Abstract

‘Dead silence’ can resonate with more meaning than the spoken word, the absence of oral discourse signaling the presence of an unsettling subject, as Edward Said commented in Culture and Imperialism. Heart of Darkness pierces this silence through its assessment of Victorian society’s corrosive capitalist core. The novella’s symbolism and collapse of binaries anticipates modernism, and these techniques allow Conrad to censure white men, both those with real and petty power; and white women, who are depicted as colonialism’s passive or active enablers. This portrayal ultimately condemns the characters’ brutality even as it expresses cynicism about humanity’s potential for compassion.

Occasionally, within a literary work, conversational “dead silence” resonates with more meaning than the spoken word, the very absence of oral discourse signaling the presence of a socially unsettling subject. So suggests Edward Said in evaluating an episode in Jane Austen’s Mansfield Park for Culture and Imperialism, his seminal book on postcolonial literary theory. While the characters in Austen’s novel readily banter on a variety of trivial topics, the heroine Fanny Price meets “dead silence” when she queries her uncle about the slave trade. Commenting on this incident, Said writes that Austen’s sensibility was insufficiently attuned to this controversial issue in 1814, when Mansfield Park was published, but “[i]n time there would no longer be a dead silence when slavery was spoken of, and the subject became central in a new understanding of what Europe was” (96).

By the late nineteenth century, writers like Joseph Conrad recognized that the virtual enslavement of Africans in the guise of colonization was a crucial concern for those seeking to genuinely comprehend the underlying bases of society in Victorian England and Belle Époque-era Continental Europe. Unlike Matthew Arnold, whose 1869 work Culture and Anarchy
extols canonical Western art and literature as a means for human perfectability and the antidote to anarchy (148), Conrad, in his novella *Heart of Darkness*, suggests that the façade of Western artistic achievements merely cloaks Western imperialist aims, or, in Said’s terms, that culture and imperialism are inextricably and deleteriously intertwined. *Blackwood’s Magazine* first published Conrad’s text in 1899, near the apex of European colonialism, which for Conrad seemingly coincided with the European people’s pinnacle of moral depravity. His late Victorian work was lauded by literary critics near the turn of the century (Garnett 606, James 347–348), despite its disturbing assertion about humanity’s boundless capacity for evil, a tendency manifested by European hegemonies through their oppression of colonized peoples.

By 1975, when Nigerian author Chinua Achebe delivered his landmark address “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness,*” one University of Massachusetts professor emeritus claimed that the novella was the country’s most widely taught text (Zasky). The rise of postcolonial literary theory, pioneered by Said’s writings, has tempered contemporary praise of *Heart of Darkness*, but its critique of Victorian society’s commercial foundations within the period itself remains perceptive. To explore why, this essay will first present a brief historical overview of European colonialism in Africa, particularly the Congo Free State, and discuss Conrad’s expeditions within the colony in 1890. This context significantly informs *Heart of Darkness*, whose compelling assessment of nineteenth century English society’s corrosive capitalist core arises from the work’s use of universalization and symbolism, along with its innovative collapse of binaries in a fashion that anticipates modernism. These techniques allow Conrad to censure all levels of Victorian society through his text: white men, both those with real and petty power; and white women, who are depicted as colonialism’s passive or active enablers. This portrayal ultimately condemns the characters for their brutality towards fellow humans even as it expresses cynicism about humanity’s potential for compassionate behavior.

European intervention in Africa dates to the early fifteenth century, when the Portuguese captured Ceuta (a city now disputably in Morocco), but what became known as the “scramble for Africa” intensified in the nineteenth century (Christopher 1, 13) with the burgeoning Industrial Revolution, which required raw materials to feed factories in colonizing countries. Britain’s participation in New Imperialism within Africa commenced with its invasion of the Cape region of modern South Africa in 1795 (Baranov 84), and other European hegemons, including France, Germany, Belgium, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Austria-Hungary, the Netherlands, Russia, and Sweden-Norway, advanced rivaling claims in Africa until 1885. That year, those colonial powers, along with the enfeebled Ottoman Empire, formally
partitioned the continent at the Berlin (or “Congo”) Conference, with the conferees agreeing to operate within prescribed “spheres of influence” (Chamberlain 124–125). European maps of Africa reflected these rapid shifts in territorial demarcation from the century’s inception until its waning years; moreover, the most expansive “blank space” (71) Marlow recalls as residing at Africa’s heart—the Congo River Basin—had become *terra cognita* following Henry Morton Stanley’s explorations in the mid-1870s (Chamberlain 26). The continent itself could be designated *terra* European by the time *Heart of Darkness* was published in book form in 1902; only Ethiopia and Liberia remained free from European control (Sullivan 156). The novella depicts African colonization as implicating vast swaths of Europe by tracing Marlow’s journey to the Congo’s core through figures and entities from several European countries. Marlow, an Englishman (131), departs from Europe for the region on a French steamer (78) and, upon arriving at the Congo River’s mouth, continues his journey inland with a Swedish captain (80). He presumably pilots a steamship on behalf of a Belgian trading company, replacing a murdered Danish captain (72).

Marlow’s predecessor Fresleven was felled when the brutality he inflicted on African natives redounded to him (72–73); in actuality, incessant cycles of retributive violence punctuated lives in the Congo Free State after King Léopold II of Belgium began ruling the region as his personal fiefdom in 1885. Earlier, in 1878, Léopold had founded the International Congo Society, a capitalist enterprise whose foreign investors he covertly bought out to pursue his imperialist visions, meanwhile maintaining the International African Association as a philanthropic front with a close nexus to the economic organization (Wesseling and Pomerand 89); in the text, the fictitious—but in a sense realistically named—International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs appears as the Association’s analogue. Kurtz pens an eloquent report for the Society (127), but despite his altruistic representations on its behalf, Kurtz, a commercial Frankenstein with an insatiable desire for ivory (137), scribbles in his report’s lurid pragmatic postscript: “Exterminate all the brutes!” (128). Kurtz executes his own macabre advice, decorating his property’s perimeter with decapitated heads (137); similarly, Leon Rom, a Matadi district commissioner and subsequent head of the *Force Publique*, kept severed African heads in his flower bed (Cowie 152). Léopold’s lackeys, including Rom, infamously implemented his megalomaniacal orders; they imposed stringent rubber and ivory quotas on native laborers (Hochschild 229–230), and villagers who failed to meet the insufferable standards for rubber collection suffered dismemberment, with hands becoming a form of currency amassed by white officers and used to tabulate bonuses (Forbath 374). When one Congolese village protested, white soldiers conducted a raid in which junior officers were, according to
a contemporaneous account, ordered “to cut off the heads of the men and hang them on the village palisades ... and to hang the women and the children on the palisade in the form of a cross” (Bourne 253).

It was into this royally-sanctioned inferno that Conrad descended in 1890 after obtaining an appointment to captain a steamship through his aunt, much like his ostensible alter ego Marlow in the text (Sherry 11). Conrad traveled painstakingly from Bordeaux, France to Matadi in the Congo, then from that district to Kinchassa (two hundred miles, as does Marlow (80)), and, finally, to Stanley Falls, the “heart of darkness” (Sherry 14). Kurtz, who Marlow pursues into the Congo’s interior, is speculated to be modeled after Leon Rom (Firchow 131), or Georges Antoine Klein (Klein translates as “small” and Kurtz means “short”), a Belgian ivory trader aboard Conrad’s steamship traveling upriver (Oates 4). As a result of witnessing brutalities on his voyage inland and coping with near-death bouts of dysentery and fever, Conrad endured life-long physical debilitation and depression, retiring from a seafaring life to become a writer, one whose unremittingly bleak view of human nature developed from his ordeal in the Congo (Oates 6). He would later describe the place as one where he discovered the “vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and human exploration” (Sherry 14).

Yet Conrad’s genius, evidenced in Heart of Darkness’s use of universalization and symbolism, arises from his ability to express how his profoundly personal experiences provide philosophical and psychological insights about human proclivities. Marlow apparently endorses this idea of the raconteur’s responsibility; he articulates an intent not to bother his listeners with what personally happened to him during his expedition to the Congo (70). Conrad universalizes the text by deliberately neglecting to name the places depicted within it; while the paper’s foregoing discussion has detailed the work’s historical context at measured length, Heart of Darkness itself contains no references to particular locales. Marlow finalizes his appointment as a steamship captain for an unnamed company in a “sepulchral city” (155), and the Congo Free State and Congo River are never explicitly mentioned, though Conrad leaves sufficient clues for the perceptive reader to discern where the novella’s climactic events transpire. By not overtly situating these incidents in a circumscribed geographic area, Conrad enables the reader to imagine them occurring in any African colony, one overseen by Britain or another European hegemon. The general anonymity of the characters reinforces this expansive interpretation; while Marlow and Kurtz are named, most of the text’s other characters are designated by their occupations—for example, the “clerk” (75) and the “chief accountant” (84) – indicating how colonialism reduces even white men, its purported beneficiaries, to mere functionaries and symbols of the moral
malaise afflicting Western European society. Symbolism most acutely pervades the novella’s descriptions of the Congo’s heart as a ravaged corporeal space outwardly embodying the degraded state of mind of its inhabitants—most notably the white ones.

*Heart of Darkness* consigns humanity to perpetual wretchedness by invoking archetypal dichotomies like good versus evil, civilization versus savagery, light versus dark, order versus chaos, and present versus past and exposing each binary’s affirmative side as a sham. All binaries in the text derive from the classic good versus evil distinction, and Marlow begins his narrative with an admonitory self-examination, contemplating how the Romans who conquered Britain nineteen hundred years ago, when the island was a dark, savage wilderness (68-69), had a “fascination of the abomination” (69) resembling that of their nineteenth century descendants—Europeans undertaking “fantastic invasions” (138), Marlow’s ironic yet accurate description of colonial forays. Modern evil nonetheless seems qualitatively different to Marlow, who exclaims: “I’ve seen the devil of violence, and the devil of greed, and the devil of hot desire; but, by all the starts! These were strong, lusty, red-eyed devils, that swayed and drove men—men, I tell you. ... [I]n the blinding sunshine of that land I would become acquainted with a flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly” (82). In the Congo’s depths, Marlow almost yearns for the evil of yore, whose perpetrators harbored comprehensible motives, and even an “uncomplicated” savage sight like the staked heads surrounding Kurtz’s residence perturbs him less than the “lightless region of subtle horrors” he must navigate through (138–139). Marlow surmises that only those rare humans utterly divorced from modern life—fools too obtuse to know when darkness is assaulting them and sublime individuals desensitized to all but heavenly sights and sounds—can remain impervious to the near-omnipotent forces of evil (126–127). Typical mortals are susceptible to being readily seduced by Kurtz-like demagogues who apply “common everyday words” to pernicious ends (149). Kurtz’s single-minded determination to hoard ivory for the Company precipitates his downfall (137–138), and his character’s exploits prefigure Hannah Arendt’s theory about the “banality of evil,” that perpetrators of appalling crimes may not initially be deranged fanatics, but ordinary citizens whose overzealous fidelity to some bureaucratic enterprise ineluctably saps them of regard for the moral consequences of their actions (287).

The amorphousness of contemporary evil terrifies Marlow, and while he never clearly elucidates what actuates the villains of his day, the text suggests that the very technological improvements heralded as indicators of progress perversely embolden humans to act on their basest primeval inclinations when afforded an opportunity. Marlow distinguishes the Romans who
vanquished British Isle natives from nineteenth century Britons based on the latter’s “efficiency” (69), the touchstone capitalist value that equips them with the means to commit carnage on a scale inconceivable to their ancestors. Moreover, the pretext of civilization justifies their actions (70), serving as a redemptive idea in the estimation of colonial apologists like Rudyard Kipling, whose influential poem *The White Man's Burden* was published in 1899, the same year as *Heart of Darkness* (Kipling 12). Jingoistic texts like Kipling’s encouraged colonizers to smugly congratulate themselves for installing railways and conveying steamships to Africa while using these innovations primarily as tools for political and economic aggrandizement instead of indigenous improvement. But the “dead carcass” of an overturned, undersized railway car (81) Marlow espies in the Congo underscores the essential futility of these efforts, and the text often alludes to colonialism’s ephemerality, describing progress, the ideological basis for colonialism, as a “dust bin” (128), with the “wild” merely “waiting patiently for the passing away of this fantastic invasion” (91). The Congo Free State’s decrepit condition, with the International African Association endeavoring to conceal brutality through the maintenance of charitable pretenses, substantiates Marlow’s grim analysis of humanity’s voracious appetite for evil; during Léopold’s dictatorship from 1885-1908, the Congolese population dropped by half, to about eight million (Kakutani), indelibly scarring the “wild” so that liberation in 1960 (Helmreich 231) was accompanied by internal turmoil that has persisted into the present century (Turner 200–208). *Heart of Darkness* thus reveals that the “good,” and attributes associated with the quality, including civilization, light, order, and the progressive present, are inventions, a position that aligns the novella more with modernist literature than canonical Victorian works.

Conrad applies these philosophical concepts to indict nineteenth century European society, particularly Victorians whose unparalleled, dazzling commercial prosperity masked inner moral decay, in his opinion. *Heart of Darkness* exempts no social sector from culpability for colonialism’s adverse aftereffects; upper echelon Victorian society’s affluence was predicated on appropriating raw materials from abroad, and the laboring classes sustained the factories that transformed these materials into finished products sold in both the mother country and her foreign satellites. While laissez-faire capitalism’s inhumane excesses had been mitigated somewhat within Britain since Dickens composed *Hard Times* mid-century, many flourishing entrepreneurs apparently felt no ethical compunction in abusing African natives even more harshly than they had white children until laws restrained them from doing so. The Company’s callous accountant thus makes “correct entries of perfectly correct transactions” fifty feet beneath the doorstep from which Marlow sees a “grove of death” occupied by overworked native
laborers (86), and an aspiring brickmaker describes how Kurtz, a “universal genius,” would have truly flourished if “adequate tools–intelligent men” were available (98), reflecting an extreme utilitarian view of humans’ function in the world.

A society that sanctions such demoralizing perceptions of its members corrodes the souls of those at its acme, the white men who blindingly pursue wealth, both the overseers and the overseen, and the women who accept the fictional ideological explanations the men proffer for their overseas coups. Kurtz, the inner station chief whose mother was half-English and whom all Europe contributed to making (127), is gifted with a panoply of civilized qualities, as he paints (94), recites and pens poetry (145), plays music (157), and writes tracts (157). He brings civilizing intentions to the Congo, an attribute that exalts him in the eyes of his beloved Intended. She remains unwaveringly convinced of his rectitude, lamenting his loss to the world while glorifying his words and example (162–163), and his aborted engagement to her symbolizes what he terms “right motives” (152) – “humanizing, improving, instructing” (104) – gone awry because of his ivory fixation; his single-minded pursuit of some essential but elusive “whiteness” without blackens his soul within. Marlow describes Kurtz, who leaves “not a single tusk ... above or below ground in the whole country” (125), as literally becoming his ivory, “an animated image of death carved out of old ivory” (140) whose head resembles an “ivory ball” (125). For the Company, though, Kurtz’s sole objectionable quality is his use of unsound methods (142–143) to extract ivory, not his moral infamy, and Marlow’s haunting by Kurtz’s ghost at the Intended’s pristine home in the “sepulchral city” suggests the illusoriness of civilization and the immense personal sacrifices needed to maintain its artifice, what Kurtz apparently realizes on his deathbed when he whispers “The horror! The horror!” (154). His words refer not just to the brutality he inflicted on African natives, but also to the bestial condition of other white men who are willing to hang their own to reap additional ivory profits (104).

The novella also depicts white women as colonialism’s cheerleaders at home, with some possessing at least partial knowledge of its atrocities, such as two female clerks “guarding the door of Darkness, knitting black wool as for a warm pall, one introducing, introducing continuously to the unknown” (75) and a secretary who gazes upon Marlow with “desolation and sympathy” while he signs his employment contract with the Company (74). Marlow’s aunt and the Intended, representative of the majority of white European women at the time, are more passive enablers, having Kipling-esque visions of “weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways” (77), to quote the aunt. Men, including Marlow, perpetuate the women’s fantasies about colonialism’s nobility; he ultimately informs the Intended that “[t]he last words he pronounced was – your name” (164), discerning that the truth
would destroy her “beautiful world,” an Elysium that keeps the world of men like Marlow from further degenerating (125).

While, like an Elysium, *Heart of Darkness* has imaginary characteristics, it truly is, in Conrad’s words, “experience ... pushed a little (and only very little) beyond the actual facts of the case” (Hochschild 143), presenting a nuanced critique of nineteenth-century European society. The text depicts Kurtz, the embodiment of European virtues, as “hollow at the core” (138), and the only certainty that emerges from its murkiness, its description of Marlow’s “inconclusive experiences” (70), is a belief in the ineradicable nature of evil. The book is thus more disturbingly descriptive than prescriptive, but its candor is commendable, as evidenced in Marlow’s acknowledgement that “conquest of the earth ... mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves,” which “is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only” (70), an idea the text exposes as a fabricated construct to conceal in some sense a more trivial, yet sinister, pecuniary objective, a backbreaking “devotion to efficiency” (69). In articulating the unspoken, Conrad’s fin-de-siècle novella pierced *Mansfield Park*’s “dead silence” about the centrality of colonial subjugation to Victorian society and, in doing so, induced its readers to ponder the morality of their silence amidst surface splendors obtained at an excruciating human cost.

NOTES

1 And European society’s generally, though this essay will primarily discuss the narrower criticism in light of the class’s focus.

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