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Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: A Modernist Bildungsroman*

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Kim, Sung Ryol. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: A Modernist Bildungsroman. *The New Studies of English Language & Literature* 77 (2020): 271-286. The aim of this paper is to illuminate *Heart of Darkness* by examining it as a bildungsroman or entwicklungsroman (a novel of development in which the protagonist's childhood has been excised). This focus allows one to appreciate the rich ironic subtexts of Marlow's growth psychologically and morally. From the very beginning, *Heart of Darkness* signals itself as a novel of development, for Marlow claims that his Congo journey has cast a light on everything about him. But this light is ambiguous at best, presaging the complexity of the novel as a modernist bildungsroman. Marlow's relation to the African natives is a prime example of his problematic growth. His psychological maturation is, moreover, complicated by his cynicism and irony. But they undergo a partial transformation through his encounter with Kurtz, who functions ironically as a teacher, a typical character in a bildungsroman. From the perspective of this genre, Marlow's return to European society and his refusal to enlighten are full of irony, for the novel ends with an alienated hero whose growth or maturity is marked by ambivalence and ambiguity. (Dong-A University)

Key words: Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, bildungsroman, Marlow, genre

I

To understand better Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, critics have placed the novel or novella in various categories or genres. For Peter Brooks, *Heart of Darkness* is a "detective story gone modernist: a tale of inconclusive solutions to crimes of problematic status" (238). J. Hillis

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Miller views Conrad's novel as a parable, "oriented toward the future, toward last things, toward mysteries of the kingdom of heaven and how to get there" (32). Jennifer Lipka puts *Heart of Darkness* in the category of the Gothic novel: "the feeling of dread conveyed, which is the hallmark of all Gothic literature" qualifies Conrad's work (29). Terence Bowers discusses *Heart of Darkness* in relation to the *Aeneid* and the classical epic, exploring how Conrad creates "an ironical epic" (117).[1] Daniel Brudney identifies Conrad's tale as a confession in which Marlow seeks "to explain and justify himself" (333). Still other classifications of Conrad's canonical text have been offered. Andrea White considers *Heart of Darkness* as an adventure fiction *manque* (172). Needing no explanation, *Heart of Darkness* has been called a seaman's yarn, an anecdote, a cautionary tale. Unsurprisingly as well, Conrad's novel has in passing been referred to as a bildungsroman. Linda Costanzo Cahir comments that it is "an initiation into darkness and chaos, calmly framed by a prologue and epilogue," whose theme is the fascination of the abomination (183). Constance S. Richards accepts unquestioningly this classification, seeing *Heart of Darkness* as strangely a "model bildungsroman" (44).

But Conrad's novel is *not* a typical bildungsroman, and it seems to me deserves more close attention to its bildungsroman roots. Structurally, it resembles a bildungsroman. Marlow the protagonist changes and apparently develops as a result of his Congo journey. His growth is both moral and psychological. Marlow, however, is a grown man, already endowed with maturity, differing from such bildungsroman protagonists as Pip of *Great Expectations*. Moreover, Marlow's growth is

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[1] As an allusive text, *Heart of Darkness* has attracted comparison not only to Virgil but also to Dante. See Lillian Feder, Richard Russell, and Thomas Cleary and Terry Sherwood.

full of irony because the reader is left with uncertainty at the end of the novel, questioning whether he has truly developed spiritually and psychologically. His whole stance toward Kurtz, who ironically performs the role of the teacher of a bildungsroman, remains ambivalent. And, unlike the typical bildungsroman hero, Marlow is not completely reconciled to society. He may even be alienated. As it can be seen, Conrad departs from generic conventions in many ways and re-works the genre, fashioning a modernist bildungsroman through irony.[2]

II

The central figure who develops or matures psychologically and morally in the novel is Marlow. As Albert J. Guerard has observed, *Heart of Darkness* is "not primarily about Kurtz or the brutality of Belgian officials but about Marlow, its narrator" (37). Marlow himself sets the stage, claiming that his Congo journey was

> the culminating point of my experience. It seemed to throw a kind of light on everything about me — and into my thoughts. It was sombre enough too — and pitiful — not very clear either. No not very clear. And yet it seemed to throw a kind of light. (21)

Marlow's illumination is not definite; rather, it is tentative. The light is a "kind of light" and "not very clear." "Not very clear" and "seemed" are repeated to emphasize the uncertainty. From the very beginning Conrad's bildungsroman or entwicklungsroman declares its modernist stand toward truth and illumination. Despite this uncertainty, the frame

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[2] Technically *Heart of Darkness* is not a bildungsroman but an entwicklungsroman, a novel of development in which the protagonist's process of growing up from childhood has been excised.

narrator elicits the reader's expectation that Marlow has definitely learned something from, or has been enlightened by, his Congo experience, for Marlow is compared to a Buddha: "he had the pose of a Buddha preaching in European clothes and without a lotus flower" (20).

It is a comparison that Marlow himself confirms and supports. Like a Buddha, he sees through illusions, unmasking the reality behind the Roman conquest of Britain: "It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a grand scale, and men going at it blind — as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness" (20). More pertinently, he calls out contemporary European imperialism for what it is: "The conquest of the earth, which mostly means taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter nose than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much" (20. Marlow has peered into the truth. Instead of averting his gaze, he accepts what he sees and justifies European imperialism for its ideals, a justification that is a form of enlightenment pointing to his growth and development: "What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea — something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to" (20).[3] He further vaunts, distinguishing between the Roman conquerors and contemporary European colonialists that "what saves us is efficiency — the devotion to efficiency" (20). Like a bildungsroman protagonist who defines what matters in life, Marlow more specifically delineates what is important in the European imperial enterprise and has reached a measure of peace within himself as the

[3] Tom Henthorne calls Marlow's acceptance and justification of European imperialism as liberalism: he attacks the means but not the ends of imperialism (206). William Atkinson argues that Conrad's text is an attack on *foreign* imperialism, not on the British variety.

Buddha comparison indicates.[4]

But this peace, "his growth," rests on flimsy foundations and is disturbed and undermined paradoxically by his developmental journey up the Congo river, which is the tale he tells. Exposed to the "picture of a massacre" at the grove of death, "horror-struck" Marlow responds by offering biscuits to an African boy.[5] Seeing the chain-gang of Africans, Marlow indignantly recognizes that "these men could by no stretch of imagination be called enemies" (33). It seems that his humanity would be the locus of his moral development in this bildungsroman or entwicklungsroman. Marlow, however, frequently in many cases, refuses to learn from his experience. Repelled by the horror of the grove of death, he "didn't want any more loitering in the shade" (36). Shockingly, he trivializes the massacre that is taking place by using the word "loitering." He conveniently forgets what he has just witnessed as he admires the company accountant's "collars, his vast cuffs, his brushed hair" (36), which he takes as "achievements of character" (36).[6] Later, Marlow makes light of the grove of death, hoping in joy that the rivets necessary to repair the steamer "had rolled into" it (51).

Nonetheless, he is moved, for his racism does not prevent him from seeing the African natives' humanity. In his response to the African natives on the shore, Marlow is "thrilled" by the "thought of their

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[4] For Ian Watt, Marlow is a "very odd sort of Buddha" since he engages "the practical truths of the secular world" (253). Avram Alpert asserts that enlightenment in *Heart of Darkness* "is bound up with worldly ambitions and the matrices of power" (2).

[5] Richard Rankin Russell points to the grove of death as the starting place of Marlow's rejection of his racism (138).

[6] That Marlow's admiration is misplaced is underscored by the accountant's concern for accuracy, his devotion to efficiency, which ironically undermines Marlow's positive assessment of this European colonial characteristic that has the potential to save.

humanity," by "thought of your remote kinship" (62-3). Marlow, as Russell points out, is tempted to call the Africans monstrous yet recognizes his kinship (138).[7] Even more strikingly, the cannibals on the steamer present to Marlow "one of those *human* [emphasis mine] secrets that baffle probability" (70). They do not resort to cannibalism and eat the white crew, forcing Marlow to look "on them as you would any *human being* [emphasis mine] with a curiosity of their impulses, motives, capacities, weaknesses, when brought to the test of an inexorable physical necessity" (70). They pass a critical physical test, for "it takes a man all his inborn strength to fight hunger properly" (70). Superstition, disgust, patience, fear are all to no avail when it comes to hunger. They exhibit "inborn strength" to the full. Russell concludes that Marlow ultimately rejects his racism because the journey toward Kurtz's station becomes purgatorial through which he recognizes his kinship with the African natives (139). Marlow apparently grows and develops morally, resembling a bildungsroman protagonist.

But *Heart of Darkness* is a much more complex bildungsroman or entwicklungsroman. Marlow's growth is problematic, for it is limited, a limitation that is most evident in his reaction to his African helmsman's death. He is surprised by the level of his emotional involvement in his death and discusses his relationship to him: "He steered for me — I had to look after him, I worried about his deficiencies, and thus a subtle bond had been created, of which I only became aware when it was suddenly broken" (84). What is significant is the creation of a "subtle bond," which can be called for what it is, a human bond or tie that crosses race. Moreover, etched in Marlow's memory is the moment of

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[7] According to Carola M. Kaplan, Marlow's stereotypical description of the African natives "serve[s] a strategy of containment that enables him to deny both their importance for him and his affinity with them" (328).

the African helmsman's death: "And the intimate profundity of that look he gave me when he received his hurt remains to this day in my memory—like a claim of distant kinship affirmed in a supreme moment" (84). Marlow compares "that look" to a "claim of distant kinship," again emphasizing his cognizance of a human relationship between one individual and another beyond race.

His "moral" development, however, is still undercut and tainted by his racism. Marlow views the helmsman initially as an instrument: "for months I had him at my back—a help—an instrument. It was a kind of partnership" (84). According to Michael Lackey, "Marlow does not mourn the loss of a full-fledged human being; he laments the death of a deficient tool" (32).[8] Lackey further observes that the Africans are "ontologized as more animal than human" (31). Marlow does, of course, compare the savage fireman to a dog: "to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind legs" (64). Moreover, he dismisses the entire African race as not worthy of notice, reducing innumerable African lives to grains of sand: "Perhaps you will think it passing strange this regret for a savage who was no more account than a grain of sand in a black Sahara" (84). What is "strange" is that he cannot wipe the African helmsman from his memory. He cannot quite generalize his experiences with the Africans and extend to them their full humanity. From a bildungsroman perspective, Marlow's moral development stalls, his compassion limited.

Against this racism, a culturally entrenched form of unreason, Marlow ultimately seems to fare no better than the contemporary Europeans. The question is whether the reader judges Marlow on an unrealistic plane of moral expectations based on twenty-first century values. But

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[8] Lackey ignores "the subtle bond" and "distant kinship" and is perhaps too severe in his judgment of Marlow.

the European racism typical of his contemporaries was objected to by the *Spectator*, which pointed out the general indifference toward the killing of different races of color, indifference "which would have crazed old humanitarians, but which are now received in silence" (1694-95). His auditors on board the *Nellie* show no reaction toward Marlow's racism. The readers of the novel, however, are troubled despite the flashes of Marlow's compassion and humanity to which he himself is blind. As he remarks, "you fellows see more than I could then. You see me, whom you know" (50). Unlike a typical bildungsroman protagonist, Marlow is not fully aware of the significance of the result of his trials.

III

Marlow's psychological maturation is, moreover, complicated by his cynicism and irony.[9] Marlow is not a naive young man. Even before he sets out for the Congo, he has an inkling of the reality behind the European imperialist enterprise. His aunt's estimation of him as an "emissary of light, a lower sort of apostle" (28) is quickly dismissed by him. He considers her to be "out of touch with truth" (28), venturing "to hint that the Company was run for profit" (28). On his journey up the Congo, Marlow easily sees through the "self-serving philanthropic pretence of the whole concern [the European trading company]" (46). He scathingly refers to the Europeans of the Eldorado Expedition as animals: "I know nothing of the fate of the less valuable animals" (59). The ostensibly civilizing mission is mocked repeatedly through irony by him: Fresleven "had been a couple of years already

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[9] "The pervasive tone of Marlow's narration," as Hillis Miller has observed, "is irony which undercuts as it affirms" (46).

out there engaged in the noble cause . . . and he probably felt the need of asserting his self-respect in some way" (23). The noble cause does not give Fresleven a sense of pride as he resorts to violence, whacking the old chief. Marlow himself "was a part of the great cause of these high and just proceedings" (33).

Given such cynicism and irony, there is apparently no room for growth and maturation on Marlow's part. But just as his racist shell is cracked, incompletely as it may be, his cynicism and irony undergo a partial transformation through his encounter with Kurtz, who functions ironically as a teacher, a common bildungsroman character. That Kurtz is a teacher is not incongruous if one considers his relationship to the young Russian sailor. The Russian youth plays a minor role that echoes Marlow's. As James Morgan points out, the Russian youth is a prototype representing a stage of psychological development Marlow experiences through his journey into the heart of darkness (43). Like a bildungsroman protagonist, the youth proclaims: "But when one is young one must see things, gather experience, ideas; enlarge the mind" (88-89). Importantly, Kurtz "has enlarged" his mind (90). In what way this enlargement takes place is not explicitly stated. However, Kurtz is a charismatic figure to the youth, endowed with both esoteric and practical knowledge. They have even discussed women. Marlow calls him "Kurtz's last disciple" (96). But Kurtz is ironically not a kind teacher to the Russian youth, having threatened to kill him for his ivory. Despite Kurtz's "flaws" as a teacher, the youth worships him: "You don't talk with that man—you listen to him" (88). To the young man, Kurtz is beyond judgment: "You can't judge Mr Kurtz as you would an ordinary man" (92).

Unlike the Russian, Marlow, a man of mature years, is seemingly not duped, for he "did not envy him his devotion to Kurtz" (91). His youthful devotion appears to Marlow as "the most dangerous thing in

every way he had come upon so far" (91). In spite of his wariness and caution, Marlow, too, recognizes Kurtz's appeal, which is most apparent in his eloquence: "It made me tingle with enthusiasm. This was the unbounded eloquence — of words — of burning noble words" (83). It is, moreover, his words that Marlow discovers he wants to hear after the death of his helmsman: "I couldn't have been more disgusted if I had travelled all this way for the sole purpose of talking with Mr Kurtz" (79). He is "cut to the quick at the idea of having lost the inestimable privilege of listening to the gifted Kurtz" (80). In the beginning, Kurtz had only provoked Marlow's curiosity: "I was curious to see whether this man, who had come out equipped with moral ideas of some sort, would climb to the top after all, and how he would set about his work when there" (55). Kurtz's existence has now become central to Marlow: "For me it [the steamer] crawled towards Kurtz — exclusively" (61). Ultimately, Kurtz will become Marlow's teacher, enabling him to find "some knowledge of yourself," which is the "most you can hope from life" (112-13). He will help to shape and develop Marlow's character by enabling him to discover aspects of himself that go to his moral essence.

Presaging Marlow, Kurtz also resembles a bildungsroman protagonist. He undergoes all the trials in the Congo that ironically affect his "growth." Marlow wonders: "Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge?" (112). Marlow believes, with some qualification, that Kurtz has acquired some form of knowledge about himself: "I think the knowledge came to him at last — only at the very last" (95). But this self-knowledge, encapsulated by his famous last words, is tinged with irony in the context of a bildungsroman. It is both positive and negative, befitting a complex modernist re-working of the genre. Kurtz does reach a point of self-realization like a bildungsroman protagonist

when faced with a spiritual crisis, which takes the form of death in his case. But this self-realization is horrific. Unlike a typical hero of a bildungsroman, who finds a sense of belonging in relation to his society and world, Kurtz dies alienated and alone. The irony underneath this irony, however, is that Kurtz's self-knowledge does bring his unlawful soul back into relation with the world: his vision "was wide enough to embrace the whole universe, piercing enough to penetrate all the hearts that beat in the darkness" (113). Marlow believes the vision encompassed in Kurtz's last cry "was an affirmation, a moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats, by abominable terrors, by abominable satisfactions. But it was a victory!" (114).

Marlow has not been so confident before about Kurtz's "judgment upon the adventures of his soul on this earth" (112). Earlier, he had not been "prepared to affirm the fellow was exactly worth the life we lost in getting to him" (84). Marlow had received a "moral shock" by Kurtz's disappearance from the steamer's cabin (104). Full of contempt for Kurtz, Marlow had described the pilgrims as burying "something [Kurtz's corpse] in a muddy hole" (112). And he had "resented bitterly the absurd danger of our situation, as if to be at the mercy of that atrocious phantom had been a dishonouring necessity" (97). What changes his mind is his own experience at death's door. As the true hero of this bildungsroman, Marlow reaches a spiritual crisis as he nears death and "found with humiliation that probably I would have nothing to say. This is the reason why I affirm that Kurtz was a remarkable man" (113). This new-found respect permits him to be loyal to Kurtz, the nightmare of his choice, allowing him to accept the atrocities committed by Kurtz.

Marlow's loyalty to Kurtz, then, begs the question of his psychological maturation, perhaps even his moral development. After the tale he tells, Marlow is once again compared to a Buddha by the frame narrator:

"Marlow ceased and sat apart, indistinct and silent, in the pose of a meditating Buddha" (123). This comparison, as in the beginning of the novel, seems to confirm that the protagonist has found a measure of inner peace. But this allusion to a Buddha remains ironic.[10] On the one hand, Marlow as a Buddha figure is full of compassion, lying to Kurtz's Intended: his "anger subsided before a feeling of infinite pity" (122).[11] On the other hand, he preserves illusions and refuses to enlighten: "I had no particular desire to enlighten them, but I had some difficulty in restraining myself from laughing in their faces, so full of stupid importance" (114).[12] He is "jealous of sharing with any one the peculiar blackness of that experience" (105). Deepening the irony, the Buddha comparison, while suggestive of inner peace, does not reconcile him to society. In a bildungsroman, the hero finds a sense of belonging to the world, Marlow's "knowledge of life" and of himself as a result of his Congo experience alienates him. As Bowers observes, though in a different generic context, the return home "is profoundly alienating to Marlow, a modern Ulysses, who finds it impossible to restore order epistemologically and morally (135-36).

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[10] According to Morgan, Marlow as a Buddha completes successfully his initiation ritual, shedding the role of the Harlequin (the Russian youth) for that of a Buddha, changing costumes (45-6).

[11] Alpert claims that Marlow is comparable to a Buddha: the message he conveys to the Intended confronts darkness with pity, which is a necessary response (9-10). For Ted Billy, Marlow chooses an appalling lie instead of annihilating truth (74). H. M. Daleski observes that it is an ordinary white lie (75).

[12] Alpert argues that "*Heart of Darkness* enacts a struggle against all claims to imposing enlightenment" (3). According to Hillis Miller, "Darkness enters into every gesture of enlightenment to enfeeble it, to hollow it out, to corrupt it" (48).

IV

It is not, however, a complete alienation. Marlow does lie to Kurtz's Intended.[13] He tears the post scriptum from Kurtz's report. He does share his Congo experience with those on board the *Nellie*, though they are a circle of friends. Most significantly, he accepts the ideals behind European imperialism, with all its murderous brutality, echoing the beginning of his narrative. At one point, he describes the Congo steamer, which represents European imperialism, as "the grimy fragment of another world, the forerunner of change, of conquest, of trade, *of massacres* [emphasis mine], of blessings (110). His auditors, and by implication, his readers come full circle as Marlow and his tale frustrate anyone looking for a definitive conclusion. *Heart of Darkness*, as Mark Wollaeger points out, "ends inconclusively by returning us to the narrative frame and the impossibility of knowing whether . . . listeners learned anything from the story" (74). Further, one wonders whether Marlow himself completely understands the "significance of his own narration" (Wollaeger 77). Given this ambivalence regarding Marlow's psychological and moral growth, the examination of *Heart of Darkness* as a bildungsroman or entwicklungsroman multiplies and deepens the irony, serving to underscore the complexity of this modernist text as Conrad re-works a generic form to suit his own artistic ends. *Heart of Darkness* as a modernist bildungsroman attests to Hillis Miller's trenchant observation that "no work is wholly commensurate with the boundaries of any genre" (50).

However, though it departs in many ways from a traditional bildungsroman, at its root is a concern for morality and maturation that

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[13] Matthew C. Brennan remarks that Marlow "consciously chooses to re-integrate himself into 'healthy society' by lying to Kurtz's Intended.

is preserved, though no definitive answer is provided. Conrad does not seem to relativize morality, for it is a central concern of the novel as evidenced by Marlow, who grapples with what stance he should take toward Kurtz. But the inherent strength of the novel is in the courage with which the central characters face the darkness. Kurtz has looked into it while Marlow undertakes a treacherous quest in search of evidence for a moral core at the heart of man. What he finds in Kurtz's last words changes him forever. The question becomes whether Marlow is scarred or redeemed. The frame narrator tells us that it is customary for Marlow to narrate experiences that are "inconclusive." But in this case, reverting to the form of a bildungsroman protagonist, Marlow is a sadder and wiser man.

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