

Given the woeful state of the U.S. economy, our involvement in two unpopular wars, and the fetid stench of politics in Illinois, it seemed fitting that our Great Books discussion group should visit the *Heart of Darkness*, and its derivative work, *Apocalypse Now*. Our primary aim was to explore the themes of darkness and depravity in these two works, and draw correlations to our present circumstances.

In both works, one is confronted with a sense of unreality, of “time being out of joint.” In *Heart of Darkness*, this unreality is manifest in the voyage down the river, where

In the empty immensity of earth, sky, and water, there she was, incomprehensible, firing into a continent. Pop, would go one of the six-inch guns, a small flame would appear, a tiny projectile would give a feeble screech—and nothing happened. There was a touch of insanity in the proceeding, a sense of lugubrious drollery in the sight. . . . (60)

The feeling of unreality is heightened, when arriving at the Company Station, Marlowe is greeted by the company auditor, resplendent in his white suit, while all around him, ill-clothed natives die “The work was going on. The work! And this was the place where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die” (62). Later, Marlowe meets the confidante of the Company Manager—a man who was entrusted with making bricks, presumably to build additional storage areas for ivory, which was the Company’s primary source of revenue.

The business intrusted to this fellow was the making of bricks—so I had been informed; but there wasn’t a fragment of brick anywhere in the station, and he had been there more than a year—waiting. It seems he could not make bricks without something, I don’t know what—straw maybe. Anyways, it could not be found there, and it was not likely to be sent from Europe, it did not appear clear to me what he was waiting for. An act of special creation perhaps. (73)

The sense of unreality is a basic theme of *Apocalypse Now*. Martin Sheen plays the part of the Marlowe character, a Captain Willard. His mission is to terminate the command of Colonel Kurtz, an Army Special Service commander “with extreme prejudice.” During the course of the movie, Willard

and the crew of a patrol boat travel upriver to confront Kurtz. During their journey, they meet with a Colonel Kilgore, played by Robert Duvall, who learns that one of the navy grunts is a famous surfer. Kilgore decides, on the spot, to eradicate a North Vietnamese village so that he and his men can go surfing. The resulting scenes of the destruction of the village to Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries," is a testament to the unreality of the war, and its treatment in the movie.

The levels of unreality accrete as the crew travel upriver to witness an USO entertainment, complete with playboy bunnies and rock music. A final glimpse of unreality prior to the meeting with Kurtz occurs when the patrol boat arrives at the Do Long Bridge. Here, amidst the daily carnage where the Viet Cong destroy the bridge at night, only to have it re-built the next day Sisyphus-like by the U.S. army, we learn no one is in charge, no one understands what is happening, and the work goes on!

Of course, in both the *Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now*, there is more to the journey than appears on the surface. As the boats make their way upriver, one in the Congo, one in Vietnam, the boat's occupants are confronted with darkness, real and metaphorical. As Marlowe comments to his audience – "Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. The air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish" (88). Along the way, Marlowe is assailed with thoughts of impending danger, a danger bred from the forest, but with an insidious, penetrating effect, so that he began to wonder about the effect the brooding darkness had on the travelers

The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there—you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly, and the men were—No they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—the suspicion of their not being inhuman. (91)

The realization of course, is that Marlowe and his brethren are no better than the primitives; in fact, they are inferior to the cannibals who show “restraint,” in not making a meal of the white travelers. The realization that the primitives are human, and that the darkness of the impenetrable jungle lies within the heart of the Europeans, is the lesson learned from the journey upriver.

In like manner, the occupants of the patrol boat learn that the darkness, the moral squalor and unreality of Vietnam, can infect the heart of anyone. This lesson is driven home when the patrol boat stops to inspect a sampan. Drugged out, jittery from their bouts with unreality, the crew open fire on the sampan’s occupants, and learn too late, that the “contraband” item that the Vietnamese family sought to conceal was a puppy.

Marlowe’s meeting with Kurtz, after the build-up of some one hundred pages, is somewhat anticlimactic. The anticipation of the meeting, the journey, the discovery of the golden voice of Kurtz, drove him onward

The point was in his being a gifted creature, and that of all his gifts the one that stood out preeminently, that carried with it a sense of real presence, was his ability to talk, his words—the gift of expression, the bewildering, the illuminating, the most exalted and the most contemptible, the pulsating stream of light, or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness. (107)

Kurtz, like Lucifer, has faded; his glory extinguished after the fall. But like Satan, Kurtz’ sin is pride, a voracious, all-consuming pride that turns everything it sees into a manifestation of his reality: “The mind is its own place, and in itself/Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven” (*Paradise Lost*, 362). Marlowe reminds us of Kurtz’ fall from grace, his essential sin, his death-in-life:

His covering had fallen off, and his body emerged from it pitiful and appalling as from a winding sheet. I could see the cage of his ribs all astir, the bones of his arm waving. It was as though an animated image of death carved out of old ivory had been shaking its hand with menaces at a motionless crowd of men made of dark and glittering bronze. I saw him open his mouth wide—it gave him a weirdly voracious aspect, as though he had wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the men before him. (126)

So too, is Willard's trip up the river to meet Colonel Kurtz somewhat anticlimactic. We are given glimpses of hanging men and women, heads strewn against a backdrop of a Buddhist temple, and the insane ravings of an American photojournalist, who takes the place of the Russian in *Heart of Darkness*. We are greeted with a Kurtz who reads from *The Hollow Men*, whose prized possessions include a copy of *The Golden Bough* and *From Ritual to Romance*, but who like the Kurtz of the *Heart of Darkness*, is nothing more than a voice; a once-bright angel that has been transformed in a devil chanting hollowly at the end of the movie "The horror. The horror!"

## II

The reference to *The Golden Bough* and *From Ritual to Romance* in *Apocalypse Now* is intentional. Shooting on the film never proceeded easily, but Coppola struggled to find an ending for his seminal work. In his book *Francis Ford Coppola, a Filmmaker's Life*, Michael Schumacher shares Coppola's search for an ending

Jakob (Dennis Jakob, friend and student with Coppola at UCLA film school) conferred with Coppola and Brando, going over the script and arguing that Kurtz had to die at the end of the movie—an ending Coppola considered but had yet to adopt. Jakob explained that, as far as he could see, *Heart of Darkness* had been a retelling of the myth of "The Fisher King." Coppola was aware of the story from his student days, but he had not considered it while writing *Apocalypse Now*. Jakob gave the director a copy of Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, which discussed the myth, and a copy of *From Ritual to Romance*, which had directly influenced T.S. Elliot when he was writing *The Waste Land*.

Suddenly, it all started to come together for Coppola—the war, *Heart of Darkness*, "The Fisher King" and even the Ifuagos' sacrifice of the carabao, which seemed to bear an eerie parallel to Willard's sacrifice of Kurtz. Coppola had always understood Willard and Kurtz to be conflicting sides of the same person, but he didn't know how he was going to resolve this conflict once Willard had made his journey and confronted Kurtz. Now, with the additional influence from *The Golden Bough*, the theme and resolution of the movie became clear: The search was for the truth, but in order to keep the truth, one had to accept both good and evil, life and death, as part of the same *whole*. When all was said and done, *Apocalypse Now* was a movie about choices and the paths that are taken to discover the truth. (221-222)

The reference to the fisher king in *The Golden Bough* is one of the numerous myths of the death of the old king at the hands of the new. The old, sterile king must be sacrificed by the virile new king so that the people may have new life. It is part of the sequence of fertility myths that appear throughout the Western canonical literature in various guises: Osiris, Tammuz, Adonis, Attis, Christ. By referencing *The Golden Bough*, Coppola sets off a chain of associations from *Heart of Darkness*, *The Waste Land*, *The Purgatorio*, *The Aeneid*, *The Odyssey* and the foundational myth of Oedipus and Tiresias. These associations lend credence to Coppola's view that Willard and Kurtz are locked in a struggle for supremacy: the new eliminating the old to ensure the fertility/fecundity of the race. One must recognize good and evil, death and life, and look the horror of existence in the face.

### III

Faced with so formidable an assemblage of myths, poems, novels and movies, it is easy to see the appeal of *Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now*, especially when the horror of these works has been multiplied by the onslaught of instant "on-the scene" information. We are literally bombarded with images of the devastation brought about by war; we are daily reminded of the precipitous drops in the stock market; we are numbed by the number of unemployed, and the shattering of the American dream of home ownership. In these times, the *Heart of Darkness*, like *The Waste Land*, which was inspired by Conrad, seems like an appropriate national dirge. We live in a time when politicians, seemingly possessed of nothing more than a golden, Kurtzian voice, babble on, but fail to deliver anything of substance. Unreality, in the form of well-publicized terror, the latest round of corporate restructurings that yield thousands of dispossessed workers, and assaults on our freedoms by self-satisfied despots, takes on a Conrad-like significance. And yet. . .

Lest we forget, the myth of the destruction of the old king, and the replacement by the new is a rite of passage. In *Apocalypse Now*, Willard, after killing Kurtz, rejected the idolatry of the natives. Willard rejected the carnage, the suffering, the horror—he saw through the devastation and walked away.

So too, we must remind ourselves that in order to know good, we must know evil—such is our fate for succumbing to temptation in Paradise. We must look past the two wars, the greed so manifestly exhibited by the Wall Street fat cats; we must look past the joblessness and the current economic meltdown. The old king, the destroyer of habeas corpus, the prison warden at Abu Ghraib is dead: long live the king. As he stood at the Lincoln Memorial, as he stood where some forty years before, a prophet uttered his famous words of freedom, Barack Obama reminded us that “the true character of our nation is not revealed during times of comfort and ease, but by the right we do when the moment is hard.”

Like Francis Ford Coppola, we must find our way through the heart of darkness; we must recognize that life is about choice; about choosing a path between light and darkness. Let us hope that in our journey down the river, we may be guided not by the dark voices echoing like wind in dry grass, but “by the better angles of our nature,” so that the “last, best, hope of earth,” shall not perish.

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