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Civilization and Savagery in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*

Laura Kesselring

In *Apocalypse Now*, the film adaptation of Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*, Francis Ford Coppola uses the transformation of Captain Willard to characterize the power of the savagery inherent in all humanity; this view contests Conrad's character Marlow, who affirms the models of Western civilization above any primordial instincts by his resistance to those instincts. To be civilized, according to the *New American Webster's Dictionary*, is to be "educated in the usages of organized society"; before their journey into the jungle (the "heart of darkness"), both Marlow and Willard live according to certain standards of value prevalent in the civilized, orderly world. These values include morality, class, wealth, intellect, and religion, and make up the way one sees oneself in relation to others and to the world—one's identity. These values are challenged in the "heart of darkness," and while Marlow retains his principles of civilized thought, Willard cannot abandon the truth of his origins and rejects the standards to which he once subscribed. In departing from the book's direction, Coppola makes the "heart of darkness" universally accessible, especially to the viewers of his film; he suggests that any human being can be seduced like Willard and the antagonist Kurtz, dismissing Conrad's portrayal of Kurtz as an isolated deviant.

In both the novel and the film, the standpoint of the narrator is crucial to the reader's or viewer's perception of him. Conrad constructs his novel as a tale told by Marlow in retrospect, which reveals Marlow's physical and emotional distance from the "heart of darkness." Even before hearing the story's conclusion, the reader knows that Marlow did not succumb to the power of the jungle; this is established by his civilized existence outside the "heart of darkness" as a storytelling seaman in London after the fact. Coppola, on the other hand, translates Conrad's retrospection into an unpremeditated monologue, exposing Willard's thoughts throughout the story. This adaptation stays true to the novel by transforming Conrad's elaborate descriptions into a spoken narrative, aiding the viewer in passages where the story progresses through the main character's mental deliberation. However, the viewer also feels the acute immediacy of Willard's journey, and there is a suspense surrounding his character's outcome that is not present in *Heart of Darkness*. Willard's gradual conversion to a more savage, elemental outlook (in the present time) allows the viewer to feel what he experiences; in Conrad's novel, however, the reader observes from Marlow's distant perspective, assured of his deliverance from the "heart of darkness."

Marlow and Willard begin their journeys with similar backgrounds. Marlow, a seaman with a penchant for exploring, lives primarily within European civilized standards; he tells his companions on the Thames that after sailing on the Indian Ocean, the Pacific Ocean, and the China Seas, "I had got a heavenly mission to civilize . . ." (Conrad 215). Although rather independent ("I always went my own road . . ." [Conrad 216]), he seeks a job as captain of a steamboat for "the Company," and submits, on paper, to its statutes: "I flew around like mad to get ready . . . show myself to my employers, and sign the contract" (Conrad 218). Willard, under contract to the American military, is a successful assassin in that his superiors trust him to complete a delicate assignment, Kurtz's termination. In the same way, both Kurtzs had subscribed to the respective maxims of the Company and the military; upon their falls from grace, however, the Company describes Kurtz as

"unsound . . . shows a complete want of judgement" (Conrad 275), while Willard's superior accuses Kurtz of "operating without any decent restraint. . . . Very obviously he has gone insane" (*Apocalypse Now*). These parallels are instrumental in establishing a point from which Marlow and Willard originate and from which Willard irrevocably digresses but Marlow does not.

Marlow feels that the mystery behind Kurtz's disappearance and transformation lies in the jungle, in what Conrad refers to as the "heart of darkness." The "overwhelming realities of this strange world of plants, and water, and silence" (Conrad 244) suggest a primordial environment, and Marlow senses that he is literally leaving one world and entering another. As he moves further away from civilization, he feels fundamentally connected to his surroundings and to the natives, "thrilled" at the idea of a "remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar" (Conrad 246). However, Marlow is not blinded by this newfound relationship with the "heart of darkness," but is instead conscious of its power. He says, "When you have to attend to . . . the mere incidents of the surface, the reality—the reality, I tell you—fades. The inner truth is hidden—luckily, luckily. But I felt it all the same; I felt often its mysterious stillness watching me . . ." (Conrad 244). Here he speaks of a "truth," a connection that transcends time and civilization, a common passion and savagery of human nature that the natives have retained throughout the ages and that here, in the "heart of darkness," is common to all humanity, including Marlow and Kurtz. Observing this power which drew Kurtz irreversibly toward a primitive, instinctual state of mind, Marlow concludes that "he could not have been more irretrievably lost" (Conrad 279) from logic and convention; in spite of his fascination with Kurtz, Marlow is content to merely observe this fundamental truth and existence, ultimately returning to civilization.

This satisfaction is absent from Willard's drive for truth. He seeks personal justification beyond his official military orders for terminating Kurtz; searching the dossier for a glimpse into Kurtz's soul, he desires to know the man that first "broke from them" and then "broke from himself." Conrad feels that the mystery of the "heart of darkness" in the

novel is too dangerous to explore, citing Kurtz's fate as proof of its power. However, Coppola paints Willard as a man obsessed with penetrating the conundrum of Kurtz; Willard feels that to kill Kurtz he must first understand him, but once he permeates the mystery of the "heart of darkness," he is unable to return to his innocence. Willard feels the same connection to the savagery of the jungle and its people that Marlow does. His profession as a military assassin is a civilized, reasoned form of killing, but these regulated limits begin to blur as he moves deeper into the "heart of darkness" and away from military influence.

In the film, a snag in Willard's mission occurs in the form of a wounded Vietnamese girl on a passing boat; he kills her without remorse, determined at this point to let nothing stand in the way of his journey. This is a sign of a fundamental change in his value system—he sheds his morality and military conduct in favor of instinct and selfish desire. After killing the girl, Willard himself admits that "Those boys were never going to look at me the same way again, but I felt like I knew one or two things about Kurtz that weren't in the dossier" (*Apocalypse Now*); he is altered inwardly as well as outwardly.

In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow addresses the meaninglessness of civilized conventions in the heart of the jungle; in the wilderness, he says man "must meet the truth with his own true stuff—with his own inborn strength. Principles won't do. Acquisitions, clothes, pretty rags—rags that would fly off at the first good shake" (Conrad 247). However, instead of permanently discarding these standards, Marlow retains his Western value system and accepts both outlooks on life for their applications in different situations. This balance is upset in *Apocalypse Now* when Willard approaches Kurtz's end of the river. Tossing Kurtz's dossier into the water (a symbolic rejection of the military and their judgement of Kurtz), he leaves his prior belief systems behind and yields to the power of the jungle and whatever lies ahead in Kurtz's world. In the novel, the manager responds to Kurtz's actions with proper Company procedure, declaring, "It is my duty to point [Kurtz's actions] out in the proper quarter" (Conrad 275). However,

Company policy is meaningless to Kurtz. To Marlow, Kurtz possesses "the inconceivable mystery of a soul that knew no restraint, no faith, and no fear . . ." (Conrad 274); he does not judge Kurtz, as the Company and civilization do, according to the standards that Kurtz has forsaken.

Finally, the dichotomy in the fates of Marlow and Willard is most evident from the final scenes of both the novel and the film. In *Heart of Darkness*, Kurtz has irrevocably retreated into the "heart of darkness," into "the wilderness . . . that seemed to draw him to its pitiless breasts by the wakening of forgotten and brutal instincts . . ." (Conrad 279). However, Marlow is able to withstand such an entrapment when he enters Kurtz's realm after witnessing the consequences of such a choice. Kurtz's fate is absolute; Marlow believes that "The wilderness . . . had taken him, loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own . . ." (Conrad 260). Marlow survives the transition from jungle to civilization, while Kurtz leaves his soul behind: "The brown current ran swiftly out of the heart of darkness . . . and Kurtz's life was running swiftly, too, ebbing, ebbing out of his heart into the sea of inexorable time" (Conrad 282). While the contemporaneity and value systems of the modern world are dead to Kurtz in the "heart of darkness," Conrad upholds their strength through Marlow's survival and narration of Kurtz's story.

On the other hand, the death of *Apocalypse Now*'s Kurtz was dictated by the savagery of basic human nature. On his arrival at Kurtz's camp, Willard is "baptized" in rain and mud by the natives, symbolizing his kinship with them. The finality of Willard's transformation manifests itself in the instinctual, savage manner in which he kills Kurtz; the "termination" itself resembles one creature killing another for superiority within a group, and places Willard on the same level of "insanity" as Kurtz. Coppola places his actions on a parallel with the natives' slaughter of the ox; Willard emerges the victorious hunter while Kurtz sacrifices himself to the "heart of darkness." Kurtz's blood symbolizes his primordial connection with the jungle, returning to the earth after his death; in essence, Kurtz belongs to the "heart of darkness" and has sev-

ered any ties to his family and to civilization. Coppola illustrates the dominance of the savage and the instinctual over Willard's learned conventions; rather than using a more convenient and logical form of assassination (such as bullets or poison), Willard reverts to the savage hunter within his being, stalking and finally "slaughtering" Kurtz. Willard's severance from his former civilized life and values is complete; as he leaves the camp, he turns off the radio, a construct of civilization and the military, and departs for an unknown destination. The viewer, having felt his transformation, knows that he will not return to the military, nor to his place in civilized society.

In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad manifests his belief in the strength of Western value systems through the character of Marlow. Faced with the horror of his own brutal origins, Marlow keeps a perspective that returns him, secure in his identity, to London. This image is a contrast to Conrad's Kurtz, whose divergence from the path of civilized reason is attributed to emotional weakness and insanity; Marlow reports, "his soul was mad" (Conrad 280). On the other hand, Coppola illustrates the fundamental need for Willard to return to jungle savagery in *Apocalypse Now*; his survival in the "heart of darkness" is contingent upon the shedding of constructs of both civilization and the military. In the novel, Conrad expects his readers to relate to Marlow as a narrator and similarly arrive at the same conclusions by the story's end. By drawing his viewers into Willard's mind with the immediacy of the action, Coppola connects them fundamentally to the "heart of darkness" and to Willard's transformation and reassessment of values. This break from Conrad's point of view causes the viewer of *Apocalypse Now* to question their own belief systems, whereas Conrad's reader is reassured of the relevance of such values.

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