraint and satisfaction” (McClure 142), Marlow is able to act with restraint and civility: he does not want to crush and subsequently conquer the woman’s hollow core (as Kurtz has done with the harlequin). He lets her keep on living inside of her own happy delusion with a positive image of Kurtz in her heart.

Marlow’s narrative has come to an end. It ends with Marlow’s victory against the temptations of his shadow. The novella returns to the deck of the *Nellie* where Marlow sits “indistinct and silent, in the pose of a meditating Buddha” and the narrator reports that the waterway the boat had been following appeared to look like it was leading “to the uttermost ends of the earth [...]—seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness” (187). After his “religious experience”, a journey to rediscover the humility and awe before the mystery of existence, Marlow returns a changed man (Andreach 50). He has understood that underneath the order of the known territory (social and psychological), the threat of chaos lingers with inexorable patience. His appearance and demeanour are compared to Buddha on several occasions (103, 106, 186). The same way as the Buddha, another revolutionary hero (the awakened one), Marlow has returned from a spiritual journey bearing transcendent knowledge that needs to be integrated into the larger community, thus, changing society to the better.

The story comes full circle, the known has been transformed into the unknown because the presupposition that individuals know themselves has been called into question. Everyone may be hollow at the core; the presence of the shadow within us is part of the inevitable existential fate of all human beings. The unknown territory represents the domain of the shadow and the unconscious. Fighting the apparent hollowness that Marlow has found in himself, facing and overcoming it seems to be the only way to ward off evil. This is the underlying encouragement of Marlow’s tale, the message he seeks to convey to his audience.

“Something we cannot see protects us from something we do not understand. The thing we cannot see is culture, in its intrapsychic or internal manifestation. The thing we do not understand is the chaos that gave rise to culture” (Peterson xi). Marlow has peeked behind the curtain of civilization and returned to the chaos (the uroboros) that existed before the order of civilization. He has learned that civilization is only capable of bringing the illusion of progress: it is living in the known world that keeps mankind from killing its own, not any kind of culturally-induced evolution.

5. Conclusion

One could argue that Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* takes on the role of exploratory hero of the unknown who—after having returned from his journey—has to reconstruct society to integrate the transcendent knowledge he has attained from his adventure. Marlow, at the deepest point of the underworld, is confronted with the embodiment of the “fundamental motive of imperialism” (Adelman 3): the personification of self-indulgent egoism (Hunter 53), pure greed and a barbarous desire to oppress (Hunter 64). Marlow is confronted by the temptation of evil, the possibility of freeing himself from society’s rule by establishing himself “as the sole creator of values” (Bohlmann 101). He successfully fights off this temptation and returns from Africa as a changed man, having seen what forces lay dormant inside our unconscious. He takes on the role of society’s revolutionary hero through the narration of his experience. By sharing his journey with other people and inviting them to take part in the same exploration of themselves. Marlow’s retelling of the story mirrors the whisper of the jungle—“come and find out” (114)—or the fascination he felt as he was looking at the map of the Congo River.

To reconfigure society, people need to understand the destructive forces brooding inside of their own unconscious minds: they need conscious reconciliation with their shadows. As Jung noted, the goal of every human being is “ultimate integration of conscious and unconscious,

or better, the assimilation of the ego to a wider personality” (CW8 para. 557). Marlow becomes a wider personality through his journey. He integrates his shadow, Kurtz, and is therefore able to guide others onto the path of individuation (like Buddha).

The hero of myth or of the literature of a “mythologically-charged” society mirrored the collective needs of the group. His traditional quest was undertaken not to enhance his personal prestige but to destroy the forces of darkness threatening to swallow or annihilate his people. (Rosenfield 173)

What Marlow offers is transcendental: the knowledge about the fiend within us. Through his account, the people of his time should be reminded not to delude themselves into thinking they have overcome their animalistic nature or could ever do so thanks to the potential of the known world. Marlow disillusiones himself and his listeners about the potential influence of culture and exposes the limits of its influence: civilization cannot cure us of our savage human nature (Andreach 51). It may be able to keep us from killing each other in the domain of the known but once the individual is in the unknown again, it will relapse into primitive behaviour. What Marlow brings back from the jungle is the transcendent knowledge about the threat of this delusion and an account of events that shows the hideousness of its implications on one side—and on the other, Marlow returns with a map that might prove to be able to improve the situation. His map shows the path to individuation as the journey into our own selves with the potential to master unknown situations and the interaction with our unconscious. Marlow’s narrative thus represents “a compensatory adjustment [...] effected by the collective unconscious” that lends “expression to the unspoken desires of his time” and shows the way “to its fulfilment” (Jung CW15 para. 153). In this sense, Marlow becomes a prophet of psychological change.

Notes

- ¹ As is common practice when referencing any edition of Carl Jung's collected works, this paper omits giving the corresponding page number(s) and instead indicates which book and paragraph are referenced. If the same book is referenced multiple times without any interruption through other material in the same section, only the number of the referenced paragraph will be indicated.
- ² There is no way for Marlow to leave Africa again, however, which is why he is forced to be an accomplice to the Company's atrocious acts: as the captain, he cannot abandon the mission he was entrusted with without the threat of mutiny, abandonment or death. If he were to leave the Company altogether (deserting his mission and position), he would be left alone in an alien country he perceives to be full of savages and death. Whatever little choice he has left in the matter—even quietly waiting for his steamboat to return to Europe—turns him into a moral accomplice to the atrocities committed by the Company.
- ³ Usually, the uroboros is depicted as both sky and land creature (part of the domain of matter and spirit). In the case of the map of *Heart of Darkness*, the description is limited to only two dimensions (the third dimension to take the 'sky' into account is missing). Conrad still manages to give the river (consequently, the snake) multidimensionality through its affiliation with both, the land and the sea, and a certain (literal) deepness—three-dimensionality—through its act of burying its head into the depth of the sea.
- ⁴ Interestingly, projecting his feelings onto the surrounding landscape is Marlow's approach to coping with the distress he feels in the domain of the unknown.
- ⁵ They leave a far more significant impression than the "great man himself" (the director of the Company) who hires him (111).
- ⁶ It is important to note that Marlow's aunt is right in her assessment. Marlow becomes an emissary of light—not for the 'uncivilized people' in Africa, as his aunt probably meant her statement, but for the Europeans he returns to after his journey.
- ⁷ Like Kurtz, Marlow is gifted with a certain eloquence and the ability to bewitch and deceive other people (the brickmaker, the Intended). A certain degree of eloquence cannot be denied to his narrative either.
- ⁸ Marlow's thoughts in response to Kurtz's supposed hollow core seem to perfectly fit with Jung's thoughts on the mirror at the bottom of the sea and the threat it represents. Looking into it might lead to the realization that one is

hollow at the core, however, attaining this awareness is a prerequisite for improvement.

- ⁹ In Nietzsche's own words: mankind—the “animal that rubbed itself raw against the bars of its cage” as it tried to tame itself—has turned itself into “a torture chamber” and caused its own “gravest and uncanniest illness, [...] man's suffering *of man, of himself*—the result of a forcible sundering from his animal past, [...] a declaration of war against the old instincts upon which his strength, joy, and terribleness had rested hitherto” (Nietzsche 85).

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