

Heart of Darkness: The Meaning Around the Nutshell

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Many images and symbols of *Heart of Darkness*¹ invite the reader to conclude that only nothingness exists at the center of being. At its beginning, the novel presents Marlow as a Buddha (p. 46), and "Marlow's lean face . . . with downward folds and drooped eyelids"—extending the image of Buddha—finally receives a "hollow" depiction (p. 80). Men of the stations pay homage to tusks of ivory (p. 60) that have nothing at the centers. The untamed wilderness functions as the heart of darkness, and symbolizes both the uncertain drives of man's subconscious and the possible nothingness of man's experience. The manager of the Central Station tells Marlow, "Men who come out here should have no entrails" (p. 59). Such images and symbols anticipate Kurtz, whose greed for ivory and whose inability to discipline himself have allowed the primitive drives full reign, so that the jungle consumes his flesh (p. 81) and leaves him "hollow at the core" (p. 89). If some images and symbols point toward a nothingness at the center of life, others link with details of the story to confirm meaning and a desirable system of values. The nutshell (p. 45) not only furnishes one of the most important images of the novel, but also creates fictional meaning and offers a basis for interpretation.

Near the beginning of the novel, an unidentified speaker on board the *Nellie* talks about yarn-telling and Marlow: "The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical . . . and to him 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" (p. 45). The passage prepares the reader for Marlow's speaking voice, atypicality, and complexity. Set at night, the long analogy—"like a kernel" and "as a glow"—links to the darkness so integral to the novel. Nighttime, "misty halos," and "the spectral illumination of moonshine" aid in establishing atmosphere and blend into the ethereal, dreamlike quality of the action. Marlow insists that he tells something like a dream (p. 63), even a nightmare (p. 99). Events seem to merge together, unclear and unfathomable, so that Marlow cries out to his listeners: "Do you see the story? Do you see anything?" (p. 63). Most important, the passage effects the major motif of centers and envelopments.²

Although the nutshell encircles the kernel, the halo the moon, and the meaning the tale—something exists at the center of each image. These images are not hollow. By shifting the implication to the heart of darkness, one progresses to a more valid reading of that symbol and of the novel. Darkness

¹Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, in *Modern British Short Novels*, ed. Robert M. Davis (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1972), pp. 43-106. All page numbers refer to this edition.

²James Guetti in "Heart of Darkness and the Failure of the Imagination" (*Sewanee Review*, 73 [1965], 488-504) finds in the nutshell image "the idea of [Marlow's] language moving over the outside of an 'episode,' surrounding the episode but never penetrating it" (p. 498). For Guetti, meaning and morality stretch over the surface of events, whereas reality lies deep inside, not approached. I want to credit him for mentioning the envelopment motif in relation to the nutshell image. However, I hold the opposite view that the novel through its images, symbols, and details penetrates reality.

may reside in man's subconscious and shroud the primitive drives, but the subconscious is by no means empty. If only emptiness extended through man's subconscious, all men would be hollow like Kurtz and sink into identical abominations. The novel, on the contrary, proves that some men, like Marlow, have within that darkness a strength that holds them to a basically moral and humane life.

In addition to the images and symbols already mentioned, the centers-envelopments motif has a rich application to other details. On the map in the Company's Brussels's office, the yellow section to which Marlow will travel opens "dead in the centre" (p. 49); calipers encircle Marlow's head as the doctor measures it (p. 50), and near the end of the novel "an ashy halo" encircles the "pale visage" of Kurtz's Intended (p. 103). Instead of going to the "centre of a continent," Marlow feels that he sets off for "the centre of the earth" (p. 51). Wilderness and merciless nature surround the Congo, the travelers, and the stations. Heads on stakes, all but one facing inward, enclose Kurtz's station (pp. 84 and 88-89). The memory of the Kurtz experience "lingers around [Marlow] . . . like . . . one immense jabber . . . without any kind of sense" (p. 81). When the drumbeats force Kurtz to crawl away from the ship, Marlow leaves Kurtz's track and runs in "a wide semicircle . . . circumventing Kurtz" (p. 95). The threat of destruction surrounds man and at the same time exists within him, as Marlow perceives when he hears "the dusk . . . all around" repeating "The horror! The horror!" (p. 105). The structure of the novel also merges with the motif: an unidentified narrator framing Marlow's tale, Marlow in turn conveying Kurtz's story.

The nutshell image and the centers-envelopments motif lead one to a significant interpretation about meaning in the novel. The story belongs to Marlow, not Kurtz; important action in the story unfolds when Marlow speaks, not years before during a trip up the Congo. The meaning of an episode for Marlow does not rest inside the nutshell in the kernel. The trip up the Congo and Kurtz and his Intended are the kernel. Marlow's speaking about them, like a misty halo encircling the moon, creates the meaning. One of Marlow's statements evokes the moon-halo image. He judges the Congo trip to be "the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience," then adds, "It seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me . . ." (p. 47). The trip and Kurtz and his Intended function only as they impel Marlow to speak.

Whereas Kurtz's influence hovers over all the action, the man himself enters the novel several pages into the last section. Bitterly ironical, his entrance substantiates his phantom-like quality. When one confronts the man, Kurtz is nothing but a voice (p. 81)—the most striking quality arising from a barren shell of a human being. That Kurtz enters the novel just a few pages before he dies increases the bitterness of the irony. Kurtz has little importance as a dramatic character. His effect upon Marlow, conversely, becomes all important.

Drama in the novel stems from the way in which Marlow views and reacts to what has happened to him. The long tale stands forth as an attempt to define the experience and, perhaps, to purge it. Marlow's obsessive speaking appears to be a catharsis to exorcise complicity with Kurtz and the lingering effect of the complicity.

The word "hollow" applied to Marlow must link him and Kurtz—the most obvious examples of hollowness. Since the outcome of each man verifies a clear

difference between them, the word choice must suggest that a person cannot come into contact with evil as Marlow comes into contact with Kurtz and escape unaffected. Preserving Kurtz's honor forces Marlow to lie to society and Kurtz's Intended, and for Marlow, lying holds "a taint of death" (p. 63). The problematic nature of Marlow's lying, however, expands beyond a taint of death, because Marlow chooses to take Kurtz's papers and reputation into safe keeping (p. 98), and to protect the latter's triumph.

Kurtz shows how easily the conscious mind lets the subconscious seduce it into the most heinous practices. Marlow has "wrestled with death" and "peeped over the edge" (p. 99) into the darkness of himself. The novel does not clarify the time of this episode in Marlow's life or the circumstances. Nevertheless, having stood at the boundary between light and darkness, between morality and immorality, he knows Kurtz's judgment—"The horror!"—upon what the wilderness reflects about man's subconscious has "the appalling face of a glimpsed truth" (p. 100). To lie about and protect Kurtz may taint Marlow, even consume Marlow to a degree, but Marlow is not hollow the way Kurtz is.

Marlow maintains he does not know why he protects Kurtz (p. 95). The actions and words of Marlow suggest that he intuits the reason even if he chooses not to articulate it. At least for the reader, the images, symbols, and details of the novel imply the reason for Marlow's motivation. From the start of the trip, various people associate Kurtz and Marlow in a "gang of virtue"; "the same people who sent [Kurtz] specially also recommended [Marlow]" (p. 62). People label Kurtz "an exceptional man" (p. 59), "an emissary of pity, and science, and progress, and devil knows what else" (pp. 61-62); label Marlow "an exceptional and gifted creature," "an emissary of light" (p. 51).

Marlow must recognize the attributes he and Kurtz share. At one point, Marlow explains that his curiosity about Kurtz lies in seeing "whether this man, who had come out equipped with moral ideas of some sort, would climb to the top . . ." (p. 66). Kurtz precedes Marlow into the wilderness of Africa and, then, into the wilderness of the self. The two wildernesses overwhelm Kurtz's moral ideas and pervert the ideas into a madness that drives him to gratify "various lusts" (p. 89). Still, Kurtz has the ideas, he makes the journey, and Marlow, aware of Kurtz's destruction, terms the journey a triumph because of what Kurtz discovers about the "brutal instincts" and "monstrous passions" (p. 96) at the heart of man. If "all Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz" (p. 82), then he, who evokes Christ and who has a "last disciple" (p. 90), suffers for Europe and for Western man, and his mad example of the tenuous barrier between order and chaos gives Marlow an understanding of how to save himself. For their similarity, Kurtz's achievement and example, Marlow chooses to become "a lower sort of apostle" (p. 51) protecting, although not preaching, the gospel of Kurtz.

No other image links so directly to that of the nutshell as the ashy halo ringing the head of Kurtz's Intended. The halo applied to Kurtz's Intended, who carries the final message about darkness, moves the novel toward its conclusion. The trip to Kurtz's Intended serves as an ironic inversion to the trip up the Congo. A madonna or queen with corona might be the first notion one forms of her, except Marlow's description of the house has prepared one for a different reading, and "ashy" connotes an object ruined, wasted, or used up. Tall houses press against her house on a street like "a well-kept alley in a cemetery" (p. 102). The "marble fireplace," "cold and monumental," recalls a tombstone; a piano shows "dark gleams . . . like a sombre and polished sarcophagus" (pp. 102-03). Marlow characterizes death in the world of this woman, then shows that

her obsession with Kurtz has hollowed out another human being. The visit with a representative of Brussels's wealthy society confirms that the heart of darkness exists not only in the wilderness, but also in civilization.

The family of Kurtz's Intended had "disapproved" of her engagement because Kurtz had been "a pauper," not "rich enough" (p. 104). Although Marlow tucks the details away at the end of a paragraph and diffuses them with suggestion, negation, and inference—one grasps the essence of Kurtz's relationship with his Intended and her family: Kurtz's "impatience of comparative poverty . . . drove him out there" (p. 104). Kurtz, then, had talent, intelligence, aspiration—but no name and no money. His desire to demonstrate his worth to her and, especially, to her family, probably became obsessive before he left Brussels. At any rate, the reader has no difficulty in imagining Kurtz's descent from obsession to insanity, once Kurtz leaves behind the laws of society.

Though destroyed, Kurtz achieves a self-awareness from the journey; Marlow, who follows, reaps the benefit of Kurtz's experience, so that he, too, gains a new knowledge of himself. Marlow finds Kurtz's Intended wallowing in morbid illusion. She mourns Kurtz—worships him—more than a year after his death, and her concern for herself and her suffering parallels Kurtz's ego run amuck. Phrasing her declarations and questions about Kurtz in a certain way seems to bring Marlow's support of Kurtz's nobility, accomplishments, and worth. When Marlow hesitates, she surges ahead with extravagant praise, and speaks only what she wants to believe. The glory of Kurtz redounds upon her, affirming her choice of him in the face of her family's disapproval, her present suffering, and her own superiority. "I knew him best," she declaims; "I am proud to know I understood him better than any one on earth—he told me so himself" (pp. 103-04). Upon hearing that his last word had been her name, she gives a "cry of inconceivable triumph and of unspeakable pain" (p. 105) that echoes his cry of "The horror!" and underscores their similarity and difference. Her illusion pairs with his madness, but she gains no self-awareness. As ego-consumed as he, she cares for nobody's feelings but her own.

Little wonder that Marlow sees Kurtz reflected in the glass of her door (p. 102), or sees "her and him in the same instant of time—his death and her sorrow" (p. 103), or in her house hears the dusk around whispering "The horror!" Morbidity will always be morbidity—whether in the jungle or in Brussels—and folly will be folly. Since Marlow cannot defend himself from the darkness, he reasons he cannot defend her from it; she has all she needs: a "great and saving illusion that shone with an unearthly glow in the darkness" (p. 104). The truth would have been "too dark" (p. 105), and would have snuffed out the light producing her halo. Marlow chooses to protect Kurtz. Choosing to save Kurtz's Intended from the destruction of truth authenticates Marlow's humanity again, although it forces him into the lie he detests, and perhaps opens a wider knowledge of darkness.

Critics of *Heart of Darkness* have stressed darkness, Kurtz, and hollowness; T. S. Eliot's poem "The Hollow Men," with an epigraph from the novel, employs only these qualities. The nutshell image, the details of the story, and Conrad's beliefs and themes—dramatized both in the novel and in other sources—assure that other qualities predominate. One would not want to minimize the importance of darkness to the story. Bertrand Russell has said that Conrad thought of "civilized and morally tolerable human life as a dangerous walk on a thin crust of barely cooled lava which at any moment might break and let the

unwary sink into fiery depths."³ And Marlow says, "The mind of man is capable of anything—because everything is in it" (p. 71). Darkness and the threat of horror, nonetheless, form only half of Conrad's interest. Conrad hated externally imposed discipline, believing that man's greatest achievements originate not in what society or law dictates that man do, but in what man chooses to do of his own volition. Man must confront the world and himself "with his own true stuff—with his own inborn strength" (p. 71). The network of fictional devices in *Heart of Darkness* projects an existential choice: man may venture, like Kurtz, into the wilderness of his inner world, and from his own weakness and the excessive contemplation of his bestial dimension topple into madness and immoral behavior; or man may gaze, like Marlow, at the bestiality, see it truthfully and completely, understand its working, and manage enough control over the turbulence to live a moral life.

To achieve, as Marlow does, such an understanding of the nature of life and, with discipline, to control the walk through experience certify that he erects a meaning at the center of being. The word "hollow" as it refers to Marlow is symbolic; something exists at the center of him. He is not a hollow man. The extension of the nutshell image reinforces the conclusion. Perhaps the horror that Kurtz and his Intended reveal about the subconscious' capacity for evil and illusion still "lingers around" Marlow, but Marlow's story envelops Kurtz and his Intended, exposes their failures, and judges their behavior despicable. Although Marlow's words become a symbolic shell around Kurtz and his Intended, Marlow himself paradoxically becomes the affirmative kernel of the novel. When Marlow peeps "over the edge," he discovers in himself a core of morality that guarantees him a different victory from Kurtz's, and a superior one.

³In *Ten Modern Short Novels*, ed. Leo Hamalian and Edmond L. Volpe (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1958), p. 194.