"The horror! The horror!": Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness as a Gothic Novel

Jennifer Lipka

Conradiana, Volume 40, Number 1, Spring 2008, pp. 25-37 (Article)

Published by Texas Tech University Press
DOI: 10.1353/cnd.0.0006

For additional information about this article
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/cnd/summary/v040/40.1.lipka.html
“The horror! The horror!”: Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* as a Gothic Novel

**JENNIFER LIPKA**

The only legitimate basis of creative work lies in the courageous recognition of all the irreconcilable antagonisms that make our life so enigmatic, so burdensome, so fascinating, so dangerous, so full of hope. They exist! And this is the only fundamental truth of fiction.

—Joseph Conrad (Qtd. in Swisher 12)

[The artist] speaks to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives, to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain; to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation—and to the subtle but invisible convictions of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts, to the solidarity in dreams, in joy, in sorrow, in aspirations, in illusions, in hope, in fear, which binds men to each other, which binds together all humanity—the dead to the living and the living to the unborn [. . . ] My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see. That—and no more, and it is everything.

—Joseph Conrad (Qtd. in Swisher 34–35)

Joseph Conrad said much regarding his role as author to make you see the truth. However, he also said that he didn’t like to explain what his books were about, because that would open him up to the criticism that he had failed as an artist to achieve understanding in the audience regarding what he could say the work was “really” about. Fortunately,
the field of literary criticism, theory, and interpretation have stepped in to (ad)venture failure in explaining the meaning and significance of *Heart of Darkness*. This is another such (ad)venture into the teeming jungle of Conrad’s long short story (or short novel), and the equally wild overgrowth of vegetation that is Conrad studies, criticisms, commentaries, and interpretations. According to the editor of the most recent *Heart of Darkness* casebook, “[t]he cutting edge of literary criticism seems to swing between formal and cultural-historical approaches every twenty years or so” with a pendulum whose swath swings (cuts) through postcolonialism, the adventure genre, historicism, irony, metaphor, the imagery of language, modernism, postmodernism, feminism, deconstructionism, psychology and psychoanalysis, authorial intention, and the philosophical branches of epistemology, morality, and metaphysics (Moore 7). Certainly no *Castle of Otranto*. Ironically, that is exactly what the lack and void is regarding this novel, where “the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine” (*Heart* 68). Not enough attention has been given to *Heart of Darkness* as a serious novel of horror, a prime example of the highest of British Gothic fiction. This hero’s quest, then, is to examine the flaws and benefits of the more famous works regarding *Heart of Darkness* and then discuss the work as a Gothic novel, all in terms of the question, Can “traditional” examinations of *Heart of Darkness* do the story the justice that an interpretation of the novel focusing on its Gothic elements can?

Woe to Walter F. Wright, who in his 1949 essay “Ingress to the *Heart of Darkness*” wrote “[w]e perceive that Africa itself, with its forests, its heat, and its mysteries, is only a symbol of the larger darkness, which is in the heart of man.” (Qtd. in Harkness, Conrad’s 155) In 1975, all discussion of the Western literary canon, Joseph Conrad, and *Heart of Darkness* “burst into a blaze so suddenly that you would have thought the earth had opened to let an avenging fire consume all that trash” (*Heart* 90). Nigerian author Chinua Achebe, a nonfictional African raised in a nonfictional African society shaped by European colonialism, denounced Conrad as a “bloody racist” with “a problem with niggers”; *Heart of Darkness* as a portrayal of Africans as dumb brute (animal) rudimentary soul savages in a frenzy; and the Western world as a bunch of paternalists who think they can somehow comprehend what racism and colonialism has wrought on Africans (Achebe 190). This taught the white
man the meaning of frenzy—not surprisingly, many critics and interpreters of Conrad are male, white, Western, and European, and the still existent frantic and heated attempts to rescue or damn *Heart of Darkness* have filled more pages than the novel itself. The reaction to Achebe is almost a story unto itself, a study in the guilt of the white man, the questioning and evaluating of the values of Western culture, and the birth and popularity of colonial studies and the desire to hear from non-Europeans regarding how the brute force and greed of the Western world have forever altered their cultures.

Out of fear that the political, historical, and colonial readings of the novel have done a disservice to the true message of *Heart of Darkness*, a hard push has been given to embrace the universality of the story as a message of how to live with the knowledge of the evil that exists in every heart, male or female, black or white (Harkness, “Old-Fashioned” 41). One piece of evidence for the universality of the theme is Francis Ford Coppola’s film *Apocalypse Now*, which moves *Heart of Darkness* to Vietnam, with Kurtz a renegade American military star who must be exterminated with extreme prejudice for his unsound methods during the Vietnam War (Cahir 183–85). The argument can, however, easily be made that *Apocalypse Now* portrays Southeast Asians by using racial stereotypes. Rather than saying the issue of race should be ignored entirely, so as to examine *Heart of Darkness* as Gothic genre piece, it is perhaps more constructive to show how the issue of race opens up one area of psychological interpretations of the novel, that being how we relate to the Other.

The difference between I and Other has been much explored as the source of both racism and sexism (Odajnyk 88). Psychoanalyst and cultural theorist Julia Kristeva said that facing the abject, which she calls the most violent form of psychological horror, is seeing the I and the Other (250). The I and Other are mentioned now as an introduction to philosophical implications of the novel in terms of self, the formation of identity, and the formation/learning of morality—as this does contribute to why we experience the psychological horror that we do.

If the Other is a source of horror, in that it is different from the self (or I), what is the self? “All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz” (*Heart* 123). According to the French philosopher Louis Althusser, this is indeed true. As a Marxist and a determinist who denied individual freedom, Althusser coined the notion of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA), everything from churches to schools to the family to the government, as the institutions which shape the self (132, 154–56). Marlow
acknowledges how another social institution, that of language, is also nothing more than a tool used to justify one’s identity. When Marlow realizes that the ornamentation of the fence by Kurtz’s hut is actually rotting heads on stakes, the Russian tries to lessen his horror at this barbarity by explaining that “these are the heads of rebels. I shocked him excessively by laughing. Rebels! What would be the next definition I was to hear? There had been enemies, criminals, workers—and these were rebels. Those rebellious heads looked very subdued to me on their sticks” (Heart 134). If the self is a void in the absence of social constructions, the absence of ISAs helps explain Kurtz’s uncivil behavior in “utter solitude without a policeman [. . . ] where no warning voice of a kind neighbour can be heard whispering of public opinion” (Heart 122).

German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer agreed that an absence of social institutions implies an absence of morality: “Might it not follow from a retrospective glance at the vain attempts to find a sure basis of morals from more than 2,000 years that there is no natural morality at all that is independent of human institutions? [Morality is] an artificial product, a means invented for the better restraint of the selfish and wicked human race.” (qtd. in Madden 43) However, Schopenhauer did not believe that the human is without a self in the absence of ISAs. As a pessimist, he believed in the human being as little more than an evil ego, and life as a lie regarding our true nature:

If every individual were given the choice between his own destruction and that of the rest of the world, I need not say how the decision would go in the vast majority of the cases [. . . ] At such moments when we do have an opportunity to see the boundless egoism of almost everyone, the wickedness of many, and the cruelty of not a few [. . . ] we [. . . ] imagine we have chanced upon a monster never before seen.” (Madden 45–47)

Marlow expresses the boundless egos of the pilgrims and of Kurtz, and also the role of appearances and illusions used by “civilization” to avoid facing the truths about itself. Marlow sees that he has entered a Nietzschean world beyond good and evil, and from this perspective is troubled by all the contradictions inherent within the “civilized world,” such as the noble intentions of Kurtz, representative of the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs, creating the Kurtz who “presides at certain midnight dances ending with unspeakable rites, which—as far as I reluctantly gathered from what I heard at various
times—were offered up to him—do you understand? To Mr. Kurtz himself” (Heart 123). It is these contradictions that lead Marlow into taking a journey into his unconscious mind, and it is this journey into darkness that is best expressed through viewing *Heart of Darkness* as a Gothic novel.

While it is the feeling of dread conveyed which is the hallmark of all Gothic literature and this alone can qualify Conrad’s novel as Gothic, *Heart of Darkness* belongs to the nineteenth-century psychological Gothic—although it does contain many classic *Castle of Otranto* early Gothic elements, such as a far-off, exotic setting, “nightmares,” “visions,” night and darkness aplenty, a damned soul, and a “ghost” haunting Marlow:

> I had a vision of him on the stretcher, opening his mouth voraciously, as if to devour all the earth with all its mankind. 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. [. . .] And the memory of what I had heard him say afar there, with the horned shapes stirring at my back, in the glow of fires, within the patient woods, those broken phrases came back to me, were heard again in their ominous and terrifying simplicity. [. . .] I rang the bell before a mahogany door on the first floor, and while I waited he seemed to stare at me out of the glassy panel—stare with that wide and immense stare embracing, condemning, loathing all the universe. I seemed to hear the whispered cry, ‘The horror! The horror!’” (Heart 152–53).

Conrad scholar Frederick R. Karl called *Heart of Darkness* the Danse Macabre and called the work a new version of Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner, as Marlow has suffered through a nightmare, an experience that sends him back a different man, now aware of depths in himself that he cannot hide. The tale he narrates on the Nellie is one he is unable to suppress; a modern version of Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner, he has discovered a new world and must relate his story to regain stability. (144)

In addition to Kurtz’s ghost, C. B. Cox noted that the first circle of Dante’s Hell, the office in Belgium (leading to the boat, to the Company Station, the Central Station, and finally the Inner Station), is guarded by
two women knitting black wool (the Fates?), one of whom is depicted as a witch—complete with cat on her lap, an evil eye, and a wart on her nose (47).

The thematic notion of the nightmare and the dream are standard themes of the Gothic (Sedgwick 4). While Marlow repeatedly says he is living the nightmare of his choice, living a waking horrific dream, Conrad structurally wrote the story in language that is very dreamlike. Ian Watt has called this Conrad’s impressionism, the art of “delayed decoding,” in which events are described before the reader knows what has happened (11). While Conrad’s artistic use of language has made him of interest to modernist, postmodernist, and deconstructionist circles, this is an excellent literary technique for a Gothic novel, as the initial descriptions make the reader uneasy with the unknown, which is slowly drawing them in to a shock:

My purpose was to stroll into the shade for a moment; but no sooner within that it seemed to me I had stepped into the gloomy circle of some Inferno. [. . .] Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair. [. . .] These moribund shapes were free as air—and nearly as thin. I began to distinguish the gleam of the eyes under the trees. Then, glancing down, I saw a face near my hand. (Heart 81–82)

In terms of psychoanalysis, language and irony act like a veil between a patient and the horror of a traumatic experience (Murfin 15). However, Conrad used language and irony with great skill to create a real feeling of uneasiness—the absurd is not just funny, but the absurd among such horror puts the so-called rational world in question. Karl Marx said that “The claim that the rational is actual is contradicted precisely by an irrational actuality, which is everywhere the contrary of what it asserts and asserts the contrary of what is.” (qtd. in Ravel 9) Conrad artistically uses such contradictions between the rational and irrational to create a very interesting psychological effect in the reader:

One evening a grass shed full of calico, cotton prints, beads, and I don’t know what else, burst into a blaze so suddenly that you would have thought the earth had opened to let an avenging fire consume all that trash. I was smoking my pipe quietly by my dismantled steamer, and saw them all cutting capers in the light, with their arms lifted high,
when the stout man with moustaches came tearing down to the river, a tin pail in his hand, assured me that everybody was “behaving splendidly, splendidly,” dipped about a quart of water and tore back again. I noticed there was a hole in the bottom of his pail. (Heart 90)

Absurd moments like this are exactly what keep Marlow in a dreamlike “sense-less delusion” beyond that “that had its reason, that had meaning” (Heart 78). Marlow has brief moments where he has a grip on reality: “For a time I would feel I belonged still to a world of straightforward facts; but the feeling would not last long” (Heart 78).

Another structural convention of the Gothic evident in Heart of Darkness is the likelihood “to be discontinuous and involuted, perhaps incorporating tales within tales, changes of narrator” (Sedgwick 9). The novel also uses what has been called “Gothic therapeutic dialogue”: just as the Ancient Mariner tells his tale to the Wedding Guest, Frankenstein his tale to Robert Walton, and Nelly Dean the tale of Wuthering Heights to Mr. Lockwood, Marlow tells his tale to his shipmates aboard the Nellie (Brennan 11). And whether in terms of a session on the couch or on the other side of the veil from a priest, Conrad did consider the novel to be his “confessional” (Gose 131).

Real horrors do fill the pages of Heart of Darkness, be they heads on stakes or the grove of death. Yet the message of the work is that the real horror has been internalized and lies within the heart, the heart of darkness. Marlow himself makes a distinction between the outside threat of danger and terror to the most extreme terror, which is a product of the mind:

The fact is I was completely unnerved by a sheer blank fright, pure abstract terror, unconnected with any distinct shape of physical danger. What made this emotion so overpowering was—how shall I define it?—the moral shock I received, as if something altogether monstrous, intolerable to thought and odious to the soul, had been thrust upon me unexpectedly. This lasted of course the merest fraction of a second, and then the usual sense of commonplace, deadly danger, the possibility of a sudden onslaught and massacre, or something of the kind, which I saw impending, was positively welcome and composing. (Heart 141)

The birth of Gothic as a literary genre was a reaction to the Enlightenment era’s extreme leanings towards the rational; the Gothic goal was to exalt the senses over reason by taking the reader into “the abyss that
incapacitates our power of cognition” (Brennan 3). During the nineteenth century, the outer ghouls of Gothic became the inner ghouls of Gothic, the “demon” became the “daimon” (Gose 169). According to Matthew C. Brennan, the Gothic psyche is the most perfect literary representative of Jungian psychology, an example of what Jung called “visionary art,” which reaches into the dark recesses of the human mind to express the collective unconscious (13). The monsters and saviors of Gothic literature are Jung’s doubles and archetypes, and Kurtz is not just Marlow’s double, but his “shadow” (Brennan 15). The lead in a Gothic novel is acting out his own therapy, which is to serve as lesson to the reader:

Gothic works all depict the failure of individuation in at least one key character; in different ways, they depict the collapse of the psyche and disintegration of the Self [. . .] Sometimes, though, the Gothic also includes characters who manage to integrate the experience of a destructive cautionary tale and thus to strengthen themselves psychologically. (Brennan 10)

According to Brennan, Jung would consider the ending of Heart of Darkness, the lie to the Intended, a happy ending. Marlow does not become Kurtz; he realizes that the truth is “too dark—too dark altogether,” and despite his own anger at the lie which is the illusion the Intended must hold as her memory of Kurtz, he acts like a good civilized man who must act as if goodness and faith prevail (Heart 157). Marlow has confronted how destructive his choice of nightmare has been, and consciously chooses to reintegrate himself into “healthy” society (Brennan 25).

Can it really be said that Heart of Darkness has a happy ending or therapeutic value, for either Marlow or the reader? If it is a Gothic novel, what has happened to the feeling of dread? Does it not linger long after the novel is finished? Isn’t Conrad pointing out that the “healthy” society in the novel is not at all healthy? Does Marlow awake from his nightmare? H. P. Lovecraft considered Joseph Conrad a fine example of “The Weird Tradition in the British Isles” in his 1927 treatise on horror in literature, which does not use the language of Gothic critics, but still contains interesting reflections regarding the psychology of fear.

The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown. These facts few psycholo-
gists will dispute, and their admitted truth must establish for all time the genuineness and dignity of the weirdly horrible tale as a literary form [. . .] As may naturally be expected of a form so closely connected with primal emotion, the horror-tale is as old as human thought and speech themselves. Cosmic terror appears as an ingredient of the earliest folklore of all races. (Lovecraft 12, 17)

This statement on the universality of fear helped Lovecraft to argue that the horror tale will always persist in literature, despite the fact that the unknown world is shrinking due to advancements in science. While he argued that there is a physiological fixation on what is mysterious, he also said that only a small minority of the population can truly appreciate the weird, the horrific, and that which inspires dread—because only a minority of the population appreciates and uses the imagination (Lovecraft 13).

Lovecraft’s use of “minority” and “imagination” are what makes certain elements of Freudian psychology particularly interesting tools in opening up a discussion about “the truth” of Heart of Darkness, which, fortunately, has little to do with “the snake-like river is the penis penetrating the female body of the wilderness” (15). Freud himself developed the theory of the “unheimlich”—the eerie and uncanny, which is “that class of the frightening, which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (Freud 123–24). Marlow begins his tale by letting his listeners know that the familiar Thames “also [. . .] has been one of the dark places of the earth,” and tells his tale in miniature fashion as the conquest of England by the ancient Romans (Heart 67). By the end of Marlow’s tale, the familiar has become the unfamiliar, the uncanny, as evidenced by the last words of the novel, spoken by the narrator. Entranced by Marlow’s tale, he now recalls himself on deck the Nellie, remembers his task to set sail, and looks out at the familiar Thames: “[t]he 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” (Heart 158). Freudian Julia Kristeva wrote about the abject being more violent than the uncanny, because the abject contains nothing familiar. Kristeva said that the abject resembles the sublime with its ability to carry one away, making one lose control (or, as Marlow or Conrad might say, restraint) over one’s self. However, the real horror of the abject is that it makes known that there is a certain truth, a certain reality, that if acknowledged by a person will annihilate
them (Kristeva 250). Freudian Jacques Lacan, whose mirror stage of development theory depends on what humans see, also said that behind reality is the real, which only a few see, and not to their psychological benefit (Devlin 716). R. A. Gekowski argued that “Kurtz sees too much, too clearly, to live through the experience,” lending credence to the idea that there is a minority which does see that certain reality, that real behind reality, which annihilates them (86).

This notion of what Marlow and Kurtz “see” leads the discussion to the image, and then to the imagination: “[t]he image is the starting point and in some measure the immediate matter of all our intellectual operations. It is certain that any cessation of imaginative activity puts an end at once to intellectual function” (de Munnynck, under “Elaboration of Images by the Intellect”). That Marlow tells his tale to the crew of the Nellie sitting like “a Buddha preaching” is an image that plays not just on the transcendent enlightenment Marlow experienced on his trip to rescue Kurtz, but also on Eastern beliefs that all is one, the two parts come together as one—here not just in terms of the natures of the doubles or shadows Kurtz and Marlow, but also in terms of the irrational and the rational, the known and the unknown (Heart 69). Why does Lovecraft insist only a minority in the population can truly appreciate tales of the weird, and why do only a few, like Kurtz and Marlow, see the real that lies behind the reality—“The horror! The horror!”? According to Gekowski, “[t]he Manager of the Central Station and the other ‘fools’ of the story can never descend to the ‘heart of darkness’ because they have no ‘imagination’” (83). Conrad himself said that there are only two options of living in this world—the one option is as an idiot who does not see or think, the other as a convict who sees and thinks (Watt 8).

What does this mean for the interpretation that the heart of darkness is in every man? Despite the fact that every human being, for their own self-esteem (if not for their ignorance), must think of themselves as good, the potential for great evil lies in the heart of Everyman, with the only question being, what will bring the darkness to light? Do humans possess the imagination, the ability to see, to understand this potential for evil? When Marlow enters the grove of death, he is horrified: “Marlow’s shock, his amazement before the sheer strangeness of the ravaged human forms anticipates what the Allied liberators of the concentration camps felt in 1945” (Denby 252). Before his journey, Marlow could not imagine the horrors he witnessed and lived.

*Heart of Darkness* is not important as a historical document of what
was, or a piece of colonial literature to understand why politics and culture are like they are now in real regions of the world. *Heart of Darkness* is important as a Gothic novel, inspiring readers with the horror, the dread, of what is. *Heart of Darkness* states humanity should not have to live and witness such horrors as Marlow to understand that the human heart contains an evil that does exist. When Hannah Arendt attended the trial of Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1961, she was shocked at what a normal human being Eichmann was, even noting that while on trial he said “that he had lived his whole life . . . according to a Kantian definition of duty [ . . . ] to the surprise of everybody, Eichmann came up with an approximately correct definition of [Kant’s] categorical imperative” (Kohn 7). The Holocaust started Arendt on a decades-long search to understand the nature of evil, due to the twentieth century’s “unprecedented, [ . . . ] incredible, [ . . . ] monstrous” events which seemed to defy man’s understanding (Yar, under “7. Thinking and Judging”). Could passivity, the latent desires of the masses, a lust for power, the “lying world order,” or man’s inhumanity be at fault? (Kohn 5). Eichmann was not the incarnation of evil, Arendt decided, nor were the passive masses that allowed such horrors to be perpetrated. Arendt changed her philosophy of “radical evil” to the “banality of evil”—Eichmann and most people are simply thoughtless and lack both the ability to think critically about their actions and the imagination needed to comprehend the consequences of their actions (Yar, under “6. Eichmann and the ‘Banality of Evil’”). The official 9/11 National Commission Report also stated that one reason the attacks of 9/11 were not prevented is that the Intelligence community lacked the “imagination” necessary to envision, and therefore prevent, the attacks (under “General Findings”). Thoughtlessness makes evil concrete, and the only method to prevent evil is to actively exercise the imagination: This new “‘broadened way of thinking’—‘thinking without a banister’”—with an “‘enlarged mentality’” allows us to “‘put ourselves in the position of everybody else’” (Yar, under “7. Thinking and Judging”). Imagination allows not just for this sort of empathy, feeling what actually is for other people, but allows for the perception of what could be, as literally anything is possible. Marlow himself says this within what is not only a beautiful description of the “unheimlich” in action but also a moment where the Other becomes the I, and the I the Other. Marlow stands on the steamer, which glides down the river, past throngs of “of a black and incomprehensible frenzy,” disturbing for “their humanity—like yours”:
if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you—you so remote from the night of first ages—could comprehend. And why not? The mind of man is capable of anything—because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future. What was there after all? Joy, fear, sorrow, devotion, valour, rage—who can tell?—but truth—truth stripped of its cloak of time. Let the fool gape and shudder—the man knows, and can look on without a wink. But he must at least be as much of a man as these on the shore. (Heart 105–6)

Such is reading the Gothic novel, a genre which allows for new insights regarding the feelings and fears of the human heart and the exploration into the recesses of the mind. Hence the value of reading Heart of Darkness as a Gothic novel—as “a weary pilgrimage amongst hints for nightmares” to the “culminating point of experience” (Heart 79, 70). The dread, the insight, the uneasiness, and the horror are the gifts the readers of the novel carry with them after the last page—and “you have no idea how effective such a . . . a . . . faculty can be” (Heart 88).

WORKS CITED

Gekowski, R. A. “Kurtz as the Incarnation of Evil.” In Swisher 80–86.