UNIT 5 THE LENGTHENING SHADOW

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5.0 OBJECTIVES

The purpose in this concluding unit is to see the text as a modernist performance; its looming presence in twentieth century culture. The purpose, that is, is to see how it inaugurates certain artistic traditions to be identified as modernist traits, and also certain thematic aspects which will dominate twentieth century artistic predilections. We shall also see briefly how *Heart of Darkness* has been celebrated, condemned, imitated and resisted, but never neglected during the nearly 100 years of its life, as we approach the end of the century. We still see the heart of darkness in all its inscrutable complexity through the gaping mouth of Kurtz .

5.1 INTRODUCTION

I have said before that around the time when *Heart of Darkness* was published, a paradigm shift was underway: it was the era of new scepticism, philosophical and scientific, as well as of political upheaval. In the Arts the repercussions were being felt; and at the turn of the century Conrad's new work was hailed as having been "ahead of its times", "modern". The work itself became a symbol of what was new in a new way. Its reputation remained unchallenged, except for a few dissenting voices, by any major critic. Conrad himself was aware of his modernism. Or so it would appear from a letter he wrote to William Blackwood, where he said: "I am *modern*, and I would rather recall Wagner the musician and Rodin the Sculptor...and Whistler the painter....They too have arrived. They had to suffer for being 'new'. And I too hope to find my place in the rear of my betters. But still—my place." If not his immediate contemporaries, we at this stage, can see the point that Conrad makes here. If we recognise Eliot as the high-priest of modernism, and his *Waste Land* (1922) a high watermark in the movement, it would not be difficult at all to recognise Conrad's modernism. As you might well know, Eliot had originally placed a passage from *Heart of Darkness* as the epigraph to the poem. He withdrew it at the behest of fellow-modernist, Ezra Pound. Later, when Forster sent him a congratulatory letter, mentioning the pervasive element of horror in the poem, Eliot told him about the rejected epigraph, and how elucidative it was of the poem's theme. Anyway, epigraph or no, *Heart of Darkness* remains a looming presence in the poem. Eliot would go on to use another line from the same text as one of the epigraphs to "The Hollow Men" (1925), such was the impact of the tale on him. However, by the 1970s, when a fresh paradigm shift was underway, call it postmodernist, postcolonial or what you will, Conrad and *Heart of Darkness*, as indeed Wells, Kipling *et al*, were all seen as interesting cases of "Orientalism"; and were clubbed together as having been of their times: racist, sexist, imperialist, petit bourgeois....

But, as we have seen, pinning down Conrad to an ideology is far from easy. This is especially true of *Heart of Darkness*. For one thing he held different, often conflicting views on ideological issues at different points of time. For another, he uses the mask of Marlow, and complicates the point of view, and heaps up various ways of looking at truth—to such an

extent that the "real view" of Conrad is well-nigh impossible to grasp. The matter is complicated by the evasion that the narrator performs from time to time. As Ingram says, "the focus of the tale is never where the reader expects it to be."

Such evasion cripples the reader's understanding as much as the narrator's. Even Marlow gets intellectually crippled, and fails to grasp fuller meanings of his experiences. At the end we are not sure whether to put the emphasis on the political, existential, or metaphysical aspects of the tale. Politics is foregrounded no doubt; but as we have seen in some of the earlier sections, politics recedes into the background beyond recognition. We simplify, no doubt, to make sense of the narrative; maybe by saying that it is through the political scaffolding of the narrative that the metaphysical world of evil is explored. But we do so by severely limiting the scope of this complex work.

Conrad himself never believed in explicit statements; nor did he believe in any monologic method. It is this tendency, among others, that makes him so modern in comparison with his exact contemporaries barring Henry James. Some of the modernist methods, which he anticipates were, ambiguity and, distancing devices to effect impersonality, avoidance of the romanticising tendencies, and multiplicity of points of view. A few of these we have had occasion to look at in different contexts. Some others we shall take up presently.

5.2 AMBIGUITIES AND AMBIVALENCE

5.2.1 Title

This key component of ambiguity and evasion is what connects Conrad's novella to such other modernist works as Joyce's, Woolf's, and even Forster's.

From the title onwards the tale is replete with ambiguities and authorial/narratorial ambivalence. I think the title inaugurates the modernist tradition of titular ambiguity. (Among the more recent ones is that of *Waiting for Godot*.) As we have seen Conrad was ambivalent about the retention/rejection of the definite article. Perhaps with the definite article, the reference to darkness would have been unitary, and particular. Now the "darkness" in the title could be an allusion to the geographical appellation for Africa (as the "Dark Continent") then common among the "civilised" peoples of Europe. Marlow undoubtedly gives a vivid portrayal of the darkness of the centre of Africa. But he begins by referring to the Thames estuary and England as "one of the dark places of the earth", albeit in the past tense. Even Kurtz's tract begins by talking about the relativism innate to such notions as "civilisation", and "savage". This is borne out by Kurtz himself in the ultimate irony about his character: "Exterminate the brutes", is the post scriptum to this noble treatise. All the eloquence, and piety in the long tract is counterbalanced by the short sentence. This is the method ("No method at all"). The savagery of his method far exceeds the so-called savagery of the brutes. They had "restraint", whereas Kurtz and the rest had none. The grin that the heads on the poles wore are very similar in terms of mockery, the tongue stuck out at the end of "An Outpost of Progress". Both mock the proponents of the civilising mission. This leads directly to the literal meaning to the title. Is it a reference to Kurtz's own heart of darkness? Or that of the darkness within the European entrepreneur? If you have read the tale closely you will notice that the darkness of Africa (into this we shall turn presently) touches Kurtz and swallows him up.

> The wilderness had patted him on the head, and, behold, it was like a 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....

Conrad uses what would soon become staple modernist diet: repetition and echo, immediate and distant. Almost repeating the theme of the above passage, Marlow echoes a little later:

> ...the wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things

> about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude—and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating. It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core....

It is this self-realisation which overwhelms him, and prompts the cry: "Horror! The Horror!" Thus knowledge comes to him in a whisper. The booming voice is now nearly effectively silent. The eloquence was a sham— a mask for the profound hollowness within, just like the name. Memory is again a function of the thematic manipulations in a modernist work of art. This also seems to have been inaugurated by Conrad in *Heart of Darkness.* We are supposed, nay, expected to recall what has been said before. This recalling is possible through slight repetition. The following words about Kurtz occur to Marlow even before he met Kurtz: "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." Thus one of the major discoveries of Marlow is this untrustworthiness of contrary categories. Light cannot be distinguished from darkness; nor the savage from the civilised. Conrad may also be thinking of the parallel between the material plunder of Africa and his own artistic plunder, the role of Kurtz and his own.

So far as the other ambiguities are concerned, the last cry or whisper of Kurtz "The horror! The horror!" is one of the most ambiguous dramatic utterances in modern literature. We ask ourselves, and fail to answer, what exactly this meant. Was this an ethical judgement against himself, or the sudden realisation of the evil that surrounded and eventually consumed him? The same ambivalence of Marlow about Kurtz, about the rationalisation of the lie he told the Intended continues to enrich the text in a manner we have learnt to expect of modern literature. After all the uncertainties about, and relativity of reality and experience, conscious and unconscious or subconscious states, relativism of science (Einstein), and the German physicist Heisenberg's principle of uncertainty, the modern world can be sure of nothing. Hence Marlow's epistemological scepticism and moral relativism.

5.2.2 Marlow On Kurtz

The author of the main tale is of course Marlow; and critics have pointed out the similarities between Charlie Marlow's Faustian hero, Kurtz and Christopher Marlowe's play *Dr. Faustus.* But Marlow is, as we have seen on many occasions, not sure about his own attitude towards the hero of his yarn. He repeats that he was no admirer of Kurtz; the latter was no idol of his. But he was drawn towards him; just as he was attracted by the "mighty big river", as an "immense snake uncoiled" would attract a bird—a silly little bird". Marlow's ambivalence comes out clearly at times when he can't be sure of what to make of his experience: "The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us—who could tell?" Indeed, who could? As his narration is being relayed back to us by the frame narrator, he can be no less unreliable than Marlow himself here.

But Marlow's most challenging ambivalence is with regard to Kurtz. In fact, one of the prime factors contributing to the richness of the tale is this. Just as he is inexplicably drawn towards Kurtz, the reader too undergoes the same experience. The rivets that would fix the steamer to take Marlow to Kurtz constitute a metonym for the riveting nature of the narrative from the moment Kurtz is introduced. His first major task was to fix up "the wreck", which was under water and in ruins, but the context in which this appears one might mistake to be Kurtz.

Yet when we gather together his impressions of the chief protagonist of his tale, his value judgements seem to be in an aporetic state. On more occasions than one, Kurtz's world is haunted by agents of the devil, as much as the agents of the Company: Mephistophelean figures, snake-imagery, hissing sounds, flies. We have also seen direct evocations of evil all through. The first turnabout comes when Marlow, confronted by nightmares, chooses Kurtz, as the least frightening of them all:

> It seemed to me I had never breathed an atmosphere so vile, and I turned mentally to Kurtz for relief—positively for relief. 'Nevertheless I think Mr. Kurtz is a remarkable man,' I said with emphasis. He started, dropped on

> me a cold heavy glance, said very quietly 'he *was*,' and turned his back on me. My hour of favour was over; I found myself lumped along with Kurtz as a partisan of methods for which the time was not ripe: I was unsound! Ah! but it was something to have at least a choice of nightmares.

Marlow remains faithful to the choice he has made. That is all. His judgement on Kurtz changes character, gets qualified; so much so he suspects he too has been a little like him.

> I had turned to the wilderness really, not to Mr. Kurtz, who, I was ready to admit, was as good as buried. And for a moment it seemed to me as if I also were buried in a vast grave full of unspeakable secrets.

He would soon tell the Russian that he was "Mr. Kurtz's friend—in a way". He is told about Kurtz's methods, but promises that Kurtz's reputation is safe with him. Until then he had no plans of being so faithful to Kurtz. It is only after he hears the last cry of complete self-knowledge that he makes up his mind. His employers had asked him to be loyal to Kurtz: "it was written I should be loyal to the nightmare of my choice", he says ironically. But the "foundations of [their] intimacy" with Kurtz were being laid when he was trying to save Kurtz, prevent his escape back into the wilderness, even when he was certain that the person he was trying to save could not have been "more irretrievably lost". He could sum up Kurtz's moral state quite accurately by saying that his soul was "unlawful" "beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations." Kurtz was not mad; his intelligence, faculties remained unimpaired; but "his soul was mad". And at the very last he "looked within" and gave out that anguished cry. In that cry Marlow understood the real nature of man: "No eloquence could have been so withering to one's belief in mankind as his final burst of sincerity". This last admission is the clue to our understanding of Marlow's ambivalence towards Kurtz. After he dies, Marlow calls him "the remarkable man who had pronounced a judgement upon the adventures of his soul on this earth". Marlow himself had a glimpse of the ultimate reality; but he could not make the pronouncement Kurtz could. Because Kurtz could sum up, could judge he "was a remarkable man". The last words were an "affirmation, a moral victory", Marlow says. "That is why I have remained loyal to Kurtz to the last, and even beyond...." He talks about his own status : he too had "peeped over the edge [himself]". This is very close to what he would say about the "great British Empire". "Respectable, venerable and holy", it had now disappeared, and "gone over the edge" (*Letters* I, p. 16).

5.2.3 Marlow's Lie To The Intended

I have cited Conrad's words about Marlow's interview with the girl. You may have gathered from those words how much importance he paid to the episode, which takes the narrative to "another plane". It now becomes "one suggestive view of a whole phase of life". The climax of that interview, and perhaps the second one of the entire narrative (the first one being the cry of Kurtz) is of course when Marlow tells the Intended the lie that the last word that Kurtz pronounced was her name, following which, he "heard a light sigh and then [his] heart stood still, stopped dead short by an exalting and terrible cry, by the cry of inconceivable triumph and of unspeakable pain." Then she says, and Marlow reports, "I knew it – I was sure!" To this Marlow's ironical retrospective rejoinder is "She knew–she was sure". Why does Conrad climax the story at this point rather than sometime earlier? Why does Marlow tell a lie? Is it part of his decision to remain faithful to Kurtz? Many such questions contribute to the ambiguity of the end-configuration of the novella; and this kind of ending which raises more questions than answers, prefigures many a modernist ending: Is Stephen Dedalus an ironic portrayal in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*? Are the forms achieved by Mrs. Ramsay and by Lily Briscoe vital or illusory, set against the chaos of passing time in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse?* What did the *BOUM* sound signify; was Adela Quested really molested in Forster's *A Passage to India*? Does the lie make Marlow a misogynist or merely confirm the suspicion we already had? To some, Marlow's action is a natural sequel to his earlier assertion, "Its queer how out of touch with truth women are" as a sharp contrast to his own pride about truthfulness and his own quest for and fidelity to truth: He "brings truth to men by virtue of his bringing falsehood to women" (Straus). But is he telling a lie only to the Intended? Is he not suppressing the truth about Kurtz from his employers? What about the erasure he performs on Kurtz's "Report"? Also, his assurance to the "spectacled man" in the

Sepulchral city that Kurtz's knowledge would not have any impact on matters related to "commerce and administration" is comparable to the words of Yudhishtra about the death of Aswatthama. In the *Mahabharata,* this latter is considered a lie and as such constitutes a sin.

Just as Marlow's attitude towards Kurtz had undergone, change, so also his attitude towards women, particularly the Intended. When he sees the photograph he gets the following impression:

> She struck me as beautiful—I mean she had a beautiful expression. I know that the sunlight can be made to lie, too, yet one felt that no manipulation of light and repose could have conveyed the delicate shade of *truthfulness* upon those features. She seemed ready to listen without mental reservation, without suspicion, without a thought for herself. I concluded I would go and give her back her portrait and those letters myself.

In trying to rationalise, he cites one or two reasons, but then says, "I don't know. I can't tell". If he tells a lie it is not because of the same reasons he had cited earlier, not because he wanted her to live in the beautiful world of her own ("We must help them to stay in that beautiful world of their own, lest ours gets worse", he had told his listeners). It was under extremely painful circumstances that he could not make himself tell the truth about Kurtz. Though he persuaded himself into believing that it was because of his fidelity towards Kurtz. He feels guilty on behalf of the world of men—because, in contrast to Kurtz, she was so true, "She had a mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering": these are the values we know Conrad cared for, both as a seaman and writer—and must atone for by telling a lie, by keeping her in the dark. But this is mere surmise on my part, since Marlow himself does not know. We can never be sure. This is one of the great imponderables of modern literature.

5.3 APOCALYPTIC VISION

Apocalyptic vision of the collapse of the world becomes a prominent feature of modernist *Weltanschauung.* (Weltanschauung, as you may be aware, is a German word, that means worldview or the total idea of society and its purpose that a person or group has). This may not have followed from Spengler's *Decline of the West*, but for many historical and political reasons this became a widespread anxiety among creative artists, economists, political thinkers from around the turn of the century. In literature, implications were felt in some works with which you may be already familiar: Yeats's "Second Coming", Eliot's "The Waste Land", MacNiece's "Prayer for an Unborn Child", Auden's "Consider", to name a few. This is also evident in many paintings such as Picasso's "Guernica". What Frank Kermode has aptly called this anxiety "The Sense of an Ending", Watson calls it "The Myth of Catastrope". Kermode says further, "Apocalypse is a part of the modern Absurd".

Thus *Heart of Darkness* represents an early modernist manifesto in the direction of the apocalypse. We can detect Conrad's tug towards the eschatological, which means, towards the image of final, universal dissolution. This receives further confirmation and extension in Francis Coppola's film *Apocalypse Now*, where the scene is changed from Africa of the late ninteenth Century to Vietnam of the 1960s. Kurtz in his last words, "had made that last stride, he had stepped over the edge.... The threshold of the invisible". And "darkness' becomes a concluding invocation in which everything—the "saving illusion" of the Intended's faith in an empty deal ; the listeners, the "tranquil waterway", and "the ends of the Earth"—are all swallowed up: "I had vision of [Kurtz] on the stretcher, opening his mouth voraciously , as if to devour all the earth with all its mankind".

5.4 THE USE OF MYTH

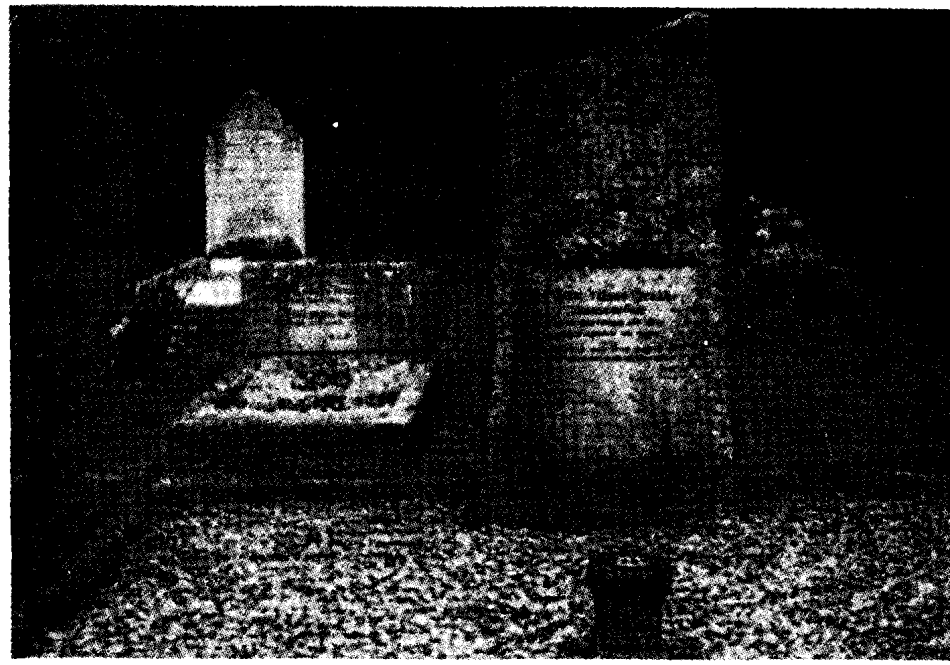
T.S. Eliot, who has himself used myths with such felicity and to such great effect in many of his poems especially in "The Waste Land", has given a formulation of the mythical ethos while extolling this technique in Joyce:

> In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him....It is a simple way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. It is a method already adumbrated by Mr. Yeats, and the need for which I believe Mr. Yeats to have been the first contemporary to be conscious.

Perceptive as Eliot is he seems to have forgotten his Conrad here. Or, is it because the latter's mythical method, as we shall see soon, is not of the kind Eliot had in mind? The conscious parallel that Conrad does draw is between distant and contemporary histories, as we have seen in the beginning of the narrative. But he seems to be alluding to, allegorising on, and even drawing on myths.

Myth of Faustus: The most obvious myth that he has integrated into the structure of *Heart of Darkness* is that of Faustus. Kurtz is a Faustian character; and is Charlie Marlow's answer to Christopher Marlowe's hero. Like his predecessor, he is extraordinarily gifted. Kurtz was "a remarkable man", Marlow never tires of telling us after his initial repugnance. He is said to have been a product of entire Europe: an allegorical figure for the European genius, and maybe, imperialism. But later he becomes a "universal genius". Here the ambiguity and irony needs to be recognised. He is all those talents combined: poet, musician, artist, explorer, rhetorician, would-be politician. But he is also someone who knows no restraint. Faustus too was unrestrained; and that was his tragic flaw. In spite of all his admiration for Kurtz, Marlow could still say, "His [Kurtz's] soul was mad".

Conrad's Grave



The Quest Myth: Frazer had begun publishing his monumental work, *The Golden Bough* (1890-1915) when *Heart of Darkness* was published. Soon Jessie Weston would publish her book on the Grail Legend drawing on Frazer's work. She explains the significance and symbolism of certain Arthurian romances which tell of the Quest for the Holy Grail by tracing them to their origin in the rituals of some ancient fertility gods, and by showing how they persisted throughout the intervening centuries. In these, the ruler of the land, the Fisher King suffers from a debilitating wound/disease. As a result his land is also cursed, and rots. He can be cured, and his land restored to fertility only if a hero/priest goes in quest of the Holy Grail in order to ask of it certain mysterious questions. He has to undergo several hardships and resist temptations to be able to carry out his objectives. Eliot's "The Waste Land" follows the pattern of this myth, but in a very subtle way, with other myths crowding in. The same is the case with *Heart of Darkness*.

The similarities and differences between the traditional Quest romance and Conrad's tale are easily seen. Kurtz undertakes the journey first, but in his quest he succumbs to temptations. Marlow embarks on another but uncertain quest; and his quest target undergoes shifts, until Kurtz himself, or rather the truth about the elusive hero, becomes his chief target. The quest does not end in expected results, and leads to further quests, which remain inconclusive. This is again a modernist method, in which older traditions are either subverted or adapted to suit the new needs.

Alternative Myths: The Christian myth of the corruption of Adam and Eve through temptation also dominates the imagery in the tale, with references to "the snake", "hissing", and Mephistopheles appearing now and then. This at once connects the tale to the other myth, that of Faustus.

5.5 LET US SUM UP

Thus we see that *Heart of Darkness* is indeed modern in more ways than one; and in certain ways ahead of its time. If it does occasionally appear to share some of the contemporary cultural prejudices, we need to take a closer look to see if appearances are deceptive. If confirmed, the prejudices strengthen the text's claims for transcending the other prejudices. Also, Conrad perceived the difference between the earlier attitudes and the emergent attitudes sooner than most of his contemporaries, and registered these in his works, especially in the tale under consideration. His own responses were quite complex as we have seen. If we are aware of this complexity it would entail recognition of a current critical habit. The past is reductively falsified in order to justify the political "correctness" of the present. *Heart of Darkness* exposes this habit in its earlier avatar, the "civilising mission".

5.6 QUESTIONS

1. Connect what is initillay referred to as the fascination of the abomination to what Marlow experiences later. Does he evince the same kind of fascination?

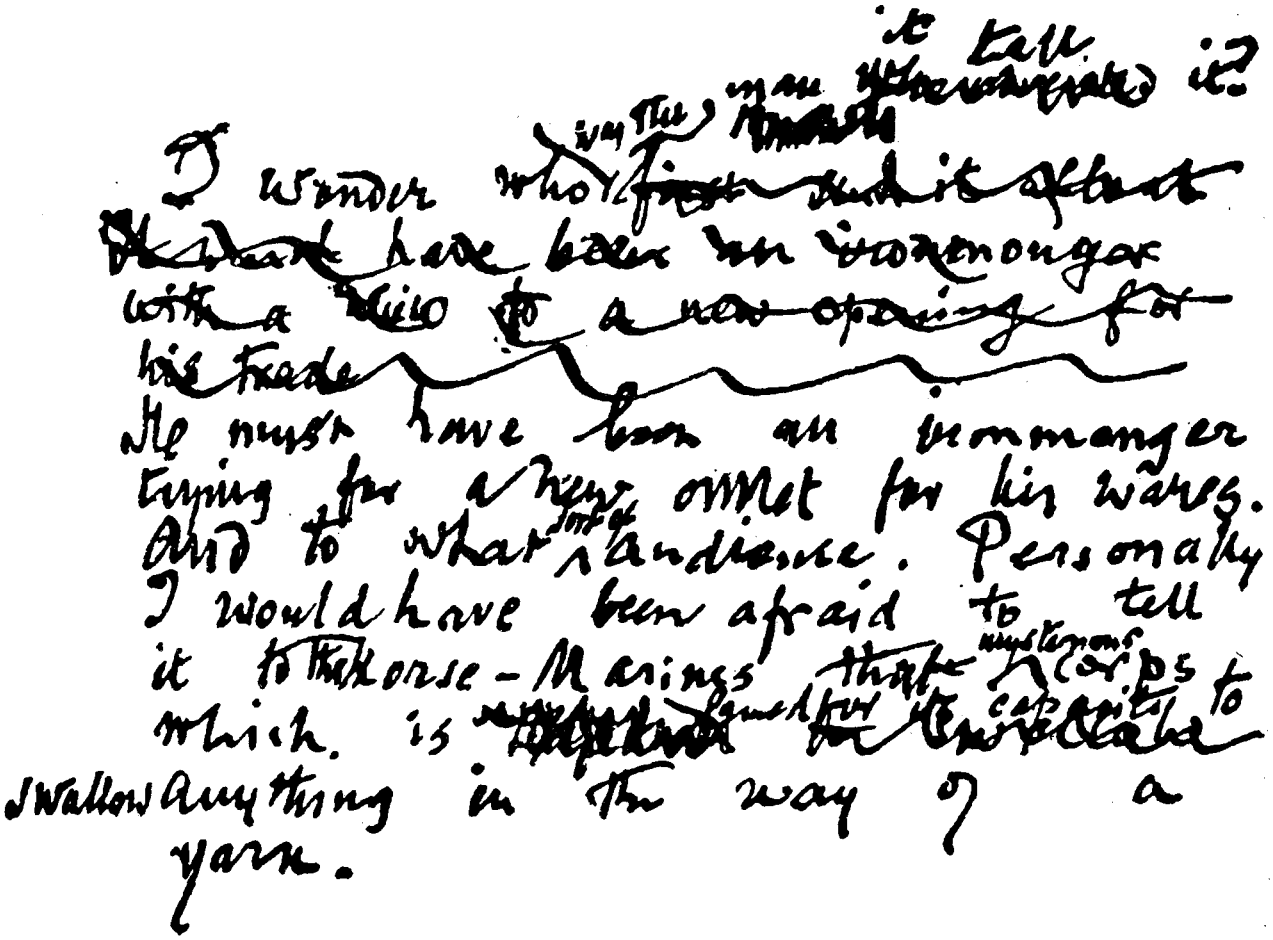
2. What is your view of the depiction of the two or three white women and the black women? Is Marlow a misogynist?

3. How does Conrad employ irony in depicting "progress" in the civilising work in Africa?

4. Do you think political-ideological reading of a literary work comes in the way of our enjoyment of it? Discuss.

5.7 SUGGESTED READING

Cedric Watts. *Conrad's "Heart of Darkness": A Critical and Contextual Discussion.* Milan, 1977.



The Last Words that Conrad Wrote