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# LISTENERS AND LIES IN 'HEART OF DARKNESS'

By THOMAS DILWORTH

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I am proud to know I understood him better than any one on earth—he told me so himself. And since his mother died I have had no one—no one to—to’<sup>1</sup>

IN Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness', the effect of speakers on listeners is obviously an important aspect of characterization, but even more important, thematically, is the power of listeners over speakers. To be successful, a speaker must accommodate his audience. This is why the first rule of rhetoric is 'know your audience'. When Flaubert, for example, struggles for *le mot juste*--which is the word that will have the right effect on his readers--to some degree he is making himself the instrument of his readers. It is always so: the audience see passively receptive, but, by the very act of listening, the audience largely determines what it will hear. The active influence of listeners on speakers has been a matter of inference in literature from *Othello* through the dramatic monologues of Browning, but in 'Heart of Darkness' it comes close to being the main theme. Conrad's novel is largely a dramatic monologue whose primary speakers, Marlow and Kurtz, resemble each other in their extraordinary passivity before auditors in private and public discourse. The chief focus of this shared

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (New York, 1969), p. 77. Page references to this text appear hereafter in parentheses.

rhetorical disposition is Kurtz's fiancée, the principal listener whom Marlow and Kurtz have in common. As such, she is even more important to the meaning of the novel than she is generally considered to be.

In 'Heart of Darkness' the reciprocity between listeners and speakers results, as many critics have noticed, in an extraordinary number of lies. The motif of lying within Marlow's story has important implications for its narration because the speaker who tells the most lies-and he admits to most of them-is Marlow. This tendency to lie, in a narrator who says he detests lying, undermines the trustworthiness of his narration. Since he speaks freely, even impulsively, to his audience aboard the yacht, we are inclined to trust the factual elements of his narrative, which is, after all, partly a confession of [510] having lied. But we may well be sceptical about his intepretative comments. The lies within the story suggest, then, that the telling of the story may itself involve lying. Conrad may be hinting at such a relationship between the story and its narration when the primary narrator says, famously, of Marlow's story-telling that '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' (5). In particular, the obvious lies within the story and the less noticeable falsehoods in Marlow's telling of the story may point to falsification in Marlow's imaginative re-creation of Kurtz's Intended.

As secondary narrator, Marlow does almost all the talking, but within the tale the primary speaker is Kurtz. In this respect as in many

others which commentators have noted, the two men are foils. As speakers, moreover, they primarily resemble each other in the extent to which they accommodate their audiences.

In his relationship to listeners, Kurtz is extraordinarily receptive, even passive. He is used to performing for audiences. During the course of the story we learn that he has been a musician, a poet, a painter, and a journalist. In Africa his art form is chiefly oratory, in which performance depends very much on audience response. Kurtz has come to Africa in part to enlighten savages, but instead he has surrendered to their savagery. He becomes the idol they worship, and leads his tribe in savage raids on neighbouring villages. He does direct his audience, therefore, and derives power from it, but initially he accommodates it.

Kurtz also has a European audience, to which he is symbolically engaged in his *Intended*. He inspires her, but largely, we may assume, by reaffirming her own values. Her high ideals are, after all, those of Europe as a whole, and if Kurtz reflects them and even, for his *Intended*, embodies them, he is not their author. She is more than a passive recipient of his communication, therefore. As she says herself, 'I believed in him more than anyone on earth-more than his own mother, more than-himself. He needed me' (78)! As we shall see and as Marlow discovers for himself, furthermore, Kurtz's *Intended* seems a listener capable of controlling whoever speaks with her.

The mutuality of Kurtz's relationship with his fiancée is obliquely illuminated by his relationship with her foil, his African consort, whose tragic gesture the *Intended* evokes as she raises her arms in grief for her dead lover (78). The native woman epitomizes Kurtz's

African audience, and certainly she is used to influencing, maybe even dominating, Kurtz. We get a glimpse of her relationship with Kurtz [511] when his Russian disciple tells Marlow, 'she talked like a fury to Kurtz for an hour, pointing to me now and then. ... Luckily for me, I fancy Kurtz felt too ill that day to care, or there would have been mischief' (62-3).<sup>2</sup> The Russian implies that usually when the woman harangues Kurtz, Kurtz does as she says. If Kurt is engaged to his European audience in his *Intended*, he is certainly married to his African audience in the passionate, voluble African woman.

Before resuming our consideration of Kurtz, and of his relationship to these two women and to the larger audiences they represent, we will consider Marlow, who is likewise, as a speaker, passive and malleable. These characteristics involve Marlow in several lies-four within his story and one, at least, in his prefatory remarks.<sup>3</sup> Within the story,

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<sup>2</sup> This may, at first, seem an exception to the rule that, in this novel, listeners dominate speakers-but here too the rule applies, for Kurtz elicits this harangue, not intentionally but by what he is, a dying man. We shall see later how his condition poses a threat to his consort.

<sup>3</sup> The count of lies differs from critic to critic. Eloise Knapp Hay and Ian Watt count as a lie Marlow's withholding information from the businessman who enquires about the late Kurtz (Hay, *The Political Novels of Joseph Conrad* (Chicago, 1963), p. 151; Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley, 1979), p. 243). Watt also counts Marlow's suppression of the truth about Kurtz to pacify the Russian. Watt and John A. McClure count as a lie Marlow's telling Kurtz that his 'success in Europe is assured'-though Watt says that these last two 'lies' are really only near-lies (McClure, 'The Rhetoric of Restraint in *Heart of Darkness*', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, xxxii (Dec. 1977), 323). And in *Thorns & Arabesques* (Baltimore, 1980), William W. Bonney blames Marlow for insisting on 'the innate inability' of women 'to cope with adversity' even though he had witnessed the unflinching courage of the African woman during

Marlow first lies at the Central Station to the general manager's spy. This man, the brickmaker, thinks Marlow one of the new 'gang of virtue', in league with Kurtz's backers. By letting the brickmaker make this assumption, Marlow passively perpetrates a lie. He deceives the brickmaker partly out of spite, partly because he sides with Kurtz, as he says, 'near enough to lie' (27) and partly to get the rivets needed to repair the steamer he has taken charge of. In deceiving this man, Marlow becomes himself 'a pretence' (27). He tries to manipulate his audience, but in the process he is mildly corrupted by his audience's corruption.

Next Marlow lies to Kurtz. In an attempt to keep him from rejoining his tribe, Marlow tells him, 'Your success in Europe is assured' (67), which to Marlow certainly and to us (but not evidently to Kurtz) is obviously untrue. In the circumstances it is a necessary lie, and therefore morally justified, but it reveals in Marlow the impulse to accommodate. We see this impulse again in his subsequent [512] lie to Kurtz. It is a polite lie, which has gone unnoticed by critics-probably because it seems not to bother Marlow much, though this in itself suggests the limits of his moral sensitivity. Dyig, Kurtz says, 'I am lying here in the dark waiting for death; (70)

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the shriek of the steam whistle (154). But Bonney sees this as 'subjective bias' rather than deliberate lying. In *The Uses of Obscurity* (London, 1981), Allon White claims that language in the novel shuns 'referential fixity' (123), so that the implied clarity of Kurtz's rhetoric is itself a kind of lie (125). He also claims that enigmatic language opens the text to radical 'interpretive plurality' (176), but there does seem to be enough unenigmatic, factual language to allow for detection of definite and probable lies.

Marlow replies, 'Oh, nonsense'. As he later admits, he forces himself to say it, which means he knows it is untrue. The lie is highlighted moreover, by this being Kurtz's great moment of truth, when he realizes 'the horror' of his acts (71). Marlow's conventional lie may not in itself be important, but it does help further to establish Marlow's inclination to accommodate his audience.

The last of Marlow's lies within the story disturbs him very much. He lies to Kurtz's Intended to preserve her 'great and saving illusion' (77). This lie has long been a primary focus of critical debate, mostly concerning whether or to what degree Marlow is morally guilty as a result of the lie. But the auditor-speaker relationship, which requires the lie, seems much more important to the meaning of the novel. As in any conversation, here the roles of listener and speaker alternate. Marlow implies that the Intended actually speaks more than he does. We cannot know how she alters her expression to suit Marlow, but we do know, because he shows us, that, when he speaks, he lies to accommodate her. For the most part, as he had to the brickmaker, Marlow lies passively. The Intended, who dominates the interview, says about Kurtz,

'It was impossible to know him and not to admire him. Was it?'

'He was a remarkable man,' I said, unsteadily. Then before the appealing fixity of her gaze, that seemed to watch for more words on my lips, I went on, 'It was impossible not to-'

'Love him,' she finished eagerly, silencing me into an appalled dumbness.

'How true! How true! But when you think that no one knew him so well as I! I had all his noble confidence. I knew him best.'

'You knew him best,' I repeated. (76)

Finally he tells her that the last word Kurtz spoke is her name. This is

his outright lie, but really it is the culmination of a series of passive lies (two of them in the passage quoted above) by which he allows her to go on believing Kurtz a great and good man. The other passive lies are his allowing her to believe that Kurtz is a 'loss ... to the world', that 'his goodness shone in every act' and so he leaves the world 'his example', and that 'his end', like his life, was 'worthy' (78). But of course the entire interview is really one extended lie composed of untruths which the Intended dictates to or extracts from Marlow.

There is one more lie in the story, the only lie of which Marlow is [513] not the author or co-author. This lie is worth considering because it exemplifies how duplicity breeds further duplicity and suggests motivation which may apply to Marlow as he tells the story and to his audience as it listens. The liar in this instance is the Company's general manager, who has probably deliberately disabled the steamer Marlow has come to take up-river in order to bring Kurtz back. Because the manager knows that Kurtz, who is suffering from malaria, wants his job (33), he wants Kurtz dead. We know he postpones ordering the rivets that would allow Marlow to repair the steamer and rescue Kurtz.<sup>4</sup> The manager has, after all, acquired and kept his position by surviving the other Company agents who must leave the jungle because of malaria or else die of it. The manager and his uncle, when he visits the station, are in complete agreement about Kurtz's ambition and the manager's interests. Nevertheless, the

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<sup>4</sup> See Norman Sherry, *Conrad's Western World* (London, 1971), p. 47; and C. T. Watts, 'Heart of Darkness: the Covert Murder-plot and the Darwinian Theme', *Conradiana*, vii (1975), 137-8.



manager tells his uncle about the repairing of the seamer: 'The extraordinary series of delays is not my fault. I did my possible!' (33). He is lying, but certainly not to protect the moral sensibilities of his uncle, who has said about a free-lance ivory trader who threatens the Company's monopoly, 'get him hanged! Why not? Anything—anything can be done in this country. . . . nobody here, you understand, here, can endanger your position' (32-3). The uncle appears actually to be hinting that Kurtz too can be disposed of. There seems no practical reason for deceiving this man. The manager may lie, then, psychologically to accommodate him, possibly because he realizes that his uncle entertains an idealized conception of himself which would be jeopardized if he were too blatantly implicated in homicidal scheming. The uncle's duplicity or self-deception in this regard is suggested by the glimpse we get of his response to hearing about the delay in repairing the steamer. He 'sighed, "Very sad"' (33), and yet it is he earlier in the conversation, who says about Kurt, 'The climate may do away with this difficulty for you' (31). The manager's lie, then, ensures his uncle a degree of imaginary innocence. In this respect the uncle in some ways resembles the audience that listens to Marlow's narrative.

Marlow tells his story, which contains so many lies, to four men: the Director of Companies, the Lawyer, the Accountant, and the anonymous primary narrator who is probably, because he relates the story in print, a Literary Man. This audience represents the English establishment which is, at this time, an imperialist establishment. If [514] any audience can influence a speaker, this one can. And, as we have seen, Marlow is susceptible to influence. His frequent use of the plural

'you' indicates, moreover, that he is very much aware of his audience ('You see me, whom you know .. .', 27; 'You know I hate ... a lie', 28). If he is telling them what they want to hear, the pattern of lying within the story suggests that, in the course of his narration, he may be lying to them, and primarily on their behalf.

Commentators have noticed that during the course of his narrative Marlow contradicts himself about efficiency, which, he says, distinguishes modern imperialism from its ancient Roman counterpart.<sup>5</sup> The suggestion that the Romans were inefficient is itself enough to make us wonder about Marlow (6-7). In his story, moreover, efficiency is identified with dehumanization and cruelty. When the black workers at the Outer Station sicken and become 'inefficient' (17), they are discarded and allowed to die. And, as Eloise Knapp Hay demonstrates at length, efficiency coexists with extreme moral callousness in the Company's chief accountant and so is not, as Marlow claims, a defence against 'the powerless disgust, . . . the hate' (6).<sup>6</sup> The ultimate argument against the saving value of efficiency is Kurtz. After the chief accountant, Kurtz is the most efficient person in the story, even though the general manager complains that Kurtz' methodology has ruined the district for future trade. On the subject of

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<sup>5</sup> Eloise Knapp Hay, pp. 142-3; Hunt Hawkins, 'Conrad's Critique of Imperialism in *Heart of Darkness*', *PMLA* xciv (Mar. 1979), 249. Hawkins claims there is no real contradiction because Marlow's views on efficiency change during the course of his narration, but there is no evidence of this. The narrative demonstrates that efficiency has no mitigating value, but never does Marlow explicitly reverse his initial judgement, which he makes, after all, with full knowledge of the conditions and events he is about to relate.

<sup>6</sup> Eloise Knapp Hay, pp. 142-3.

Kurtz, we cannot trust the manager, but we can trust the chief accountant, who calls Kurtz 'a first class agent', one who 'sends in as much ivory as all the others put together' (19). Whatever its advantages, therefore, efficiency does not immunize one against hatred, and it certainly does not preclude the criminal exploitation of men. Marlow's claims for efficiency are false, therefore, and so they constitute, if not a lie, an error in judgement which his narrative contradicts but which he never reverses. Whether or not his estimation of efficiency reveals personal bias, it probably does reflect prejudice in his audience, for it is the explicit bias of most Social Darwinists and Liberal Imperialists of the day.<sup>7</sup> And, regardless of their professed moral and cultural ideals, it is an implicit bias of the more conservative power-brokers actually governing the Empire. It is not, however, a bias shared by Conrad, who disapproves of the [515] 'unscrupulous efficiency it is the temper of the time to worship'.<sup>8</sup> Marlow accommodates his audience, but Conrad seems to be discomforting his late Victorian readers by 'accommodating' them with a falsehood which, if not obvious, is nevertheless shown to be false.

After making his claim for efficiency in his prefatory remarks Marlow initiates another false claim which he reaffirms, though in an

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<sup>7</sup> See Ian Watt, p. 216.

<sup>8</sup> Letter to the New York Times, 24 Aug. 1901. When Conrad writes to his politically Conservative publisher in 1899 that the novel is about 'criminality of inefficiency and pure selfishness when tackling the civilizing work in Africa', he may be accommodating the bias of his correspondent, but probably his own views on the matter were clarified by the onset of the Boer War. See Eloise Knapp Hay, p. 142.

altered and qualified way, at the conclusion of his story and which therefore has more the appearance of a lie. He says that what redeems modern imperialism

is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental preference but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea-something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to. (7)

'He broke off' there, says the anonymous primary narrator, and no wonder: the image of worship associated with 'the idea' has disconcerting connotations in light of Kurtz's having made himself an object of idolatry.

What Marlow calls 'the idea' seems to comprise the ideals of Western culture, specifically what Kurtz's Russian disciple calls 'love ... in general' (56). Marlow associates it with light (5). The notion of a saving idea and possibly its association with light originate not with Marlow, however, but in his audience. Before Marlow begins to speak, the novel's primary narrator writes that the 'great knights-errant' of the beginning of British imperialism in the Renaissance were 'Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame, . . . bearing the sword, and often the torch, . . . bearers of a spark from the sacred fire' (4). This anonymous primary narrator is not merely reflecting on Marlow's story, which he is about to retell. He himself must have spoken in these terms on the yacht before Marlow began his narrative, because one of Marlow's first remarks is, 'Light came out of this river since-you say Knights? Yes .. .' (5). Even at the start of his story, therefore, Marlow takes his cue and an operative image from his audience.

'The idea', as our two narrators conceive of it, does not redeem

imperialism. In saying that it does, Marlow again contradicts his own experience. No grand idea influences the agents of imperialism other than Kurtz, and it is questionable whether an idea saves him. On the contrary, as Hunt Hawkins argues, Kurtz does not so much fail to live [516] up to his ideas as fall victim to them.<sup>9</sup> They are the ends that justify his means. 'Of course you must take care of the motives,' says Kurtz, 'right motives-always' (70). Ideas, as motives, blind him to the immorality of his acts, which are all, ultimately, 'for the furthering of [his] ideas' (70). That ideals have blinded Kurt is finally clear symbolically when Marlow brings a candle to him: 'The light was within a foot of his eyes' (70)-and light has become the symbol of cultural ideas. But Kurtz cannot see the flame, and only now, when he is blind to the symbolic light, does he realize the horrible truth about his acts. Marlow himself says at one point that a man must meet 'truth with his own true stuff-with his own inborn strength. Principles won't do' (37). And yet when Marlow praises 'the idea' he praises principles.

When Kurtz cannot see the candle's flame, he ceases to behold, and be blinded by, ideals; but his final judgement nevertheless does seem to be informed by principles. Is it, then, Kurtz's greatness that in the end he is capable of making such a judgement? Marlow says it is, and he seems to value principles even though he considers them ineffectual and professes to have none himself. For Marlow life is a 'mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose' (71). When Marlow nearly dies of fever, he finds he has 'nothing to say'. But

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<sup>9</sup> Hawkins, p. 295.

Kurtz,

He had something to say. He said it. Since I had peeped over the edge myself, I understand better the meaning of his stare, that could not see the flame of the candle, but was wide enough to embrace the whole universe, piercing enough to penetrate all the hearts that beat in the darkness. He had summed up-he had judged. 'The horror!' He was a remarkable man. After all, this was the expression of some sort of belief; it had candour, it had conviction, it had a vibrating note of revolt in its whisper, it had the appalling face of a glimpsed truth.

And Marlow says of this truth-telling,

It was an affirmation, a moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats, by abominable terrors, by abominable satisfactions. But it was a victory! (72)

Was it a victory, though, or has Kurtz merely recovered the moral perspective of his European listener? (Philosophically Marlow may be a nihilist, but Kurtz does not know it, and Marlow remains sufficiently biased, ethically, to disapprove of Kurtz's 'abominable'

behaviour.) It may be argued that when he pronounces his last words,

Kurtz is really speaking to himself, not to Marlow. But for the past

few days Marlow has been Kurtz's audience, ever since he wrestled [517]

Kurtz away from the savage bonfire of his African audience. And we

have seen that as Kurtz's last audience Marlow is greatly impressed. If

as the Intended supposes, furthermore, Kurtz 'died as he lived' (78),

then can we be sure he is not at death performing for, and therefore

submissive to, his audience? That would make him, even in the end,

'hollow to the core' (59). But maybe Kurtz's final judgement is a moral

victory after all. Marlow likes to think so, and so do we. Although

Kurtz is an easy instrument of his audiences, and although he himself

has been a kind of lie, he does not tell lies. But the uncertainty

remains. Living, and perhaps dying, Kurtz is a rebuttal to Marlow's opening assertion about the value of 'the idea'.

Despite his experience, his narration, and his explicit devaluation of 'principles', Marlow continues to claim value for 'the idea', which, if it is initially symbolized by light, is finally embodied symbolically in the idealized figure of Kurtz's Intended. She believes 'that great and saving illusion' (77) which, according to Marlow, places women in general in a 'beautiful' 'world of their own' which is 'out of touch with truth' (12). It is to sustain her illusion that Marlow lies to her. If he had not lied, he says, 'It would have been too dark—too dark altogether . . .' (79). In other words, it is somehow comforting to know (or at least to think) that half the human race is pleasantly deceived about life—and that goodness and purpose, deprived of real, metaphysical meaning, retain at least an imaginative validity.

But she herself, as Marlow imagines her, may be a kind of lie. This is first of all suggested by her resembling a stock Romantic heroine, a product of conventional imagining and therefore an obvious fiction. Critics have noticed this, but have not, I think, correctly interpreted it. One critic writes, for instance, that 'there is clearly a striking lapse in the quality of writing here, a descent to the level of cheap fiction. . . and an uncertainty of tone . . .' and another writes that 'the scene is treated in a rather strained, melodramatic, and repetitive way'.<sup>10</sup> What they say is true, and Conrad is capable of writing badly, especially on the subject of women, but style here may well be deliberate, like the cheap romantic prose of the Gerty MacDowell section of Joyce's

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<sup>10</sup> H. M. Daleski, *The Way of Dispossession* (New York, 1977), p. 23; Ian Watt, p. 241.

Ulysses. Conrad may be stylistically indicating Marlow's fictionalization of experience. It may be that Marlow reports his conversation with the Intended verbatim, but his characterization of her as someone with 'a mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering' (76) may convey only part of the truth and therefore falsify the picture. This possibility Marlow himself anticipates when he says earlier of her 'portrait', apparently a photograph, that while 'she struck [518] me as beautiful-I mean she had a beautiful expression', I know that the sunlight can be made to lie, too . . .' (74).

In the Intended, Conrad gives us a palimpsest or literary double exposure, in which the human reality is faintly visible beneath the idealized convention. Almost all commentators have taken Conrad's romantic portrait of the Intended at face value, sometimes criticizing what one of them calls 'Conradian romance' but accepting without question Marlow's evaluation of her.<sup>11</sup> The one exception is Walter Ong, who sees her as a narcissist.<sup>12</sup> But the truth behind the portrait seems more complicated and more sinister than that. The main indication of this truth is the Intended's surprising reaction to hearing that Kurtz's last word is her name. She utters 'an exulting and terrible cry', one not only of 'unspeakable pain' but also 'of inconceivable triumph' (79). For a moment we see through the stereotype to something resembling this woman's passionate African counterpart. We have heard the Intended dominate Marlow in conversation. We have reason to believe that as Kurtz's audience she influenced Kurtz. Her grief at his loss may not be as unselfish, therefore, as Marlow

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<sup>11</sup> Bonney, *Thorns & Arabesques*, p. 59.

<sup>12</sup> Walter Ong, SJ, 'Truth in Conrad's Darkness', *Mosaic*, ii (Fall 1977), 160.



thinks. In her cry she exults in the assurance that she possessed Kurtz to the very end, possibly because to her he represents power. In the nineteenth century, the only means to social or political power for most women was a powerful man. And Kurtz has shown promise of becoming a powerful man in European society. A journalist tells Marlow that in Europe the speeches Kurtz gave 'electrified large meetings', and that he 'would have been a splendid leader of an extreme party. . . . Any party' (74).

Again, her African counterpart provides evidence, by analogy, that the desire for power may well motivate the Intended in her relationship with Kurtz. We have heard that his African consort talks 'like a fury' to Kurtz 'for an hour, pointing' in a threatening way to his Russian disciple. The Russian thinks she is angry because he has taken rags from the storeroom to mend his clothes. But since he cannot understand the dialect of the tribe, he cannot really know why she is angry. A more likely reason, surely, is that the Russian poses a threat to Kurtz and therefore to her. Of course, he is her competition, in a sense-the remnant of Kurtz's European audience, to whom he recites poetry (65) and talks of universal love (56).<sup>13</sup> But as a white man [519] capable of using a rifle's 'thunder and lightning' (57), the Russian is also eligible to succeed Kurtz as chief and as tribal god. When the

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<sup>13</sup> The parallel relationships to Kurtz of the Russian, the African woman, and the Intended are suggested by each of them at some time extending their arms. The Russian 'threw his arms up' (56), the African woman 'opened her bared arms and threw them up rigid above her head' (62), and the Intended 'put out her arms as if after a retreating figure' and in a manner that reminds Marlow of the African woman's gesture (78).

African woman harangues Kurtz, he has been sick for two weeks. She must know what the Russian himself apparently never consider--thate by killing Kurtz or merely by surviving him, the Russian can take his place. The same rationale applies here as with the general manager who keeps his position by surviving his competition.<sup>14</sup> It may be her influence over Kurtz, therefore, which causes him, at one point, to threaten to shoot the Russian unless he turns over some ivory and clears 'out of the country' (57). Aside from the question of love, Kurtz's African consort stands to lose power, prestige, and wealth if Kurtz dies or departs, or if another takes his place. Marlow gives some indication of her wealth and suggests its source when he says, 'She must have had the value of several elephant tusks upon her' (62). Although the African is a stone-age woman and the Intended is a gentlewoman of an industrialized, imperialist society, both are leisured women and both love Kurtz. The parallel strengthens the suggestion that, like her foil, Kurtz's fiancée desires power. As we have seen, she is a dominant, assertive person. Now she is without hope of expressing in society this dimension of her personality. In her extreme grief for Kurtz she seems to mourn, therefore, partly for herself.

Marlow says that at this stage in his experience, his 'imagination wanted soothing' (73). He wants to believe that the whole truth about the Intended consists of her faith and love—and so, he knows, does his male, late-Victorian audience. To some degree the cover-up

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<sup>14</sup> The brickmaker is to the manager what the African woman is to Kurtz, at least in so far as he stands to lose if the manager goes, unless he can ingratiate himself, as he tries to do, with 'the gang of virtue'.

protects contemporary sexual mythology, wherein the female is submissive and accommodating to the male. But, beyond the reversal of conventional roles, we have reason to suspect that the heart of darkness resides within the Intended. How else could she have been, after Kurtz's mother, his first, best listener? Though most critics of the novel accept it without question, Marlow's interpretation of her as a paragon of idealized femininity may well be Marlow's final falsehood. In the Intended, his lying seems, then, to attain the supreme form of literary fiction, though it is by now the threadbare and debased fiction of popular romance. It is—for Marlow, probably not for Conrad--third-rate fiction.

Although Marlow intends to convey the impression that the Intended is untainted by the surrounding, deepening darkness, his words associate her with the whited sepulchre, a motif begun in [520] conjunction with the European imperialist capital in which she resides. Marlow describes the room where he speaks with her in terms evocative of the motif: 'The tall marble fireplace had a cold and monumental whiteness. A grand piano stood massively in a corner . . . like a sombre and polished sarcophagus' (75). The motif of the whited sepulchre, which appears earlier in the 'bit of white worsted' round the neck of a dying negro (18) and in the immaculate clothing of the chief accountant, has its final manifestation, and its inversion, in the Intended. She is white and wears black; the deceiving whiteness is now on the inside. Her 'pale head' shines in the dark (75). 'Her forehead, smooth and white, remained illuminated', Marlow says, 'by the inextinguishable light of belief and love' (76). Critics regularly call Marlow's deception of her a 'white lie' without noticing the irony of

their image in the context of the novel's white sepulchre motif.<sup>15</sup>

As the novel's ultimate symbol of cultural hypocrisy, the Intended is synonymous with 'the idea' she believes in. She and 'the idea' are both means by which Marlow and his audience deceive themselves. We have seen that Marlow's confession of having lied masks his fictionalization of the Intended. In her he gives the no-longer-tenable cultural idea an inviolable sanctuary. This allows for the persecution of the idea which initially justifies imperialism and now also justifies the suppression of the horrible truth about imperialism. Walter Ong is right, therefore, to assert that Marlow's lie to the Intended is, in the deepest symbolic sense, not a lie at all.<sup>16</sup> When Marlow substitutes the name of the Intended for Kurtz's last words, Conrad is implying the disquieting truth about her, which is at the heart of the meaning of the novel.<sup>17</sup>

As Marlow's last and most successful falsehood, the Intended is the culmination of the pattern of lying within the story and, beginning with the nonsense about efficiency, in the telling of it. The lies are not exclusively Marlow's, however, for they arise from his rhetorical relationship with his listeners. Marlow might not have praised 'the

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<sup>15</sup> See for example Ian Watt, p. 244; H. M. Daleski, p. 74.

<sup>16</sup> Walter Ong, p. 153.

<sup>17</sup> As Jeremy Hawthorn writes, 'furthermore, the epithet the Intended is ironic ... for Kurtz is characterized by unimplemented intentions and unfulfilled ideals' (Joseph Conrad Language and Fictional Self-Consciousness (London, 1979), p. 32). More to the point, perhaps Conrad may have had in mind the cliché about the way to hell being 'paved with good intentions'.

idea' or idealized the Intended if he had had an audience other than the Director of Companies, the Lawyer, the Accountant, and the primary narrator. After all, Marlow realizes that 'principles' are ineffectual, and his story reveals that, like efficiency, idealism, as motive for imperialism, is pure whitewash. But his role as speaker involves him in what Orwell calls doublethink-a form of lying to [521] one's self. To accommodate his audience (and to some extent himself), Marlow refuses fully to know what he knows.

But we can be sure that Conrad knows what every Pole has known for centuries, that ideas, ideals, and ideologies often mask imperialism, and that the naked truth of empire is always what St Augustine calls it-robbery.<sup>18</sup> If Conrad had agreed with Marlow and Marlow's audience that in certain circumstances the truth about imperialism ought not to be revealed, he would never have written 'Heart of Darkness'. But because he is writing primarily for a late Victorian audience which shares the cultural and imperialist assumptions of the men on the yacht, he writes partly by indirection so that the meaning of his novel ultimately resides in its readers, and

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<sup>18</sup> A great deal has been written about Conrad's complex attitude toward British imperialism as distinct from his extreme disapproval of German and Belgian imperialism. The consensus seems to be that he opposed imperialism in general. In his correspondence he calls it 'obscene' and he characterizes British aggression in the Boer War as 'stupid', 'imbecile', an act of 'murder'. See Eloise Knapp Hay, p. 122; Ian Watt, p. 158; Hunt Hawkins, pp. 293-4; Avrom Fleishman, *Conrad's Politics* (Baltimore, 1967), pp. 97-104; and Jacques Darras, *Joseph Conrad and the West* (Totowa, NJ, 1982), pp. 4-5.

emerges 'as a glow brings out a haze'. [522]