Analysis of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in Juliet McLauchlan's "The 'Value' and 'Significance' of *Heart of Darkness*."

Much has been written about *Heart of Darkness*. The following is an analysis of Juliet McLauchlan's critique. Her treatment is very incisive, providing a fairly sound analysis of the text and its intention. However, she comes short of its true import, drawing back from seeing the Christian nature of Heart of Darkness. Rather than attempt a refutation of her analysis, we wish only to show where the Christian interpretation better suits her own analysis.

I

In the interpretation of literature such as *Heart of Darkness,* it is essential first to understand its symbolic vocabulary. Then the functions of the symbols and their relationships to each other must be determined. The level of the story where the intent of the text, or the world of the story, resides must first be discovered. Then the way in which the various elements interact to produce the desired effect, or to make the intended point, becomes apparent.

Most of the symbolic vocabulary in *Heart of Darkness* has been known for years. But McLauchlan shines where the controversy rages, i.e., in the usage of the symbolic vocabulary. Working inductively from within the text, she carefully and clearly compares and contrasts various symbolic elements in order to make sense of the tale in a way that neither ignores important elements, nor places unbearable weight upon them. She handles the issues she raises in a logical order, showing their interrelationships in the process.

McLauchlan does an outstanding job of discovering the finest nuance of the thesis by proceeding from symbols to their interrelationships and thence to "the meaning" of the story. She begins by asking the question "must we interpret *Heart of Darkness* 'in the light of the final incident' in order to see the story's coherence, worth and essential meaning?" She sharpens the question by noting recent trends in interpretation and by denying the position taken by H. M. Daleski that the savage consort of Kurtz has no status in the story; were this the case, the final scene would be inexplicable. It is clear that she seeks to contribute to the scholarly debate surrounding the study of Conrad a strong, defensible position which provides a basic interpretive framework for further studies. Hence her polemics and hence her beginning question.

McLauchlan answers the question in the affirmative, quoting as support Conrad's own words: " . . . In the light of the final incident, the whole story . . . Shall fall into place – acquire its value and its significance." Therefore, McLauchlan demonstrates that by getting to the heart of the final scene, five major interpretive difficulties are resolved. These difficulties include "the symbolic function of the Intended herself," the meaning of Kurtz's final "victory," the nature of his original debasement, Marlow's "choice of nightmares" and the expression of ideas and ideals.

Of primary importance is the symbolic identity of the Intended. McLauchlan quotes from *Heart of Darkness* several passages that identify the Intended as idealistic, selfless, mature," ready to listen without thought for herself" and so forth.

She was "illuminated by the inextinguishable light of belief and love. Herein is faith and

division, but not knowledge." But the Intended is "portrayed in surroundings of growing darkness" and tends to the conclusion that she is in little better shape than the savages of Africa. Just as Kurtz is found nearly dead and estranged from his philosophy, so the Intended is revealed in terms of funerary refinement.

The Intended is a play on words wherein Kurtz's "Intended" represents his cultural and political intent and his true altruism. Thus, while Kurtz's intentions are only broadly hinted at in the main part of the story, the "Intended" personifies them. They are revealed in her in the final scene of the story.

By juxtaposing Kurtz and his Intended, the one dead and the other surviving, Conrad allows Marlow to provide the key for understanding Kurtz. Marlow "saw them together . . . heard them together." This is nothing less than the mechanism of Kurtz's self-condemnation shifted onto Marlow, for it contrasts his lofty ideas, as embodied in the Intended, with his abject failure and fall.

This failure was, according to McLauchlan, wholly internal, as was his final enlightenment and self-condemnation. Kurtz's fall consisted of his surrender to his "monstrous passions" and was the manifestation of his own "brutal instincts." But in the end, through his "struggle," Kurtz is able to regain enough of his lost idealism and ethical bearing to pass judgment upon himself. This "is Kurtz's undoubted victory, a confirmation of the validity of his ideals, intentions, even his words. This is the great moral center of *Heart of Darkness* -- and this is what robs the 'darkness' of any overwhelming power."

The nature of Kurtz's debasement has its origin in the "strange commingling of desire and hate." His inner surrender to base passions is a plunge into darkness. His true, altruistic goals, which provide the basis for his final self-judgment and "victory," although never destroyed, are completely suppressed. The coexistence within a single soul of base desire and moral disarmament, of "diabolic tone and unearthly hate," opposing elements fighting for possession, show the nature of Kurtz's inner conflict. "The Horror" may contain the final realization of the existence of such a conflict, but is specifically defined by the failure involved in allowing (willing!) the baser instincts to win possession of the sold soul and not only to win it, but to elevate it to godhead. Herein is debasement such as Kurtz suffered (contrived!). In "getting himself adored," Kurtz not only abandoned his own high ideals, he sought the fulfillment of his base desires by becoming a local deity. Apparently his passions held such sway over him that he was willing to receive human sacrifice. "Paradoxically, to the extent that Kurtz's 'unlawful soul' has aspired to godhead and assumed it, to that same extent Kurtz as a human being becomes debased."

The reader is forced to share Marlow's revulsion as Kurtz's degradation is dragged before him page after page. But why must one make such a point of utter degradation as is "unspeakable – unthinkable?" What could be worse? Conrad's purpose is to contrast it with an even greater evil that is easily speakable and thoroughly thinkable: soulless materialism. Marlow must make a choice of evils, a "choice of nightmares." The choice was, as McLauchlan demonstrates, between Kurtz and the manager, between self-serving deity and self-serving beast, between becoming an inhuman god and becoming inhumanly materialistic. Marlow's choice is clearly with Kurtz, to whom he "turned mentally . . . for relief – positively for relief." For he recognizes in the local deity a potential for repentance that does not exist in the inhuman manager. The god has values by which he may be reclaimed. The inhuman materialist has not.

The fact that both the manager and the Intended survive Kurtz, the one "serene, quiet,

satisfied" and the other, isolated and in mourning, indicates their relative strengths and position. Materialism, even in the days of Conrad, was an identifiable evil and European idealism was on its last legs. Marlow was forced to choose between them.

It is the function of Marlow's lie, according to McLauchlan, to preserve Kurtz's altruistic idealism, as it is embedded in his Intended. The lie is intended as "a defense against the growing darkness surrounding the Intended." For "without Marlow's lie, all 'light of visionary purpose,' any 'slender ray of light' would be extinguished and, with these, the whole concept of humanity's upward potential. Humanity, in future, could never know the struggle for the victory of a Kurtz, could never gain the insight of a Marlow into the 'two extremes that can exist within the human mind'." For "of the two nightmares, the worse consists in the rejection and denial of expressed human values. The mentality which rejects and denies is a mentality obsessed by sheer rapacity, ruthless ambition, deep malevolence."

II

For all its undisputed insight, McLauchlan's interpretation fails to go far enough. In fact, she explicitly denies the appropriateness of "any specifically Christian reading of Kurtz's fate." Perhaps as far as his fate and self-judgment are concerned, this is true. But McLauchlan adds that "Kurtz neither makes a pact with a 'real' devil, nor is he diabolically possessed in a theological sense." Two elements in *Heart of Darkness* mitigate this assertion and thus support the notion that literary texts *may* contain unintended meaning[1]. They are the facts that Kurtz literally reprised the role of Satan found in Isaiah 14:12-14, and that in so doing, he only succeeded in demonstrating the New Testament teaching on law and human nature.

Kurtz needn't have made "a pact with a real Devil" or been "diabolically possessed," in order for his self-judgment to reveal a decidedly Christian perspective. Indeed, his final "enlightenment" cannot be properly explained apart from the Christian notion of the nature of man. This example is instructive, for it is not mere subjectivism that leads the reader to this interpretation, but Conrad's culturally determined perspective. It argues from the universality of law to the understanding of man typical of Christendom.

The thesis of *Heart of Darkness* that confronts man is the proposition that it is only the contrivance of law that spares man from absolute moral darkness. Law is the codification of the minimum acceptable standards of behavior within a given society. Law may express ideals, but requires self-imposed human restraint to be effective. Kurtz knew no restraint and deliberately became a law unto himself; worse, he became a god. It was not the law's implicit idealism which had escaped him, but the element of self-restraint. As McLauchlan has shown, the idealism of the law remained with Kurtz and allowed him at last to pronounce judgment upon himself and to understand his lack of restraint. Here is nothing less than an echo of Paul's statement ". . . I consent unto the law, that it is good." (Romans 7:16, but the entire context from 7:14 to 7:24 is the Christian structure upon which *Heart of Darkness* is built).

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[1] Perhaps what we mean when we speak of "unintended meaning" is rather "unintended illustration," or perhaps it only indicates misinterpretation on the part of the readers.

Throughout the story, darkness refers literally to night and the jungle and allegorically to the savagery of those who live without the light of civilization. Light and Darkness (a contrast used repeatedly by St. John) provide the great contrast, by which all else in *Heart of Darkness* works. Over and over this contrast is brought to mind, sometimes subtly, other times more forcefully. The final scene, as McLauchlan has demonstrated, presents, in the person of "the Intended," the contrast to Kurtz's savage consort. But underlying this contrast and providing the final sting of irony, is the reader's assumption of the cultural and moral superiority of the civilized European to the savages. This superiority was, in Conrad's time, clearly visible to all. But the contrast between civilization and savagery only serves as a foil for the thesis that personal restraint is the *sine qua non* of human law and society.

The underlying principle of restraint both explicates the law and demonstrates the Christian understanding of the human condition. In *Heart of Darkness,* personal greed, the implications of genuine social or alleged racial superiority, colonialism and so forth were present and unvanquished by the finest and highest development of European law. Throughout the story, it is clear from the narrator's perspective that even the "civilized" European exhibited the need for greater restraint. For his heart was by nature no better or more enlightened than the heart of a cannibal. For although law is based upon and partakes of the character of ethical enlightenment, the very *need* for such external restraint implies a perversion in the human condition. Otherwise, there would be no need for law. This is a specifically, thoroughly, essentially Judeo-Christian notion. Because the human heart is unalterable by the law, the truly enlightened soul goes beyond law to self-control, self-government. and self-discipline – to self-restraint.

It is clear therefore, that in *Heart of Darkness* Conrad is making a specifically Christian assertion about the heart of man. Weather or not he was fully aware of the Christian nature of his statement is immaterial; for the social milieu of Christendom (in contrast to *Christianity)* is sufficient to explain both the writer's direction and the reader's fascination with the story. We have, in Kurtz, a prodigal who thoroughly enjoyed the "far country" and lingered too long at the troughs. He was too soon dead and too late wise.