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HEART OF DARKNESS:

"THE ANCIENT MARINER" A HUNDRED YEARS LATER

TWO OFTEN-ANALYZED MASTERPIECES of English literature, if studied in juxtaposition, provide fresh insights into the contrasting attitudes of Romanticism and post-Darwin Victorianism. The contrasting themes of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1798) and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) dramatize the revolution in science, philosophy, religion, art, and letters that shaped the character of late Victorian England. Perhaps more significantly, a comparison of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and *Heart of Darkness* in terms of structure, setting, and characterization, as well as theme, reveals certain crucial similarities and contrasts in the two works and thus contributes to a greater understanding and appreciation of both of them.

Coleridge's poem concerns a casual and wanton crime against "the one life within us and abroad",¹ the punishment visited by Nature upon the criminal, the repentance and penance of the criminal, and the final readmission of the criminal (who must, however, remain spiritually scarred by his deed) into the fellowship of The One Life. Coleridge's Mariner is then constrained to preach his gospel of love:

He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all. (ll. 614-17)

The Mariner's own experience indicates that this love must be intuitive; it does not come from an act of will. Coleridge's Mariner achieves unity with a beneficent Nature (as William Wordsworth has it) only through a "wise passiveness":²

O happy living things! no tongue
Their beauty might declare:
A spring of love gushed from my heart,
And I blessed them unaware:

Sure my kind saint took pity on me,
And I blessed them unaware. (ll. 282-87)

Heart of Darkness concerns unspeakable crimes committed by a representative of civilization who possesses all the standard virtues of a civilized society and who confidently brings the blessings of the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs to the Congo's world of savage Nature. Kurtz, enhanced by the conventions of civilization, is seen by civilization's hollow men as a man with a mission, "a universal genius", even a saint. "Men looked up to him,—his goodness shone in every act", his bereaved fiancée says of him.³ But when Kurtz confronts Nature, he finds, not a Nature that works a healing ministry through man's wise passiveness, but a Vampire Nature that embraces a man only to drain all humanity—indeed all life—from him. Marlow says of Kurtz, "The wilderness had patted him on the head, and, behold, it was like a ball—an ivory ball; it had caressed him, and—lo!—he had withered; 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" (131-32). Thereupon, Kurtz takes "a high seat amongst the devils of the land" (132). His union with Nature, however, brings madness rather than peace: ". . . his soul was mad. Being alone in the wilderness, it had looked within itself, and, by heavens! I tell you", Marlow asserts, "it had gone mad" (164).

After Kurtz's season in hell, his vision of truth is not that love, instinctive and intuitive, is the means whereby alienated man can resume his place in a genuine universe. Kurtz's message to his alter ego (and "wedding guest") Marlow concerning the meaning of existence is embodied, in part, in his impulsive postscript to his eloquent report on the Suppression of Savage Customs. The report, says Marlow, "gave me the notion of an exotic Immensity ruled by an august Benevolence. It made me tingle with enthusiasm." But this paean to "the dear God" who "made and loveth all" is cut short by Kurtz's scrawled postscript: "Exterminate all the brutes!" (135). "In that phrase", declares Paul L. Wiley,

he had signified his determination to be at one with nature, to ravish and to master it; and he has been blessed by its very favour, including that of divesting himself entirely of human flesh except for the resonant voice for which the mute wilderness has no use. His brief career has been a triumph in the stripping away of all the rags of ethical self-deception with which men fatuously seek to confront the eternal powers of darkness; and, dying, he has won a further victory in his vision of the 'horror.'⁴

The remainder of Kurtz's message is contained in his last words: "The horror! The horror!" Kurtz, asserts Marlow, "was a remarkable man. He had something to say. He said it. . . . He had summed up—he had judged. 'The horror!' He was a remarkable man" (170-71). Jerome Thale's comments on Kurtz's last words are perceptive:

Kurtz's last cry takes us to the meaning of the whole African venture for Marlow, the illumination he receives. For Marlow sees that Kurtz's cry is more than self-knowledge, more than an insight into the depths of his own evil. It is an insight into the potentialities in all men, it gives the perspective in which we must see Kurtz's discovery of himself. Kurtz's cry is no deathbed repentance which makes him a hero to whom Marlow can be loyal. It is for Marlow a terrible illumination, for, in Kurtz, Marlow discovers not simply one man become evil, but a universal possibility."⁵

Conrad's theme, then, becomes a powerfully ironic post-Darwin and pre-Golding parody of the theme of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner."

The *mise en scène* of Coleridge's poem is a wedding, appropriate first because it provides a world of blooming vitality in contrast to the delirium of the world of the Mariner's ordeal. But, more importantly, the wedding dramatizes the Mariner's awareness of the meaning of love on the highest plane. The wedding would mark only the first stage in an awareness of the true meaning of love: one soul's attraction to another. The Mariner, though unlettered and naïve, has won through to a higher love: a Platonic vision of the true, the good, and the beautiful. Finally, the frame device of the wedding provides, in the guest, an audience for the Mariner, who transfixes him during the narration of the events which have led the Mariner to his vision of "the one life within us and abroad". The wedding guest is the poet's surrogate for his reader.

Conrad's frame device is more subtle and complicated than Coleridge's. At one level, Kurtz is Conrad's Mariner, and Marlow is Kurtz's wedding guest. But Marlow is also Mariner. Marlow approaches his moment of awareness of the meaning of existence as casually as did Coleridge's Mariner. Marlow journeys to the Congo simply because it fascinates him "as a snake would a bird—a silly little bird" (60). Having reached the heart of darkness, however, Marlow meets his secret sharer Kurtz and learns Kurtz's bitter lesson. The dice are thrown, Death wins Kurtz, and Marlow recovers from his illness to become the prize of Life-in-Death. Like Coleridge's Mariner, Conrad's Marlow is condemned to tell his story—and Kurtz's story—to an uncomprehending audience.

Marlow's first wedding guest is Kurtz's grieving "Intended", the bride whose faith and love are as sterile, if as "good", as the lie Marlow tells her. When Marlow, on returning to Europe, seeks her out, he finds himself forced to perpetuate her sentimental misconceptions concerning Kurtz:

" 'And of all this', she went on, mournfully, 'of all his promise, and of all his greatness, of his generous mind, of his noble heart, nothing remains—nothing but a memory. You and I—'

" 'We shall always remember him', I said, hastily.

" 'No!' she cried. 'It is impossible that all this should be lost—that such a life should be sacrificed to leave nothing—but sorrow. You know what vast plans he had. I knew of them too—I could not perhaps understand,—but others knew of them. Something must remain. His words, at least, have not died.'

" 'His words will remain', I said.

" 'And his example', she whispered to herself. 'Men looked up to him,—his goodness shone in every act. His example—'

" 'True', I said; 'his example too. Yes, his example. I forgot that.' "

Finally, Marlow, with "The horror! The horror!" ringing in his ears, tells her in answer to her plea for "his last word—to live with": "The last word he pronounced was—your name" (181-83).

The message of love that Marlow passes on to Kurtz's fiancée is given, instead of the truth, to her because Marlow knows that she could not survive an encounter with the truth as Marlow has learned it from Kurtz.⁶ Conrad's Mariner then, like Coleridge's, returns from his ordeal with a message of love. But, whereas Coleridge's Mariner imparts his message to one who rises the next morning "a sadder and a wiser man", Conrad's Mariner out of pity and, perhaps, contempt, relays his spurious message of love to a shallow sentimentalist who requires such an illusion for survival.

Marlow as Mariner entrusts his genuine message not to Kurtz's Intended but to his audience aboard the yawl *Nellie*: The Director of Companies, The Lawyer, The Accountant, and the narrator of the story. There is no evidence that most of Marlow's listeners, perhaps themselves hollow men, really know what he is driving at in his tale of Kurtz. Marlow manages to elicit a response only when he taunts them about their daily "monkey tricks" as they perform on their "respective tight-ropes for what is it? half a crown a tumble—". The narrator reports the response to Marlow's gibe: "'Try to be civil, Marlow', growled a voice, and I knew there was at least one listener awake besides myself" (106). At the conclusion of Marlow's story, the sole response is the Director's remark: "We have lost the first of the ebb" (184). Though the members of Marlow's audience, with the exception of the narrator himself,

do not appear to know that their friend is trying to tell them something worth reflecting on, they do serve, like the wedding guest in "The Ancient Mariner", to reinforce the frame device and to save the work from becoming nothing more than a monologue. But Marlow with his "yellow complexion" and "sunken cheeks" (52), like Coleridge's Mariner with his "glittering eye" and "skinny hand", has transfixed at least one member of his audience who will leave the *Nellie* "a sadder and a wiser man". The concluding remark of the narrator, after Marlow's voice trails off into silence, indicates the impression made upon him: ". . . 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" (184).⁷

". . . the deep truth", says Shelley, "is imageless" (*Prometheus Unbound*, II, iv, 116). The deep truth contained in (and obscured by) Kurtz's words "The horror! The horror!" and "Exterminate all the brutes!" is refracted through the various points of view of Kurtz, Marlow, Conrad's narrator, and Conrad himself. The ambiguities and ironies are therefore profound. Nevertheless, Conrad's statement concerning man, man's place in nature, and the meaning of existence appears to be a reversal of the theme of Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner", and Conrad's approach to characterization, setting, and structure, though marked by a greater sophistication, subtlety, and complexity, is strikingly reminiscent of Coleridge's. *Heart of Darkness* is, in effect, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" one hundred years later.

NOTES

1. The phrase is Coleridge's. See "The Eolian Harp", line 26. My statement of the theme of Coleridge's poem is, of course, not original. Various critics and scholars have suggested such a reading. See, for example, Robert Penn Warren, "A Poem of Pure Imagination: An Experiment in Reading", *Selected Essays* (New York, 1958), p. 222.
2. "Expostulation and Reply", l. 24.
3. Joseph Conrad, *Youth and Two Other Stories* (New York, 1903), pp. 174, 182. Succeeding page references to this volume are given in parentheses in the text.
4. "Conrad's Skein of Ironies". *Heart of Darkness: An Authoritative Text—Backgrounds and Sources—Essays in Criticism*, ed. Robert Kimbrough (New York, 1963), p. 227.
5. "Marlow's Quest", *University of Toronto Quarterly*, XXIV (1954-55), 356.
6. See Robert F. Haugh, *Joseph Conrad: Discovery in Design* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1957), pp. 40, 53-54.
7. See Seymour L. Gross, "A Further Note on the Function of the Frame in 'Heart of Darkness'", *Modern Fiction Studies*, III (1957), 167-70.