

## Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as Pretext for Barth's "Night-Sea Journey": The Colonist's Passage Upstream

George Kurman and Roger W. Rouland  
Western Illinois University

More than one critic has observed the similarities between John Barth's story "Lost in the Funhouse" and James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Barth himself confides that "At heart I'm an arranger . . . whose chiefest literary pleasure is to take a received melody—an old narrative poem, a classical myth, a shopworn literary convention . . . and, improvising like a jazzman within its constraints, reorchestrate it to present purpose."<sup>2</sup> Thus we claim that John Barth modeled his "Night-Sea Journey," the story of a contemplative sperm cell en route to a female ovum, on Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the story of Charlie Marlow, a similarly philosophical European colonist making his own passage upstream into the heart of the African Congo. Because Barth uses Conrad's story as a remote but sustained model or pretext, a reading of "Night-Sea Journey" with *Heart of Darkness* in mind illuminates and expands the meaning of the short story, while at the same time throwing light on the imagery of the short novel, which has been the subject of critical debate for nearly a century.

Barth appears hardly naive about this debate, or Conrad's novel, either, because "Night-Sea Journey" is the story of a sperm colonist that is both "vessel and contents";<sup>3</sup> or, the story of a protagonist who is both a means of transporting ("telling") a heritage and the heritage itself. Similarly, *Heart of Darkness* is the story of a sea captain guiding his own trading vessel, a "mangled steamboat"<sup>4</sup> carrying what is emblematic of the history of European colonization, while at the same time telling the history of "men going at it blind" (21) and "taking possession of an accursed inheritance" (50). Both stories, in essence, represent the recurrent tale of the colonist's heritage-bearing passage upstream. In "Journey," Barth uses a swimming sperm enclosed in its reproductive setting to suggest subtly the anguish and toil of the colonist's voyage towards regeneration; while in *Darkness*, Conrad uses the natural setting of a river leading into the heart of the African Congo to suggest the dark urge of European colonization.

Because of the numerous comparable features uniting the two stories—including similarities in narration, plot, and theme—it appears obvious that Barth was influenced by specifics in Conrad's tale, not just inspired by a universal theme. But it also appears likely that such universality attracted Barth to *Darkness*, and, as a

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<sup>1</sup> See Joseph J. Waldmeir, ed., *Critical Essays on John Barth* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1980) 193, 208.

<sup>2</sup> See Ann Charters, ed., *The Story and Its Writer*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Bedford, 1991) 88.

<sup>3</sup> See John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse* (New York: Bantam, 1969) 3. Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text after the abbreviation "NSJ."

<sup>4</sup> See *Heart of Darkness*: Joseph Conrad: *Heart of Darkness: A Case Study in Contemporary Criticism*, ed. Ross C. Murfin (New York: St. Martin's, 1989) 47. Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text after the abbreviation "HOD."

result, perhaps inspired Barth to illustrate that within *Darkness* there lies an unseen "Night-Sea Journey."

"Journey" appears as one of several stories in Barth's book *Lost in the Funhouse* (1969). In the Author's Note to the first edition, Barth says that his book "differs . . . from most volumes of short fiction [in that] it's neither a collection or a selection, but a series" of stories (ix). Thus it is only natural that the opening phrases of "Journey" suggest that the sperm's story is also one in a series of night-sea journeys in a history continually repeated and rehearsed: "One way or another, no matter which theory of our journey is correct, it's myself I address; to whom I rehearse as to a stranger our history and condition" (3). Similarly, the narration of the story within the story provided through Marlow in *Darkness* begins with the notion that Marlow's tale fits into the context of a history of colonization, which includes repeated journeys upstream, such as the earlier one up the Thames "when the Romans first came here, nineteen hundred years ago" (20).

In "Seven Additional Author's Notes" to the second edition of *Funhouse* (1969), however, Barth reminds critics and readers that the narrator of "Journey" is "quoted from beginning to end by the authorial voice"<sup>5</sup>—comparable to Marlow's tale, quoted by Conrad. With these similarities in mind, consider a second time the opening phrases of "Journey": "One way or another, no matter which theory of our journey is correct, it's myself I address; to whom I rehearse as to a stranger our history and condition" (3). It is apparent, then, that the passage above is reflective of the multiplicity of levels on which the sperm's story (just like Marlow's) can be understood. It speaks to those critics and readers who would look upon a colonist's journey in various lights: for example, as a battle to be won, or as a psychological undertaking, or as the reliving of an epic quest. Given the lengthy critical debate over *Heart of Darkness*, we contend that Barth's passage referring to "our history" also addresses Conrad's tale (which thus serves as a pretext for the former). In the beginning of Marlow's tale (quoted above), Conrad's narrator likewise considers what his individual journey, in the context of the history of colonization, would lead to: "To understand the effect of it on me you ought to know how I got there, what I saw, how I went up that river to the place . . . It was the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience" (21). Thus, while both Marlow and the sperm are caught up in their own individual experiences, both narrators recognize their heritage, and rehearse and repeat history.

For both, that heritage-bearing involves a history of colonization, distinguished most frequently by the strength of conquerors, the weakness of those who are unable to continue procreating the cycles of colonization, and the death or destruction of those who stand its way. Marlow, in addressing the "noble cause" (23) of his predecessors (and at the same time laying the groundwork to mock the cause of his own passage upstream), says of the Roman visitors to the Thames: "They were no colonists . . . They were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force—nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others" (21). Similarly, the sperm espouses

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<sup>5</sup> Both the "Authors Notes" and "Seven Additional Notes" appear in the 1969 edition of *Lost in the Funhouse*.

his distaste for the history of human conception, which like the history of colonization, presupposes the death of many of its participants: "[The journey's] meaning and value we never questioned; to be sure, some must go down by the way, a pity no doubt, but to win a race requires that others lose" (8). Thus the history of the sperm and his predecessors is also a history of doctrines, theories and ideas about the journey itself, as well as the history of a Maker or makers who conceived both types of colonists and set them off on a dark voyage. The sperm says: "The 'purpose' of the night-sea journey—but not necessarily of the journey or of either Maker!—my friend could describe only in abstractions: *consummation, transfiguration, union of contraries, transcension of categories*" (10). Likewise, Marlow theorized that behind the history of colonization was a history of elevated abstractions of philosophical or religious worth: "What redeems [the journey of colonization] is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to" (21).

Hence, both Marlow and the sperm try to sort out their respective places in the history of colonization, ironically, as they retell a tale of how they took part in this history. And because the history of their species—as far as the narrators know—is caught up in conflicting theories about the "journey" and its worth, both narrators bring to their stories a history of mystery which the narrators themselves concede they are not capable of completely solving. Marlow notes that his journey "seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me—and into my thoughts. It was sombre enough too—and pitiful—not extraordinary in any way—not very clear either. No, not very clear" (21). The sperm likewise was not "clear" about the meaning of its voyage: "Many accounts of our situation seem plausible to me—where and what we are, why we swim and whither. But implausible ones as well, perhaps especially those, I must admit as possibly correct" (3). Thus we see that both story and novel begin with a notion of a series of journeys or a history, a version of the narrator's place in that history, and a notion that some kind of illumination might have occurred on the journey. Yet in both cases that illumination is overshadowed by a measure of ambiguity as to why such journeys continue. Thus Marlow and the typical colonist are forced to begin journeys, metaphorically speaking, in the dark: "There's no initiation either into such mysteries. He [the colonizer] has to live in the midst of the incomprehensible, which is also detestable" (20). Likewise, the sperm recognizes that within his species' history (which by its very nature and condition is the rehearsal of human endeavors), "we [are] . . . all at sea and equally in the dark" (5). Thus do Marlow and the sperm begin the retelling of their tales.

Following Conrad's lead, Barth's story quotes a narrative voice from beginning to end, a technique deployed by Conrad, save for some introductory background and a few pauses in Marlow's recounting of his tale. And there are numerous similarities between the narrative voices of the sperm and Marlow, who as narrators evoke the pun on "seaman" and "semen" (as well as "tale" and "tail"). But Marlow and the sperm share an extended list of traits beyond the wordplay found in defining their respective stations in life. For instance, both Marlow and the sperm have a questioning, philosophical nature that leads them to perceptions that apparently others on their journey are incapable of reaching. As a result, Marlow and the sperm are able to stand both inside and outside of the heritage they "trans-

port"; and although it is a heritage they find abhorrent, both reluctantly do take part in its transmission. Marlow "resented bitterly the absurd danger of [his] situation" (75). Similarly, the sperm seems to resent the absurdity of his situation which "makes the night-sea journey essentially *haphazard* as well as murderous and unjustified" (6).

What is more, both journeys begin with uncertainty and end with the blasphemy of a friend in the presence of a female. And neither protagonist is conventional: "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" (19). The sperm is not typical either; for he, out of thousands of his kind, was the only one to reach "Her." Likewise Marlow was the survivor who reached not only the heart of darkness in the Congo, but was privy to Kurtz's own heart of darkness and lived to reach Kurtz's intended. In other words, both narrators are introspective, and both are self-indulgent in retelling their tales.

Largely as a result of such introspection, what can be termed "metanarration" is found in both tales. The sperm, for instance, finds himself asking rhetorically: "Is the journey my invention? Do the night, the sea, exist at all, I ask myself, apart from my experience of them? Do I myself exist, or is this a dream? Sometimes I wonder. And if I am, who am I? . . . Such are the questions that beset my intervals of rest" (3). Addressing a similar concern for differentiating himself from his dreams, Marlow, in a metanarrative fashion (during what the sperm would refer to as one of the "intervals of rest" in the seaman's storytelling) asks, "Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream—making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is of the very essence of dreams . . . It is impossible. We live, as we dream—alone" (42).

And though conveying truth may be "impossible," that is precisely what Barth attempts to do through his sperm narrator: to convey the very essence, the life-sensation of existence. Through the sperm, Barth rehearses (as does Conrad) the male "condition" of wanting to colonize. And the sperm's rehearsal is likely to be part of Marlow's history of colonization—and its "commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt" (42)—once the sperm is "transfigured" (11) into a human. It is also apparent that both Marlow and the sperm not only attempt to explore the nature of human existence, they also attempt to explore the nature of their own storytelling: the sperm wonders if he is dreaming. Similarly, Marlow tries to tell his dream, but in vain.

Another similarity between the narration of the story and novel is that both the sperm and Marlow present their tales in a nonchronological manner, as if the divergent streams of their memories will not allow them to tell a story strictly from beginning to end. As a result, both narratives roll back and forth through time, reinforcing both the limitations of the narrators and the "fluidity" of the imagery and symbolism the narrators use, which of course echoes the fluidity of the medium in—or on—which the colonists travel.

Similarities in the language usage of the two narrators are also evident; for instance, both repeatedly ask rhetorical questions, use tongue-in-cheek humor, and flaunt foreign phrases. In general, both narrators use vague, mysterious, questioning and dreamlike language, intensifying the air of mystery in the two tales. And with *Heart of Darkness* as his pretext, Barth borrows some of Conrad's favorite words, such as "absurdity / absurd" and "brooding," (NSJ 3, 5 and HOD 17, 63, 75, 77) which are used in both stories to describe a physical landscape which is at the same time reflective of the mental landscape of the narrators.

Each tale also makes use of ambiguity. In *Heart of Darkness*, as many critics have pointed out, Conrad's "black" and "darkness" ironically also connote light; and conversely "white" or "light" connotes darkness.<sup>6</sup> Barth, in remodeling Conrad's tale, takes a similar tack. In "Night-Sea Journey," the word "love" (indicating intercourse) connotes hate or death, while "hate" connotes love or a union. Thus Barth borrows Conrad's technique of paradoxically reversing the meanings of universal abstractions, as when Marlow recalled that "hadn't [Kurtz] said he wanted only justice? But I couldn't. I could not tell her. It would have been too dark—too dark altogether" (94). Actually what Marlow meant, paradoxically, was that to enlighten Kurtz's fiancée to the realities of colonization would have required too much light or truth. Likewise, when Barth's sperm reaches Her, he blasphemes his late companion's trust and instead of rejecting colonization, like Marlow, the sperm gives in to female desire. But he does not surrender to the concept of hate or death involved in colonization (recall that "love" can also mean "hate" or "death" here): "It is *not* Love that sustains me! No; though Her magic makes me burn to sing the contrary, and though I drown even now for the blasphemy, I will say truth" (11).

In comparing the diction and overall style of the two tales, literary allusions should also be considered. Marlow's narration includes mythological, biblical, and literary allusions from the mythical notion of sailing to the center of the earth, the medieval tale of Faustian devils, and Dante's *Inferno*. It seems no coincidence that the sperm's narration similarly contains allusions to mythology, the Bible, and Dante's epic. Like Dante's pilgrim, en route to Her, the sperm contemplates the death of his comrades and the meaning of his journey; he can be seen as a colonist caught up in the process of humanizing or transfiguring the natural form of the "Other-than-a-he" (10). In this case, the She can be seen as similar to Conrad's jungle and the heart of darkness in Marlow's tale. The sperm recognizes that to give in to the She is "blasphemy" of his desire to end the deadly cycles of colonization, yet he does surrender in order to convey the legacy of death and destruction involved in night-sea journeys. That surrender, though, recalls the hope of the drowned friend that there is a Shore (like Kurtz's jungle) where one does not necessarily have to participate in the continuation of needless night-sea journeys which lead only to needless rebirth, death and destruction.

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<sup>6</sup> For instance, consider the penultimate paragraph in Conrad's story, where Marlow reveals that telling Kurtz's fiancée the truth "would have been too dark—too dark altogether" (93-94), and the earlier passage where Marlow considers the natives and the "lightless region of subtle horrors, where pure, uncomplicated savagery was a positive relief, being something that had a right to exist—obviously—in the sunshine" (74). For other criticism noting Conrad's inversion of traditional abstractions, see Adena Rosmarin's essay in Murfin's edition of *Heart of Darkness*.

The diction of both narrators relies heavily on connotation, resulting in chiasmatically related imagery and symbolism in both texts.<sup>7</sup> Both tales are laden with sexual and natural (often water-related) imagery, but "Night-Sea Journey" appears to emphasize the sexual, while *Heart of Darkness* appears to emphasize the natural. On its more literal level, "Journey" makes use of sexual diction—like "impotent Creators, Makers unable to Make, as well as uncommonly fertile ones" (8)—which often evokes images of the white colonists or the artifacts of colonization found in *Heart of Darkness* (where, for example, the brick maker did not have what it took to make bricks) (38). Meanwhile, the underlying level of imagery in "Journey" is comprised of natural images such as "a sea at night," which seem to reflect the more literal level of the imagery in its pretext, Conrad's novel—which employs the more natural imagery of its setting: a passage up a river shrouded by the surrounding jungle. However, Marlow's diction connotes imagery that is distinctly sexual: "We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness" (50). In essence, then, the literal level of narration in *Heart of Darkness* utilizes a natural imagery while addressing the colonists' penetration into the depths of the African jungle, while on an underlying level Marlow's narration addresses the "unnatural" and forced procreative (and hence, seemingly sexual) efforts involved in colonization.

With *Heart of Darkness* as a pretext, Barth borrows Conrad's two levels of imagery but inverts them, making the sexual level appear the more literal while the natural imagery of the colonists' passage is at work on an underlying level. In sum, then, the author and narrator of Barth's tale are open about the sexuality of the sperm's journey, shrouding the colonizing aspects of the sperm's passage upstream. In Conrad's tale, the author and the narrator are open (to a degree) about the literal colonization involved in the journey, while obscuring the figurative and sexual nature of the passage upstream. That sexual nature becomes clearer when considering that in *Heart of Darkness* nearly everything literal can be taken for a sexual symbol (just as much of the sexual imagery in "Night-Sea Journey" can be read as relating a tale of a colonist's journey upstream through a natural world). In *Darkness* many persons and things also have sexual connotations. For example, the literal agents, native, company stations, jungle, ivory, ship, river, sticks and guns, can be viewed as symbolically corresponding to lusty men, seeking manmade desires; lusty black men (and women), seeking natural desires; the place where men seek the object of lust; that which is raped; the object of lust in the jungle; the transporter, "vessel" of heritage, male organ; semen, "contents" of heritage—female organ; natives' "natural" ejaculation, and the colonists' manmade ejaculation, respectively.

Given the symbolic nature of people and things, then, consider a sexual reading of *Heart of Darkness*—inspired in retrospect by the overt biological sexuality of Barth's story—in which white colonists set up a "station" in order to rape the black world. The black natives themselves are continually seen with "staves" in hand, but their object of lust is the jungle and its women, not the white colonists' objects of greed. Hence, when Marlow's ship is confronted by attacking natives, the mostly naked blacks shoot "sticks" at the colonists (dressed only in pyjamas),

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<sup>7</sup> Again, consider the notions of "love" and "hate" in "Journey" and "light" and "dark" in *Darkness*, as noted earlier.

who respond by "squirting lead into that bush" (60). Thus Conrad suggests there are two types of procreation, one natural, the other a lust driven by greed. Interestingly, Kurtz is a man confounded by these two types of lust. He retrieves large quantities of "ivory from the jungle," as a white colonist would historically be driven to do. But at the same time, Kurtz was inclined "to preside at certain midnight dances ending with unspeakable rites, which . . . were offered up to him" (65). Given such sexual context, there is good reason why Marlow finally lies to Kurtz's white Intended and tells her that the dying man's last words were "her name." Thus the underlying sexual nature of the plot of *Darkness* is clearly similar to the literal one in "Journey."

There are other comparisons between the plots of the story and novel. Both can be divided into four essential parts: (1) the preparation, wait and beginning of the journey; (2) the journey itself; (3) the profound, crucial influence of a friend ("the late companion" in Barth's story and Kurtz in Conrad's tale); and (4) the eventual union or meeting with Her or the Intended, respectively.

"The preparation" in *Darkness* suggests that, at least initially, the character of Marlow viewed the "contents" of a colonist's heritage as desirable. But even as a youth, Marlow's unreflective attitudes foreshadowed what he would learn about the true nature of colonization: Marlow decided he wanted to get to an appointment on a ship in Africa, was willing to do so "by hook or by crook," and finally did get his appointment after another captain was killed by African natives (23). Likewise, the sperm's description of his preparation (or lack of preparation) echoes similar blind but confident ambition: "We were young then, and had only the dimmest notion of what lay ahead; in our ignorance we imagined night-sea journeying to be a positively heroic enterprise" (8).

But as the wait begins and the journey nears, the sperm views his ambition and the journey's purpose with a growing understanding of what success might entail, noting that the journey's "meaning and value we never questioned; to be sure, some must go down by the way, a pity no doubt, but to win a race requires that others lose, and like all my fellows I took for granted that I would be the winner. We milled and swarmed, impatient to be off, never mind where or why, only to try our youth against the realities of night and sea" (8-9). Likewise, in waiting for the rivets necessary for his ship's repair, Marlow observed that the brick maker appeared to be waiting for "an act of special creation" (39). As a matter of fact, Marlow notes that "they were all waiting—all the sixteen or twenty pilgrims of them . . . They beguiled the time by backbiting and intriguing against each other in a foolish kind of way" (39). Both Marlow and the sperm at the outset of their respective journeys, then, typify the history of colonization, which is often characterized by a confident yet unreflective start. But as their respective journeys progress, both narrators begin increasingly to recognize the absurdity of colonization.

For instance, Marlow, en route to his sunken ship, and then later as he makes his own passage upstream, witnesses a stream of deadly images: the soldiers who died in the surf exiting the French steamer (27), the "black shadows of disease and starvation" representing dead and dying bodies discovered in an infernolike hole near a "whirlpool" and his Company's station (31), the potentially poisoned

"sticks" shot at the colonists while their ship was anchored in blinding fog (60), the body of the dead native dumped into the river and then snatched away by the current (66), the thought that hungry natives might mutiny and slaughter the "pilgrims" (57), and the human heads symbolically displayed on poles near Kurtz's station (73). Although retold in a more compressed version appropriate to a shorter text, the sperm witnesses similar things on his journey: "The carnage at our setting out; our decimation by whirlpool, poisoned cataract, sea-convulsion; the panic stampedes, mutinies, slaughters, mass suicides" (9).

Such devastation perhaps led both the sperm and Marlow to be influenced by their respective friends: the "drowned comrade" and Kurtz, who are strikingly comparable, given the similarity in verbiage used by Barth and Conrad. The drowned comrade with "mad notions" (8) objected to "popular opinions . . . and their claim to general validity" (7). Likewise, Kurtz "had gone mad" (82), was not on "on the popular side" of ideas (82) and became "an extremist" (83). Both, then, were viewed as "mad" by fellow colonists, rejected "popular" opinions and in their own way "refuse[d] to participate" in continuing standardized colonization efforts (11). The sperm-with mad-notions' rejection was based on a theory that any life chain could be terminated "after any number of cycles"; and hence, the sperm refused to continue the business of his species' colonization efforts. And while Kurtz apparently did not reject the notion of taking ivory out of the jungle, he did reject his Company's claim to that ivory and—like the sperm—rejected the "popular" method of doing business. Of course both the drowned comrade and Kurtz died before their ideas could be fully tested, leaving the sperm narrator and Marlow to retell—and internalize—the heresies of their friends. The sperm says that "sometimes I think I am my drowned friend" (11), while Marlow likewise notes, "It is [Kurtz's] extremity I have seemed to live through" (87).

Despite reservations, though, both Marlow and the sperm finish their journeys. And for both, the journey's end means reconciliation with their dead friends' views and a meeting with the Intended or the She. Marlow is left to "transport" a packet of Kurtz's papers to the dead man's fiancée. But rather than tell the white woman of the "horrors" Kurtz witnessed and the atrocities Kurtz took part in, Marlow lies. Hence he fails to deliver the "justice" Kurtz had asked for. Similarly, unlike his dead comrade, the sperm gives in to procreation, but not because of hatred or because of lust or because of a concern for his own well-being. Rather, he gives in to Her in hopes of "transporting" the ideas held by his dead comrade—the horrors of colonization and the possibility of refusal to participate in such horrors—to ("You") his future offspring: "What has fetched me across this dreadful sea is a single hope, gift of my poor dead comrade: that You may be stronger-willed than I, and that by sheer force of concentration I may transmit to You, along with Your official Heritage, a private legacy of awful recollection and negative resolve." (11). What makes the recollection "awful" and the resolve "negative" is that the heritage is not personal, but rather it is an "inheritance." It is what Marlow recognized when he said, "we could have fancied ourselves the first of men taking possession of an accursed inheritance" (50).

So in both *Darkness* and "Journey" the two narrators resolve to transport the deathly heritage of colonization to the female at the end of their story. But that does not mean that either storyteller lastingly affirms that there is a "noble cause"



in colonization—quite the contrary. Marlow indeed cannot bring himself to share the "truth" with Kurtz's Intended, and masks his true feelings about the horrors of colonization. The sperm, however, does "say truth" (11) and continues the procreative cycle in hopes that his offspring will learn from his mistakes and break the cycle. The sperm, then, is willing to be the one "*who abjures and rejects the night-sea journey,*" hoping and calling for "an end to night-sea journeys," a hope for which he is willing to "deny" himself (11-12). Likewise, Marlow denies both himself and Kurtz justice when he tells the Intended a lie because of her love for Kurtz, although Marlow appears unwilling to transport Kurtz's hope to the Intended and enlighten her about the true nature of colonization.

Along with that nature of colonization, both tales address many other similar themes, including: the origin of man, the "history" of colonization, the doctrine of "survival of the fittest," the "condition" of humankind in a world with no clear-cut purpose, the position of the female gender in that world, the nature of the Creator, and possibilities for immortality. And in both tales those themes are intricately tied together (although admittedly Barth's notions of Creator and creation contain a hierarchy of creators beginning with an apparent actual deity that fosters man, who in turn fosters endless generations of sperm and thereby other men).

For the sperm narrator of "Journey," man can generally be viewed as the Creator and one of the two Makers. In considering the nature of the Creator, the sperm's late companion theorizes that a "Father does exist," who also "creates (voluntarily or not) other seas and swimmers at more or less regular intervals. . . . Our 'Father,' in short, was our adversary and would- be killer" (6-7). And while Marlow, at the beginning of his journey, might view "rivers" as carrying "the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires" (19), the seed-bearing colonists, according to Kurtz later, "must necessarily appear to them [i.e., to the natives] in the nature of supernatural beings—we approach them with the might as of a deity" (65). Not only is the nature of god problematic in both narratives, but the doctrine (and theme) of the "survival of the fittest" is also called into question, as indicated by Marlow's description of a station bookkeeper: "He had no learning, and no intelligence. His position had come to him—why? Perhaps because he was never ill ..." (36). The sperm also entertains similar notions when considering who among his fellows would survive the night-sea journey: "I, who find abhorrent and tautological the doctrine of survival of the fittest (fitness meaning, in my experience, nothing more than survival-ability, a talent whose only demonstration is the fact of survival, but whose chief ingredients seem to be strength, guile, callousness), may be the sole remaining swimmer!" (6). This notion of "survival-ability," then, speaks to the condition of both colonist and sperm who exist in a world where even if one does survive, survival will mean little in terms of one's intellectual or moral worth. As Marlow said: "Droll thing life is—that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose" (86). Regarding his response to that "futile purpose," Marlow further notes: "it occurred to me that my speech or my silence, indeed any action of mine, would be a mere futility. What did it matter what any one knew or ignored?" (53). Likewise, the sperm concludes that "the thoughtful swimmer's choices, then, they say, are two: give over thrashing and go under for good, or embrace the absurdity; affirm in and for itself the night-sea journey; swim on with neither motive nor destination, for the sake of swimming . . . I find neither

course acceptable." (5). In other words, both protagonists run up against meaninglessness.

Ultimately, then, the protagonists in both stories reinforce (and speak directly of) the "absurdity" of colonization and life in general, yet in many ways become participants in the ongoing rehearsal and repetition of continuing colonization efforts. Thus each story is the recitation of a story that has been lived and told before, and is destined to be lived and told again.

As a result, the potential for immortality in the case of the sperm and Marlow and their respective species is likely limited to rehearsing and repeating the history of colonization. For the sperm, his potential for immortality boils down to "survival-ability" and sheer numbers, "(that is, one swimmer in two hundred fifty billions) achieved a qualified immortality" (7). For the species of colonists, there too was only a qualified immortality available that might assure Kurtz's "success in Europe" (82) but would leave the ivory trader on his deathbed crying out for "My Intended, my station, my career, my ideas" (84); with those possessions, as Marlow noted, "satiated with primitive emotions, avid of lying fame, of sham distinction" (84). And so in both tales, procreation of the species and of colonization is the only means to immortality in a world where physical acts, not lofty ideas or ideals, appear to rule.

Of course, neither Kurtz, Marlow nor the sperm and his drowned comrade could engage in the physical actions necessary to achieve immortality without the female. Significantly, in both "Journey" and *Darkness*, the female is largely absent from the journey itself. Rather, she can be found in the short novel's beginning, before Marlow sets sail, and at the end, when Marlow lies to Kurtz's Intended. During the journey, though, the jungle itself takes on feminine and distinctly sexual properties, as discussed earlier. In essence, the female is always there—as an object of love, lies, and perhaps as the pretext for horrors produced by the procreation of colonization—giving mystery to the journey.

Likewise in "Journey" the "maddest notion" of the drowned comrade was that She was the destination and much more; She was "a mysterious being, indescribable except by paradox and vaguest figure: wholly different from us swimmers, yet our complement; the death of us, yet our salvation and resurrection; simultaneously our journey's end, mid-point, and commencement . . . self-contained, yet dependent absolutely, in some wise, upon the chance . . . that one of us will survive the night-sea journey and reach . . . Her!" (9-10). Hence the female not only inspires the journey, but the Heritage cannot be transmitted or transported without her, which is why the story of colonization told by the sperm and Marlow is directed towards her.

Thus in revisiting Conrad's tale after a reading of Barth's story, one can begin to recognize the sexual imagery and symbolism of the mysteriousness involved in the passage upstream, which conveys the ongoing and often unknowing procreation of Western civilization's colonization efforts. In this way, "Night-Sea Journey" continues the epic story of man's quest for colonization. In other words, after

one reads Barth's story with care and approval, one can't quite read Conrad's novel in some of the ways it has been read for the past century. But, then, what is the right way to read either story? As the sperm points out, it doesn't really matter "which theory of our journey is correct"—because the journey's discoverable destination and meaning lies entirely in getting there.