Revisiting Characters in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: Binarism, Trauma and Resilience

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Abstract

For decades, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) has been subject to different readings and interpretations. Transcending the boundaries of time and place, Conrad's novella is still a relevant text for modern critical readings. Although many critics have studied characters referring to different theories and perspectives, characterization is still a rich source of meaning. This paper aims to study the characters in *Heart of Darkness* and examine Conrad's narrative strategy in terms of binarism and doubling. The paper also explores how, despite their depiction as powerful characters, Marlow and Kurtz show symptoms of failure and trauma while the black female character, usually depicted as an emblem of absence and negation, shows signs of power and resilience despite her muteness and minor presence. Feminist, Psychoanalytical and trauma theories are referred to in the revisiting of characters in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

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Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is a text that takes the reader to a deep foggy African jungle. Through Marlow and his narrative, the reader starts a journey that is too mysterious to be enjoyed and too complex to be comprehended. It is indeed a heart of darkness journey. The title in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* adds to the complexity of the text. Lacking definiteness provided by the article "The", the title is much generalized with a startling juxtaposition between the two words "Heart" and "Darkness". The former is concrete while the latter is abstract. The two words are also divergent, for "Heart" refers to life, love and motion while "Darkness" is associated with death, gloom and evil. Reminiscent of the oxymoron in Charles Baudelaire's title *Les Fleurs du Mal*, the title of Conrad's narrative is built upon binary opposition. Jacques Darras, in *Joseph Conrad and the West*, suggests that the indefiniteness of the title is Conrad's way to make the text open yet enigmatic to symbolically "free the African continent from geographical strictures and return it to its original mysterious origins" (41). George Kateb equally comments on the lack of a definite or indefinite article in the title concluding that "the primary meaning of heart of darkness was not geographical or topographical but cultural" (212). Despite geographical and cultural interpretations, the title's conflicting meanings still stimulate many questions in the reader's mind: is Africa meant to be Heart of Darkness? Is Heart of Darkness a space or a condition? Does it stand for the main characters Marlow or Kurtz? Does it refer to the colonists or the natives? These questions are meant to be open as no definite answer would readily be available in the indefinite *Heart of Darkness*.

In *Rule of Darkness*, Patrick Brantlinger states that "in the world of *Heart of Darkness*, there are no clear answers. Ambiguity, perhaps the main form of darkness in the story, prevails" (287). Throughout the narrative, juxtaposing polarities contribute to the ambiguity underlying the plot, setting, and characters. This paper aims to study the characters in *Heart of Darkness* and decipher the sense of implicit binarism, stylistic and thematic, governing their portrayal in Conrad's text. The focus is on the major white characters; that is, Marlow and Kurtz, and the minor black and female characters and their oscillation between power, trauma, and resilience.

Characterization in *Heart of Darkness*

Much has been argued about the thematic function of characterization in *Heart of Darkness*. Among many critics, David Galef states that despite his minor appearance in the novel, Kurtz's existence "provides the central themes of darkness and harrowing journey of the mind" (28). Ludwig Schnauder regards the major characters in Conrad's text as a medium to articulate the theme of free will and determinism as both Marlow and Kurtz engage in a quest of free will yet they face the obstacles of a materialist deterministic world that denies them the possibility to accomplish their mission (8). Along with other critics, Edward Said finds in Marlow and Kurtz a representation of reality, pointing out that through the characters, Conrad reveals the truth of colonialism at its worst. Likewise, Hena Maes Jelinek explains that while narrating Marlow's insistence on blackness, disease and death indicates that it is not light but darkness the white man has brought with him" (67). Otto Bohlman goes further to highlight the existentialist trait of the characters of Marlow and Kurtz who replicate modern Man's struggle to give meaning to a mysterious and hostile universe (3-4). Other critics like Ruth Nadelhaft focus on the female characters in *Heart of Darkness* to highlight race and gender issues, arguing that, at the beginning of the narrative, Marlow's contention that women know nothing of politics or the real world brings forth gender issues and reveals Conrad's sexist attitudes and his belief that women are "threatening, monstrous and frustrating" (93). However, Nadelhaft believes, *Heart of Darkness* is not a text "without significant women characters, though they do not serve as protagonists" (95). These views and others testify to the complexity of Conrad's text and its openness to different readings and perspectives. Nonetheless, the narrative devices employed by the author in the portrayal of his characters are overlooked by most of the readings of the novel which are purely thematic.

Narrative Devices and Binary oppositions

The setting is very significant in the portrayal of characters in *Heart of Darkness*, The sense of binarism characterizing the setting is very telling insofar as it establishes two distinct prototypes of characters in the narrative. The use of metanarrative or the technically termed "framed narration" in *Heart of Darkness* is Conrad's medium to create two utterly divergent spaces. Marlow, the narrator, tells the story on the Nellie, the ship, which is the space of narration. The narrative takes place in an African jungle, which is the space of action. Both spaces are indeed symbolically employed in the portrayal of characters in the novel.

Charlie Marlow, as a narrator and character, recounts his story to the occupants of the Nellie. The characters on the Nellie are introduced in terms of their social positions rather than their names. The "lawyer", the "accountant" (owner of the yacht), and the company director or the "Captain" (Conrad 6) can only be described as civilized by virtue of their thriving social positions. The symbolic image of the lights reflected on the River Thames' waters is also connotative of the civilized nature of the characters: "The water shone pacifically, in the sky, without a speck, was a benign immensity of unstained light" (6). The River Thames is described as "rest[ing] unruffled at the decline of the day […], spreading out in the tranquil dignity of a waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth" (6). The peacefulness and tranquility of the river tells much about the perception of the civilized white "hunters for gold or pursuers of fame" (7) who share the dignity and tranquility of the space.

While the geographical space of narration is functionally employed in the description of the civilized character, the space of action is purposely suggestive of the

uncivilized and the savage. Though realistically described (London, jungle, rivers), space functions symbolically in the depiction of characters in *Heart of darkness*. The space of narration, the Nellie and the River Thames, is the realm of power, light, and civilization, while the space of action, the jungle, and the Congo River, serves to portray the opposite side of life.

Darkness is the key notion in the space of action: "We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness" (50). The jungle is also depicted as a sphere of gloom and mystery: "It was then in the afternoon, the forest as gloomy" (63). Contrary to the River Thames, a symptom of calmness and "dignity", the Congo River is presented as violent and savage: "I steamed up a bit, then swing downstream, and two thousand eyes followed the evolutions of the splashing, thumping, fierce river demon beating the water with its tail and breathing black smoke into the air" (96). The Congo River is metaphorically equated with a demon and leading into the "heart of an immense darkness" (111). If the Congo jungle is the space of darkness and evil, Europe is then meant to be the space of light and London is "the biggest and the greatest town on earth" (5). The exotic darkness of the geographic space of action replicates the state of the natives populating it. They are uncivilized, savage, dark and depending on the white's "heavenly mission to civilize [them]" (11).

Time is also an important element in the depiction of characters in *Heart of Darkness*. A sense of binarism governing time is also relevant to characterization. On the Nellie, time is specified. The reader immediately grasps that Marlow starts his narrative when "the sun sank low, and from glowing white changed to a dull red without heat" (6). It is sunset when the narrative starts. Although it bears a thematic significance, the time of Marlow's narrative is indicative of a group of male characters who are well aware of the notion of time. They are indeed on board witnessing sunset and waiting for "the turn of the tide" (5).

The Nellie occupants' awareness of time is implicitly opposed to the native's lack of perception of any time reference. Marlow describes his journey in the deep jungles as foggy: "The curious, inexplicable note of desperate grief in this savage clamor […] had swept by us on the river bank, behind the blind whiteness of the fog" (60). The repeatedly recurrent metaphor of fog emphasizes the absence of any clear perception of time and place in the land of fog which is a corollary to darkness replicating the blinding obscurity and indistinctness in which Marlow's steamer is caught, turned unable to predict any notion of time or place. The natives are also depicted as utterly out of time: "I don't think a single one of them had any clear idea of time, as we at the end of countless ages have. They still belonged to the beginning of time" (58). So, the specified time on the Nellie contributes to the construction of the civilized characters while the absence of any clear reference to time adds to the primitiveness of the natives.

A sense of ambiguity about the present and the past is also created in Marlow's narrative. The story is being told "one evening" and as the tale gets deeper into Africa and further into the past, images of darkness get more and more overwhelming. The evening grows darker and by the time Marlow finishes telling his story, late at night, his listeners appear pervaded by darkness: "I raised my head; the offing was barred by a black bank of clouds and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed somber under the overcast sky" (111). This sense of darkness that invades time is a projection of the gloom rooted in the black natives and transferred to the Nellie through Marlow's narrative. So, in "the heart of deep darkness" (50) and fog, natives are doomed to be blind and unconscious about time, light and civilization. Such a degrading portrait is strongly sustained through the recurrence to a poetic narrative style.

Heart of Darkness has a sophisticated effect springing from the condensation of poetic devices throughout the text. The use of figurative language, color symbolism, animal imagery, repetition and the grotesque is very functional in the creation of characters as distinctly opposed polarities in the text. The use of colors in the narrative is employed in the binary depiction of characters. "The dark faced" creatures, "the eyes shining darkly" (85), the "dark human shapes", the wild woman with a "dark face hav[ing] a tragic and fierce aspect of wild sorrow and of dump pain" (87) and the "dark eyes" (106) in the obscure jungle are ironically opposed to the occupants of the Nellie resting "in the luminous space" (5) and looking at "the luminous estuary" (25). So, from the "dark" color to the "luminous" one lies the boundary between the light of civilization and the darkness of wilderness.

Animal imagery is equally relevant in the ambivalent depiction of the characters and the implicit imperialist "refusal to turn the other into the same" (Sarup 38). The natives are rendered to a state of bestiality through a set of animal analogies: "A lot of people, mostly black and naked moved about like ants" (Conrad 21). Besides, "one of these creatures rose to his hands and knees, and went off on all-fours towards the river to drink" (25). Animal imagery adds the portrait of the native as savage, bestial and primitive. Referring to the natives as a crowd of savage creatures is an illustration of Homi Bhabha's postulation, in *The Location of Culture*, that "the objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction" (70).

Animal imagery is also functional in the creation of the archetype of the civilized character. In *Heart of Darkness*, the Congo River is represented as "an immense snake uncoiled" (2). This image is subverted later in the text when Marlow equates himself to a "bird" fascinated by a snake: "It fascinated me like a snake would a bird – a silly little bird" (12). Contrary to the denigrating animal images attributed to the natives and adding to their sense of savagery and primitiveness, animal imagery related to the white Marlow presents the civilized man as instinctively innocent in his endeavor to bring light to the deep labyrinths of the uncivilized world. Animal imagery of the little bird innocently fascinated by the snake stands for the purity and nobility of the civilizing mission and is implicitly meant to catch the sympathy of Marlow's audience on the Nellie as well as the reader. Thus, the device of animal imagery brings about the "imperative reasons for widening the gap between the civilized man and his antecedents [and] support[ing] the ideology of colonial expansion" (Watt 156). Likewise, employing animal imagery to create a positive image of the white Marlow echoes the Spencerian and Darwinian postulation about the white race's inherited superiority over other races[1]. Within the imperial context of Victorian England, a belief that the more intelligent would rule the less intelligent arose. The domination and extermination of inferior races are regarded as key in the process of civilization and the legitimization of imperialist ventures and the conquest of the uncivilized world.

Repetition is another stylistic device abundantly employed throughout the text to further establish the binary opposition in the construction of characters in *Heart of Darkness*. The duality of voice/silence is recurrent throughout the narrative creating a sense of duplication governing characterization in the text: "I have a voice […]; mine is

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[1] In *First Principles*, Herbert Spencer argues that the "survival of the fittest" is the law that has to govern the economic order in the process of social evolution, asserting that the dominance of the white race is itself the result of inherited superiority. Likewise, in *The Descent of Man*, Charles Darwin talks about "high" and "low" races and "stronger" and "weaker" nations. (https://www.britannica.com/science/survival-of-the-fittest)

the speech that cannot be silenced" (Conrad 52), Marlow says. "'It is very serious,' said the manager's voice behind me" (60), he adds. "A voice! A voice! It was grave profound, vibrating," (56) Marlow describes Kurtz's voice. By virtue of their whiteness, characters in *Heart of Darkness* are endowed with an eloquent voice. However, the natives are represented as "mute" or whispering and "babbling". Marlow describes a wounded native: "We two whites stood over him, and his lustrous and inquiring glance enveloped us both. I declare it looked as though he would presently put to us some question in an understandable language; but he died without uttering a sound" (66-67). In another instance, Marlow repeatedly talks about a "beaten nigger groan[ing] somewhere […]. The hurt nigger moaned feebly somewhere nearby" (37).

Therefore, through the repetition of the duality voice/silence, a clear line is set up between the voice of power and the silence of savagery and primitiveness. While the civilized characters are depicted as eloquent voices, natives are not allowed to voice and articulation as they can only babble. Even their babbling is ironically meant to stress their bestiality: "Catch'im, […], catch'im to us. 'To you, eh? I asked; 'what would you do with them?' 'Eat'im!' he said curtly (58). So, the one opportunity offered to the natives to speak is ironically intended to highlight their instinctive and animalistic desire to eat prisoners. Thus, the natives' savagery is made manifest through silence and babbling while the whites' power and civilization is stressed through voice as a metaphor of agency and dominance.

In this respect, Chinua Achebe, in "An Image of Africa," criticizes *Heart of Darkness* as a racially prejudiced text in which blacks are made voiceless or babbling like animals. Their selfhood is not asserted as human beings and they are incapable of acquiring an identity. They are also kept in a state of invisibility and are always seen through the gaze of others. They need a mediator, Marlow, to be voiced, which is a pretext of their dominance and manipulation. Achebe reads *Heart of Darkness* as replication of the image of "Africa as the other world, the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization: a place where Man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality" (252).

Achebe's reaction is quite relevant since Conrad's text is a portrayal of the black natives as utterly wild and primitive. The device of the grotesque is deliberately applied to further highlight the reductive portrait of the natives as animals and mere objects:

> Near the same tree two more bundles of acute angles sat with their legs drawn up. One, with his chin propped on his knees, stared at nothing, in an intolerable and appalling manner: his brother phantom rested its forehead, as if overcome with a great weariness; and all about others were scattered in every pose of contorted collapse, as in some picture of a massacre or a pestilence. While I stood horror-struck, one of these creatures rose to his hands and knees, and went off on all-fours towards the river to drink. He lapped out of his hand, then sat up in the sunlight, crossing his shins in front of him, and after a time let his woolly head fall on his breastbone. (Conrad 25)

The 'phantom', 'bundle', 'shins' and the 'wholly head' refer to a non-human state and turn the natives into beast-like 'creatures' who seem in dire need of the lights of civilization. Therefore, through a variety of stylistic devices and the settings of space and time, which are ambivalently deployed in the text, characters are readily classified into two contradicting polarities, namely the superior white colonizer and the dependent black colonized. Marlow and Kurtz could be studied as the prototypes of power in *Heart of Darkness*, while the natives are the embodiment of powerlessness and subordination. This sense of binarism governing the depiction of the white and the black characters has

a historical and political dimension in that it is a reflection of the perpetual struggle between the colonizer and the colonized and the conspiracy of silence around the colonial truth, or doing imperialism quietly as a way to establish voice and negate the other (Bhabha 175).

Parallel Character Construction

Dealing with the two major characters Marlow and Kurtz, a sense of parallelism in their portrayal may be synonymous with the doppelganger[2] or the double. Marlow as a narrator incarnates power. The reader is granted access to the narrative through his voice. Although in many instances of the text, Marlow confesses that "it cannot be described" (73) or "I don't know" (50-79-105), he still remains the powerful voice in the narrative. Indeed, he is so powerful a narrator that he leaves his readers with endless questions, becoming dependent on him as the most reliable speaker. He elaborates on the inexpressibility of some facts to preserve his role as the most dominant voice in the narrative. He exposes the reader to a variety of analogies, metaphors, and symbols to add to the narrative's ambiguity and ensure an utter dependence of the audience on him as a narrator. The strategy involved here is that of the manipulation of expectations and counter expectations achieved through a rearrangement of language with the paradigm of the literal and the figurative. Marlow is then an extremely powerful voice as far as the narrative approach is concerned.

The narrative strategy employed by Conrad turns Marlow into a powerful character since outside the Nellie, space of narration, there is nothing but darkness as Edward Said puts it in *Culture and Imperialism*: "Conrad sets the story on the deck of a boat anchored in the Thames; as Marlow tells his story the sun sets, and by the end of the narrative the heart of darkness has reappeared in England; outside the group of Marlow's listeners lies an undefined and unclear world" (28-29).

If Marlow dominates the narrative discourse, Kurtz embodies absolute power and domination as a protagonist. "You don't talk with that man—you listen to him" (68) Kurtz is described by the Russian trader. In many instances throughout the narrative, Kurtz is strikingly present despite his physical absence. References to Kurtz establish him as an emblem of power. The manager describes Kurtz as "an exceptional man, of the greatest importance to the company" (Conrad 32). The Russian trader talks about Kurtz: "You can't judge Mr. Kurtz as you would an ordinary man" (80). Marlow considers "Mr. Kurtz [as] a universal genius" (67). Europe has converged in the creation of the prototype of Kurtz as an emblem of power. His mother was half-English, and his father was half-French. "All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz" (71). He has a German name: "Kurtz – Kurtz – that means short in German, don't it?" (85). He is Belgian; he speaks French and is half-English.

Kurtz is then a symbolic character in a geopolitical way insofar he is portrayed as the contact zone in which Europe meets, the center of interest in Marlow's narrative and the central station positioned in the heart of darkness or the centre of Africa. Kurtz is placed in the centre of the narrative and equated to the centre of the earth: "I felt as though, instead of going to the centre of a continent, I were about to set off for the centre of the earth"

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[2] Doppelgänger, (German: "double goer"), in German folklore, a wraith or apparition of a living person, as distinguished from a ghost. The concept of the existence of a spirit double, an exact but usually invisible replica of every man, bird, or beast, is an ancient and widespread belief. To meet one's double is a sign that one's death is imminent. (https://www.britannica.com/art/doppelganger)

(29), Marlow says describing his journey to Kurtz. The latter is symbolically turned into an archetype of the colonizer whose power, hostility, benevolence and omnipresence are central in imperialist ideology.

Kurtz's monopoly of ivory testifies to his supreme economic order: "My ivory, my station, my river, my… Everything belonged to him; everything belonged to him" (70). His determination to "exterminate all the brutes" (72) reflects his hostility, and his belief that "we could do plenty of good for them [natives]" (70) replicates the benevolent civilizing mission of enlightening the savage natives. Besides, Kurtz's ideology that "we, whites, from the point of development we had arrived at, must necessarily appear to them in the nature of supernatural beings – we approach them with the might as of a deity" (71) elevates him to the divine status so as to be worshipped by the natives. Therefore, power in *Heart of Darkness* definitely belongs to the white masters Marlow and Kurtz, for the former is the master at the narrative level while latter is the master at the economic level. In this vein, Edward Said summarizes the issue of power, stating that "the whole point of what Kurtz and Marlow talk about is imperial mastery, white European over black Africans and their ivory, civilization over the primitive dark continent" (30).

The startling sense of binarism governing the construction of the characters of Marlow and Kurtz has been subject to many studies based on different approaches ranging from the biographical to the psychoanalytical, the cultural and historical perspectives. The different studies testify to the complexity of the Marlow-Kurtz characterization and the intricate doubling governing their development in Conrad's text. In "The Journey Within", Albert Guerard explains Marlow's journey is both physical and symbolic, being structured on binary oppositions like light and darkness, life and death and the conscious and subconscious. Guerard refers to Carl Jung's concept of the "night sea journey"[3] to read Marlow's expedition as a quest within the labyrinths of the human psyche:

> I refer to the archetypal myth dramatized in much great literature since the
> Book of Jonah: the story of an essentially solitary journey involving profound
> spiritual change in the voyager. In its classical form, the journey is a descent
> into the earth, followed by a return to light. (15)

Guerard studies Marlow's journey as a symbolic oscillation between light and darkness replicating the perpetual "conflict between the apparent and the hidden double" (27). In this sense, the dichotomy light/darkness is a symbolic manifestation of the conscious and the unconscious within the human psyche. Guerard concludes that "it is time to recognize that the story is not primarily about Kurtz or about the brutality of Belgian officials but about Marlow, its narrator and his journey toward and through certain facets or potentialities of self" (328). The encounter between Marlow and Kurtz is in this respect "the confrontation of the self with the hidden double" (331). This claim is endorsed by Marlow's affirmation that "in the interior, you will no doubt meet Mr. Kurtz" (Conrad 27) as well as his description of Kurtz's death as his own partial death: "The voice was gone; what else had been there? But I am of course aware that the next day, the pilgrims buried something in a muddy hole. And then they very nearly buried me" (100). Guerard's psychoanalytical study of the major characters provides a good background toward further understanding Conrad's motives behind their construction. However, an important element

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[3] Night sea journey: An archetypal motif in mythology, psychologically associated with neurosis, depression and loss of energy s. "The night sea journey is a kind of descensus ad inferos–a descent into Hades and a journey to the land of ghosts somewhere beyond this world, beyond consciousness, hence an immersion in the unconscious" (Sharp 90).

in both characters' psyche is overlooked in Guerard's analysis, namely the sense of trauma Marlow and Kurtz display through their words and actions.

Major Characters' Unresolved Trauma

In addition to the Freudian perspective, the characters' construction in Conrad's text is relevant to Cathy Caruth's theories on trauma. Starting from Freudian concepts, Caruth states that trauma is always "the story of a wound that cries out and addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (4). "This truth," she explains, "in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language" (4). Delayed and belated, trauma and its dynamics, between what is known and unknown, is relevant to the character construction of both Marlow and Kurtz. Marlow's occasional failure to tell and his repeated utterances: "I don't know" (50-79-105) mark his apprehension and his traumatic experience while moving into the depths of the African jungle. Likewise, Kurtz's final words "the horror, horror" (Conrad 100) may relate to the wound he is left with when finally discovering his truth as a colonizer.

Marlow and Kurtz's story reflects a traumatic experience "not only as the enigma of a human agent's repeated and unknowing acts but also the enigma of the otherness of a human voice that cries out from the wound" (Caruth 3); a voice that witnesses a truth both major characters cannot fully grasp. The repetitive cry, "the horror, the horror" reinforces Kurtz's unvoiced ordeal as what is described as "the horror" is prohibited for the readers. Furthermore, the elliptical feature in utterances like "the horror, the horror" or "I don't know" forces Kurtz, Marlow and the reader back to the site of trauma, for the ellipses and repetitions can be seen as a kind of silence that evokes hidden meanings and an unavailable truth. Hence, the abstruse and repetitive structure becomes the precise site of trauma experienced by Kurtz and projected on Marlow as well as the reader.

According to Caruth, "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely not known in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on" (4). Trauma cannot be located in Kurtz's psyche, yet his final words in the narrative excite the belated return of the traumatic experience that haunted Kurtz and shaped his experience in the geographical space of the jungle. In such a moment "the fear shouts from the page, [being] brought on by the trauma of geopolitical circumstance" (Grey 9).

Kurtz's trauma is the outcome of a shock at the realization of his truth as a colonizer, to which he was not prepared. Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* explores the issue of internal versus external assault on the ego and provides a definition of trauma: "We describe as 'traumatic' any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield," Freud wrote, provoking "a disturbance on a large scale in the functioning of the organism's energy and [setting] in motion every possible defensive measure" (33). According to Freud, shock, which is an extensive breach in the protective shield against stimuli, is caused by the lack of preparedness. Building on Freud's ideas of shock and trauma, Walter Benjamin explains that the subject experiences shock as he is interrupted by the sudden change of images (238). The movement from one setting to another constitutes a kind of change in the reality of Kurtz as a colonizer. It is in the deep darkness of the Congo River that he discovers the brutality of his practices and the unvoiced truth of his imperial project.

Furthermore, in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, Shoshana Felman states that bearing witness of the traumatic experience requires an act of testimony, which encompasses "the political dimension of oppression and the

ethical dimension of resistance" (12). Both Caruth and Felman insist on an opposition between traumatic event and narrative possibility. Together they emphasize the need for a changed critical and ethical practice and a new mode of reading and listening, in which intersubjectivity plays a key role in bearing witness to how wound becomes voice (Caruth ix). In this sense, Marlow's narrative "disrupts conventional views of Empire by forcing the reader to see the stark realities of colonial exploitation" (Grey 5), bearing witness to the decline of the imperial project and its failure to face the overwhelming silence of the jungle and leading to a sense of trauma suffered by the man of action and the man of narration.

Characters and the Struggle for Power

Confining the study of characters to the psychological interpretation would be too simplistic insofar as it obliterates "the worldliness of the text," to use Edward Said words. Although the text provides the reader with a good ground to study the human psyche, it is equally rooted in the social and historical reality of the time. Kurtz's eloquent discourse turns him into an influential character whose language has an annihilating power: "Exterminate all the brutes!" (Conrad 72), he says. Kurtz's language, establishing him as a powerful character, confirms Maurice Blanchot's view that language is power, for "when two people talk, one of them must always remain silent" (qtd. in Gunnars 44) and the more the speaker talks, the more he becomes the owner of tools of articulation and voice "regardless of accuracy, veracity or appropriateness" (Gunnars 44). The control over the means of communication is an idiosyncratic feature of the colonial discourse where a "standard version of metropolitan language is established as the norm while the variants are marginalized as impurities" (Ashcroft 7). In this way, language turns into a means of hierarchical power, for truth, order and reality pertain to the speaker of the mainstream language while those who do not speak the dominant language are dubbed as a marginalized, silenced and excluded other.

Nonetheless, language can also unveil the characters' powerlessness and susceptibility: "The horror, the horror" (Conrad 100), Kurtz final words summarize his judgment on his own life, his fate, and the sense of agony he has experienced during his adventure on the Congo River. So, through language the protagonist and the imperialist Kurtz is ambivalently constructed as powerful yet vulnerable, and fluent yet repetitive and babbling. Thus, "acutely aware of the slipperiness of all verbal communication, Conrad's writing warns us that language is often at its most powerful when at its most duplicitous" (Greaney 108).

Portraying the African characters as voiceless and savage, Conrad reveals himself as a racially prejudiced writer who, according to Susan Blake, associates blackness with evil (396) and deprives the natives of voice and identity as "none of them has name and none of them appears for more than a full paragraph" (Hawkins 163). However, portraying the white Kurtz as wild and pervaded by mystery and gloom may lead the reader to question Conrad's motives underlying such a negative portrayal:

> The wilderness had patted him on the head, and behold, it was like a ball – an ivory ball […]. It had taken him, loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation. (69)

It is definitely not coincidental that the language becomes figuratively crammed with gloom whenever dealing with the character of Kurtz. The narrative style becomes

figurative and different from the language of the text when the focus is on Kurtz, testifying to the sense of darkness devastating him.

Critics like Edward Said relate this sense of stylistic alienation in the narrative to "Conrad's failure to write" (Said 82) and fully grasp his character. Likewise, Michael Greaney in "Conrad's Style" argues that writer's narrative style is characterized by a sense of "unwillingness – or inability – to comply with the naïve appetite for answers and revelations that all readers, however sophisticated, cannot help bring to narrative" (107). Nonetheless, another way to look at this point is Conrad's deliberate intention to shed some mystery on the character of Kurtz. In this respect, the lack of specificity is not a stylistic failure; it is rather Conrad's strategy to show that there is an inherent Kurtz in the human being which cannot be fully understood. There is no specificity in describing the evil overwhelming Kurtz, which is Conrad's intention as a modernist writer to force the reader to share in the construction of meaning in the text.

Conrad exposes the reader to a degrading portrait of the natives who keep babbling and groaning, regressing to the primitive stages of humanity. He also introduces Kurtz the colonizer using "human skulls" as a way of ornamentation and fiercely believing in the necessity to annihilate all the natives. A conclusion about whether Conrad is racially prejudiced or not would be too complex to be reached as far as the characters' construction in the text is concerned. Indeed, it is revealed that while the natives show physical darkness, Kurtz the colonizer shows a sense of deeper darkness, wilderness and primitiveness.

The Female Character: the 'Subaltern' Voice

Through the symbolic presence of the female character in *Heart of Darkness*, the issue of imperialism is further emphasized. The black female in Marlow's narrative is also the main element in the denigrating portrait attributed to the natives. She is described as mute, passive and wild: "The barbarous […] woman did not so much as flinch and stretched tragically her bare arms after us over the somber and glittering river" (97). The female native is often described as a "shadow" and an exotic "apparition", which adds to the mystery of the feminized space: "And from right to left along the lighted shore moved a wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman […]. She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent" (87).

The black female's description is relevant to Gayatri Spivak's notion of the subaltern and his inability to speak. Spivak discusses women's position as a "subaltern" in patriarchal imperialist cultures. In her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" she contends that women are "doubly in shadow," for they are doubly alienated by imperialist as well as patriarchal discourses and are unwillingly placed "outside of the mode of production [and] the writing of history even as they mime writing as such" (23). Spivak argues that women remain a silent subaltern, for "if the mode of production narrative is the final reference, these women are insufficiently represented or representable in that narration" (22). Being excluded and deprived of full representation, women are compelled to exist in silence and obscurity. Spivak remarks that, being denied the act of writing history, "women cannot be grasped at all" (23). She points out that the dominated cannot possess a voice and thus cannot be in a position of enunciation. Spivak's claim highlights the Western imperial project that constructs itself at the expense of negating and silencing the "other". In this sense, the black female's description does not differ from the portrait of the black woman who is blind folded, carrying a lighted torch which is painted by Kurtz in the brick maker's room to suggest the failure of the subaltern to speak as well as the white colonizer's failure to accomplish his mission of benevolence and enlightenment.

Furthermore, Kurtz's makes use of language to construct an imagined reality of bringing light to the uncivilized natives, yet his attempt turns to be a mere illusion:

> I was cut to the quick at the idea of having lost the inestimable privilege of listening to the gifted Kurtz. Of course I was wrong. The privilege was waiting for me. Oh, yes, I heard more than enough. And I was right, too. A voice. He was very little more than a voice. (Conrad 78-79)

Exposed to such an illusion and the absurdity of the civilizing mission, Kurtz's death while pronouncing the words "the horror, the horror" implies the imminent destruction of existing civilization (Watt 161) though the illusion of imperialism may be granted survival through the other female character, namely Kurtz's Intended who still believes in his greatness and his claim to civilization and imperialism. Accordingly, it would be relevant to conclude that the female characters in Conrad's text are used as a transition from the world of reality to the realm of illusion. The female portrait replicates Kurtz's realization of the futility to bring light to darkness while his mistress is the medium through which this illusion would ironically be granted survival: "She seemed ready to listen without mental reservation, without suspicion, without a thought for herself" (Conrad 104).

Seen from an opposite perspective, the black female's muteness and her body language, while stretching her arms, can further account for the male colonizer's failure when faced with the semiotic. In her psychoanalytical model, Julia Kristeva introduces the notions of the "semiotic" and the "symbolic" modes of expression as a reproduction of Lacan's pre-oedipal "Imaginary" and post-oedipal "Real" pointing out that language favors the symbolic over the semiotic and arguing that as speaking subjects, all we acquire is a phallic position[4]. Subsequently, for a female "language seems to be seen from a foreign land […]. Estranged from language, women are visionaries, dancers who suffer as they speak" (Kristeva, *Oscillation* 118). Kristeva suggests finding a new form of language that subverts the masculine symbolic order and highlights the more feminine semiotic which is more closely connected to the rhythms of the body, to the mother's figure and to a pre-language stage.

Accordingly, the native woman's silence and her body language become a medium of expression which the male occupants of the Nellie cannot understand, turning into a medium of articulation, identity and resilience. In this respect, Homi Bhabha argues in *The Location of Culture* that "each time the encounter with identity occurs at the point at which something exceeds the frame of the image, it eludes the eye, evacuates the self as site of identity and autonomy and—most important—leaves a resistant trace, a stain of the subject, a sign of resistance" (49). Described as a "wild gorgeous apparition", the native woman escapes the colonial reality as established by a patriarchal language and moves beyond "the frame of the image" as a way of resistance, claiming a new identity that overcomes the residues of patriarchy and turns lack into possibility and marginalization into agency. It is indeed what Homi Bhabha describes as "another otherness that speaks in riddles, obliterating proper names and places [and] a silence that turns imperial triumphalism into testimony of colonial confusion and those who hear its echo lose historic memories" (176). This silence displaces and destabilizes established dualities like civilized/uncivilized, mimicking and mocking the social performance of the colonizer's

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[4] In *The Revolution of Poetic Language*, Kristeva states that language has two aspects namely the semiotic aspect, which is linked to the maternal body and is closer to nature and the unconscious, and the symbolic aspect which is more closely identified with the father figure and is rather associated with culture and conscious behavior (4).

language and its inability to articulate the natives referring to them as "non-sense" (177), which is an implicit assertion of the limitation of the dominant language and its failure to contain the silence of the native which Bhabha describes as "the unitary sign of human culture" (178).

In *Strangers to Ourselves*, Kristeva states that, speaking in a patriarchal language means "not to speak one's native language, to inhabit sonorities and arguments cut off from the body's nocturnal memory, from the bitter-sweet sleep of childhood, to carry inside oneself something like a secret burial vault" (79). Kristeva talks about women's foreignness as induced by a patriarchal language as well as the separation from the mother's body which contains female experiences. Kristeva's notion of exile from the maternal body ironically trespasses the contours of femininity to reach masculinity in *Heart of Darkness*. Indeed, the sense of quietness and calm on the Nellie is telling about a sense of estrangement the male characters experience at the end of their journey to the depth of the Congo River, which stands for a movement back to a maternal nonverbal semiotic order that cannot be contained by patriarchal language:

> Nobody moved for a time. 'We have lost the first of the ebb,' said the Director suddenly. I raised my head. The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky— seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness. (Conrad 131)

In his attempt to contain the Congo River with his symbolic language, Marlow the narrator and the other male characters find themselves overwhelmed by the darkness of the river, falling within the confines of feminized geographical space and symbolically returning to the semiotic womb. Bernard Constant reads the final scene as Conrad's male characters attempt to postpone "their long-awaited return to a mother, whose untimely death has sown the seeds of longing and remorse, and whose voice whispered from beyond the grave utters her insistent claim upon her son's return" (Meyer 69). However, motionless and submerged by the darkness of the Congo River, the male characters witness a metaphorical immersion of the self into the dark waters of the unconscious and unwillingly return to the semiotic mother's womb which is transformed into a figurative tomb.

Conclusion

Structured on binarism, characterization in *Heart of Darkness* is intricate, adding to the narrative and thematic complexity of Conrad's text. This sense of binarism at the level of characterization can be read as juxtaposition between distinct prototypes of power powerlessness, civilization primitiveness and dominance submissiveness. It can also be approached as a synonym of the doppelganger particularly when dealing the characters of Kurtz and Marlow although they are portrayed as dissimilar in many instances in the text. From the binary structure of the title, to the construction of the text on binary settings, to the binary construction of characters as emblems of light, darkness, power, and resilience lies the ambiguity of Conrad's novella.

The text's thematic darkness may be read as Conrad's inscription in the modernist trend allocating an active role to the reader in deciphering the text's meaning. It may also be read as Conrad's state of perplexity when trying to consider the imperial ideology which is conventionally established on the heavenly mission to civilize and enlighten the dark uncivilized; yet finding out that the only truth about such an ideology is a tragic illusion. Such an illusion is ironically replicated through the implicit contrast

between a heavily sophisticated title *Heart of Darkness* and the ship's suggestive name the Nellie declaring the civilizing mission as null and void.

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