

“It Was the Stillness of an Implacable Force”: A Lyotardian Study of Ecology in *Heart of Darkness*

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines nature in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* in the light of Lyotard’s discourse of ecology and his other philosophical ideas. His postmodernist criticism of conformity and representability, as asserted in his notion of ecology and implied throughout his whole philosophy, provides a lens through which to see nature as an unruly agent that challenges Western development in epistemological and linguistic terms. Such an understanding of nature, Lyotard suggests, necessitates the deconstructive power of avant-garde art, especially literary writing, which Conrad’s 1899 text best prefigures. Set mainly in the wilderness of colonial Congo during the nineteenth century, the widely acknowledged postcolonial novella at once invites an ecocritical reading of how European developed culture struggles and eventually fails to prove mastery over African nature.

Key words: Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, Lyotard, Ecology, Optimal Performance, Language

INTRODUCTION

Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* has been the object of extensive postcolonial criticism. One of its most quoted passages appears early in the novella, where Marlow, its sceptic British protagonist and the main narrator, makes an interesting commentary on colonization:

The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. 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.... (Conrad, 1899, p. 10)

Marlow’s remarks are part of a self-contradictory argument he makes to defend British colonialism as opposed to the Roman Empire. Condemning the latter for its false pretensions to human rights, he first hails the former as redeemed by an unselfish idea but, quite ironically, goes on to admit the “philanthropic pretence” of the European colonial mission to Africa which he was appointed for and is now giving an account of to a group of auditors (p. 27). Yet, it is not only the racist aspect of colonialism that prevents it from being a pretty thing to look at—what many critics have taken Marlow’s commentary to be all about. Colonization is as importantly “the conquest of the earth” (p. 10), Marlow points out at the very outset, bringing up the issue of environmental abuse involved in the project of colonization.

Drawing on the ideas of the twentieth-century philosopher Jean Francois Lyotard, this essay seeks to cast new light

on the natural environment and its relationship with humans in *Heart of Darkness*. Although Lyotard is never regarded as an environmental theorist and his oeuvre reflects little concern about the natural world, I want to argue that particularly his “version of ecology” (Lyotard, 1993, p. 100)—with its political, psychological and linguistic implications—can provide a theoretical framework for a new analysis of nature within the colonial context of Conrad’s novella. Accordingly, nature, as also implied in the title of this essay, is a silent and secret but rebellious entity; it resists the encroachments of Western epistemological and linguistic development and even rebels against the greedy encroachers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous ecocritical scholarship on *Heart of Darkness* is rare and new. Jeffery Myers (2001) sees the main conflict of Conrad’s novella rooted in European proclivity for “construction of the self over and against the ‘Other’” (p. 98). He highlights colonial acts of violence against African people and nature in the text to conclude that Kurtz’s death is due to his deadly disillusionment with European civilization, with, in other words, the mastery of European “anthropocentric self” over the natural world (p. 100). With a particular emphasis on the character of Kurtz and his fateful transformation due to his ivory greed, Jeffrey Mathes McCarthy’s treatment of Conrad’s text in 2009 similarly presents it as a literary effort to challenge the position of the “confident, imperial, and civilized subject” in its relationship with the natural world (p. 635). He interprets Marlow’s “choice of

nightmares" (Conrad, 1899, p. 62) as modern Europe's dual attitudes toward nature: one that sees nature as a "passive object for human exploitation" (McCarthy, 2009, p. 627) and the other that risks losing European "self-regard" by seeking identification with nature (p. 639). Geoff Berry (2011) explores images of light and darkness in the novella in order to reveal Conrad's anxiety over the limits of the ideology that associates the former with the order of Western civilization and the latter with the savagery of nature. He believes that "the ancient duality of light over darkness enthrone a damaging cultural law dedicated to the overcoming of earthly conditions." (p. 83). Conrad's novella, he contends, attempts to subvert this duality, showing that the darkness in question is not that of Africa: "it is the darkness that shadows the colonist's drive towards being free of the earth while continuing to deploy the most effective machinations of plundering it" (p. 89). Describing it as a "work about the environment" (p. 94), Terence N. Bowers (2013) finds Conrad's masterpiece informed by a Darwinist vision of man-nature relationship that seeks to undermine the "ecological as well as imperial triumphalism" of British global power (p. 98 emphasis original). Highlighting the fates of European settlements as well as main characters that Marlow comes across in his African experience, Bowers states that Marlow's "journey hints not only at the failure of Euro-imperialism to establish itself in the tropics, but also, at the likely failure of civilization to survive on earth and the folding back of all humanity into nature with the rest of animal creation" (p. 104). In a later analysis, Greg Winston (2015) identifies three aspects of Conrad's ecological awareness in the text—hydrologic, geologic and zoologic—showing in each category "an economy of [narrative] style that features intersecting tropes of imperialist and ecological significance" (p. 42). Informed by the rather new and more comprehensive approach of postcolonial-ecological criticism, Winston's analysis seeks to explore a sense of "interconnectivity of natural resources with the historical circumstances of cultural conquest" in the novella (p. 45). Most recently, Caitlin Vandertop (2018) has read Conrad's novella as a depiction of ecological and epistemological failure caused by "global capitalism" (p. 682). He believes the colonists' short-sighted motivation for uneven accumulation of wealth in the novella to be the main force behind the "appropriation and exhaustion of human and extra-human natures" (p. 688). Illuminating as all these studies are, none shows Conrad's advocacy of nature as bound with his critique of European complacency in human consciousness and language. To see this in the novella, we should now turn to Lyotard and examine his vision of ecology.

DISCUSSION

Optimal Economic Growth and Colonial Trade of Ivory

In his short essay entitled "*Oikos*"—Greek for eco—Lyotard identifies some sort of anomaly which emerges as a result of systems' struggle for what he terms "complexification"—i.e. a state of "development" based on the principle of "efficiency" or "optimal performance." Accordingly, in their efforts to ensure optimal performance in all areas including

"economy," Western "technoscientific systems" inevitably give rise to a kind of "otherness" within them that can act as a source of "trouble" or "dangers" for the systems' development. Widely ascribed from the point of view of development to the "Third World," this "otherness" cannot exist on its own as a separate entity: "either it will join the system," observes Lyotard, "or it will have to be excluded from it" (1993, pp. 96-107). Clearly, this can find expression in Western colonialism, leading to domination, exploitation and displacement of humans as well as natural resources from underdeveloped countries.

Lyotard's suggestion that economic efficiency motivates much of European involvement in the Third World well explains Belgian colonization of the Congo in the novella. Describing the Company he was going to work for, Marlow admits to his aunt a few days before his departure that the Company's mission to the Congo is in fact prompted by its economic "devotion to efficiency" (Conrad, 1899, p. 10). Rather than for a truly civilizing cause—that of "weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways," as was widely publicized in the press (p. 16)—"they were going to run an oversea empire," notes Marlow, "and make no end of coin by trade" (p. 13).

Marlow's reference is to the trade of ivory. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, the African continent witnessed a tide of Europe's colonial activities, with the Congo basin becoming Belgium's share. Writing of King Leopold II's exploitation of the Belgian Congo, Guy Vanthemsche (2012) notes that "around 1895, the gathering of ivory, and especially the harvesting of wild rubber, became highly profitable" (p. 23). He explains it as follows:

In order to maximize profit, both the Congo Free State authorities and the concessionary companies set up a particularly harsh system of exploitation. The Congolese were not only subjected to a merciless work regime, but also to acts of violence aimed at breaking any vague ideas of resistance. The destruction of villages, summary executions, hostage taking and various types of corporal punishment were common practice in many parts of the Congo Free State. (p. 23)

Thus, the Congo being rich in such natural resources as ivory and rubber, King Leopold II's greed to hoard as much of them as possible led to appalling genocide as well as massive destruction of the indigenous wildlife across the region.

Colonialism and Destruction of African Nature

In *Postmodern Fables*, Lyotard (1997) warns that "it even became necessary that the open systems temper their success over other systems in order to preserve the ensemble called ecosystem from a catastrophic deregulation" (p. 90). For him, Western technoscientific development is inevitable, but alarmingly so is the destructive treatment of nature that follows from it (Grebowicz, 2016, pp. 101-2). Given that this "war on nature is enacted by the rich on the poor" (Conley, 1997, p. 4), it is indeed the case that in its pursuit of economic efficiency in Third World countries, Western colonialism inevitably cause damage to the natural environment.

This becomes evident in the novella in the colonists' untempered behavior toward the African environment. They see the land and the forest as either objects to exploit or threats to overcome through their technoscientific means. As Marlow recounts, on board a steamer heading to Africa, he comes across a scene in which the Europeans, armed with modern military equipment, are abusing nature:

[W]e came upon a man-of-war anchored off the coast... [S]he was shelling the bush. It appears the French had one of their was going on thereabouts... Pop, would go one of the six-inch guns; a small flame would dart and vanish, a little white smoke would disappear, a tiny projectile would give a feeble screech—and nothing happened. Nothing could happen. There was a touch of insanity in the proceeding, a sense of lugubrious drollery in the sight. (Conrad, 1899, p. 17)

The scene captures the French warship's bombardment of the African "bush," indicating the enormity of destruction that Western development can cause to the indigenous environment and, therefore, the paradox in colonialism's claim to civilization. There is not true rationality, Marlow says, but in fact "a touch of insanity" in such colonial self-serving practices. Later, upon his arrival on Africa's land and not far from the Company's Central Station, Marlow faces another scene of European abuse of nature:

I came upon more pieces of decaying machinery, a stack of rusty rails... A horn tooted to the right and I saw the black people run. A heavy and dull detonation shook the ground, a puff of smoke came out of the cliff, and that was all. No change appeared on the face of the rock. They were building a railway. The cliff was not in the way of anything, but this objectless blasting was all the work going on. (Conrad, 1899, p. 19)

As we can see, colonists deal with pieces of "machinery" and explosive devices in what appears to be a "railway" building project. However, their work, Marlow says, results in "no change" but "objectless blasting" of Congolese land. The scene betrays once again European seeming acts of development—but in fact destruction—in order to facilitate their own colonial exploitation of the Congo and, thus, achieve optimal economic growth.

Nature as a Thing in Itself

Inasmuch as Western principle of optimal performance relies on rigid, instrumental reasoning in order to rationalize its destructive control of the natural world and, thus, make sense in public opinion, Lyotard's discourse of ecology avoids it, calling instead for a state of "thought that is not subject to systematic control by destructive orders and strategic configuration" (Conley, 1997, p. 6). For Lyotard (1993), general public's thought is ordered and configured mainly by psychic repression of curiosities about whatever is traditionally associated with nature by the dominant culture, i.e. women, children, animals and, above all, human body. Given the (funda)mental role that nature—and its erasure—plays in the (mis)configuration of public ideas and beliefs, the concept of ecology, as a result, comes to take on a different meaning in

Lyotard. He sees the possibility of an ecological disaster not simply in terms of an external issue between humans and the natural environment, but, more importantly, as an internal, psychological one within and for each human being. This is, in effect, to call human consciousness and its control over a passive world into question, which helps free nature from its traditional subjective captivity.

It can be argued that nature has the status of "matter" in the context of Lyotard's philosophy. "By matter," he writes, "I mean *the Thing*... [I]t does not call on the mind... It is presence as unrepresentable to the mind, always withdrawn from its grasp" (Lyotard, 1991, p. 142 emphasis original). Therefore, to acknowledge nature as a Thing in itself is to come across the limits of Western rationality, to teeter, in other words, on the edge of vagueness and wonderment. Conrad's use of this strategy emerges in Marlow's uneasy sense of the surroundings throughout his journey. Remembering approaching the African continent, he exclaims that "the general sense of vague and oppressive wonder grew upon me" (Conrad, 1899, p. 17). As he moves further through the Congo's wilderness, his consciousness fails him even more. He finds to his dismay that no element of nature is permeable to his consciousness: "I looked around and I don't know why, but I assure you that never, never before did this land, this river, this jungle, the very arch of this blazing sky appear to me so hopeless and so dark, so impenetrable to human thought, so pitiless to human weakness" (p. 55). In fact, with its anthropocentric taste for semantic authority, Western rationalist epistemology, as Ann McClintock (1984) points out, is not able to fully grasp the non-human African wilderness, bringing Marlow to a desperate impasse of interpretation as well as communication.

Nature and Human Language

In a text that greatly concerns the questions of language, representation and communication,¹ Lyotard's linguistic observations about ecology can further illuminate the role of nature in the novella. As was mentioned, central to the Lyotardian concept of ecology is an awareness of psychic repressions. This process of repression, which begins from early childhood, takes place quite insidiously through the impositions of language as a conduit for the ideals of the dominant culture (Lyotard, 1993). On these terms, Lyotard's discourse of ecology acknowledges the presence of that which escapes dominant systems of meaning, signification and communication. As he observes, "for me, 'ecology' means the discourse of the secluded, of the thing that has not become public, that has not become communicational, that has not become systemic, and that can never become any of these things" (1993, p. 105). The nature Marlow encounters throughout his adventure is as much uncommunicative and secluded from the dominion of European linguistic system. Recounting his meeting with the Company's brickmaker, Marlow describes the Congo's wilderness as follows:

All this was great, expectant, mute.... I wondered whether the stillness on the face of the immensity looking at us two were meant as an appeal or as a menace. What were we who had strayed in here? Could we handle that

dumb thing, or would it handle us? I felt how big, how confoundedly big, was that thing that couldn't talk and perhaps was deaf as well. (Conrad, 1899, p. 29)

Marlow's remarks confirm the ontology of nature. While being "mute," "still," "dumb," "deaf," and unable to "talk" the colonists' language, nature is "that thing" that exists in itself, having its own, Marlow later says, "unspeakable secrets" (p. 62).

As Lyotard's theory of ecology suggests, our task is to seek and care for these unspeakable facts through literary works of art. He believes that literary writing is able to de-centre language, cutting through its rationalist obsession with optimal performance in order to get to the heart of things. As he explains in:

This presupposes that there is a relation of language with logos, which is not centred on optimal performance and which is not obsessed by it, but which is preoccupied, in the full sense of 'pre-occupied' with listening to and seeking for what is secluded, *oikeion*. This discourse is called 'literature,' 'art,' or 'writing' in general. (Lyotard, 1993, p. 105)

Lyotard's discourse of ecology challenges the logocentric belief in conveying the objective truth via the referential function of language, a conceptual construct that seeks semantic closure by reducing the Thing into words, thus leaving many facts about it "secluded" and, therefore, unspeakable. This well informs Conrad's writing style in the novella. Preoccupied as an innovative work of literature with speaking the "secluded" facts of the Congo's nature, Conrad's novella performs this task by showing their unspeakability. This approach of his is expressed not only in Marlow's narrative of failed communication with nature but also in the failed communication of the narrative itself. Thus, at the beginning of the novella, the frame narrator describes Marlow's tale as a rhetoric whose meaning does not readily lie in the tale's linguistic elements:

But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted) and to him 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. (Conrad, 1899, p. 9)

The meaning of Marlow's narrative, as the frame narrator implies, does not arise from inside a coherent system of signs that seeks a semantic closure; as hazy and loose as a "misty halo," it flows freely around his tale, refusing to become fixed and present to consciousness. Later, finding language too poor a medium for describing the full impact of his Congolese experience, Marlow stops the narration and complains that his attempt at doing so is all in vain:

Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream—making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is of the very essence of dreams.... (Conrad, 1899, p. 30)

Marlow glimpses at the incommensurability between word and world (McClintock, 1984). On the existential level, his real-life participation in the Congo's surroundings makes for its very essence, a lived experience which remains, to use James Guetti's term, "alinguistic" (1965, p. 502). However, on the linguistic level, his experience is dream-like, bewildering and beyond full comprehension. Linguistically, Marlow adds in despair, "it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence—that which makes its truth, its meaning—its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible" (Conrad, 1899, p. 30).

Epistemologically, Marlow's colonial mission to Africa marks the epoch of his life. If, as McClintock (1984) contends, it is his exposure to the Congo's nature—its abused condition as well as its powerful effects on him—that has rendered him so hopelessly lost for words and meaning, then it is through Conrad's artistic rendering of this very loss, this absence of Western epistemological authority, that nature finds opportunity to present itself as a Thing in itself and to make its unspeakable facts heard. Associating, as was mentioned, his theory of ecology with art, Lyotard (1991) observes, "When we have been abandoned by meaning, the artist has a professional duty to bear witness that *there is*.... Art... accomplishes an ontological task... It must constantly testify anew to the occurrence by letting the occurrence be" (p. 88). In bearing witness to nature's ontological—however wordless—status, Conrad (1899/2015) still looks to words themselves to accomplish his ecological duty as an author: "[W]ords, groups of words, words standing alone, are symbols of life, have the power in their sound or their aspect to present the very thing you wish to hold up before the mental vision of your readers. The things 'as they are' exist in words" (p. 124). Out of the powerful words of his novella, nature, as we saw, emerges as a Thing in itself; it even begins to show itself as having a form of "agency" that, although silent and latent, can become threateningly active at times (Free, 2015, p. 5).²

Nature Revenges

Conrad artistically shows this by anthropomorphizing nature. It defends and even fights back against colonial encroachers at different points throughout the story. Marlow remembers that it seemed "as if Nature herself had tried to ward off intruders" as he, on board toward the Congo, saw dangerous sea waves defending against the coasts of Africa (Conrad, 1899, p. 17). He remarks later that the Congo's wilderness waited "patiently for the passing away of this fantastic invasion" (p. 26) and that it seemed to fight back "like a rioting invasion of soundless life... ready to topple over the creek to sweep every little man of us out of his little existence" (p. 32). Moved later by the silence of the wilderness, Marlow observes that "this stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace. It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention. It looked at you with a vengeful aspect" (p. 36). And the colonist whom nature takes its revenge on most conspicuously is the greedy chief of a trading outpost, Mr Kurtz.

Marked by his communicativeness and publicity, Kurtz is defined in direct opposition to Lyotard's discourse of ecology. Marlow describes him as follows:

I made the strange discovery that I had never imagined him as doing, you know, but as discoursing....The man presented himself as a voice. Not of course that I did not connect him with some sort of action. Hadn't I been told in all the tones of jealousy and admiration that he had collected, bartered, swindled, or stolen more ivory than all the other agents together?... [O]f all his gifts the one that stood out preeminently, that carried with it a sense of real presence, was his ability to talk, his words—the gift of expression.(Conrad, 1899, p. 48)

The passage captures European rhetoric of optimal performance, with Kurtz being the "voice" of this rhetoric. His actions speak to the mechanistic-rationalist obsession with mastery over a passive world. In fact, having collected most ivory from the Congo, he gives "expression" to colonial exploitation of natural resources. This rhetoric of exploitation, of course, communicates itself effectively and makes sense to the colonial public: it has aroused other colonists' "jealousy and admiration." In this way, Kurtz, as Melissa Free (2015) points out, provides a perfect foil for the Congo's nature. For it is against a backdrop of silence and secrecy that "his words" can "stand out" to earn him public attention and a "sense of real presence."

Kurtz's powerful voice, however, gives way to the silent power of nature. In fact, his long, unsustainable engagement in "grubbing for ivory in the wretched bush" of the Congo seriously affects his health, mentally and physically (Conrad, 1899, p. 44). Speaking of him, Marlow observes that the wilderness had "got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation" (p. 49). Kurtz dies by the end of the novella, a hard lesson from nature which Marlow describes as a revelatory moment: "I think the knowledge came to him at last—only at the very last. But 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" (p. 57). What Kurtz and, by extension, the reader realize is the illusive power of European developed culture over nature, that "nature, far from manifesting civilization's priority, shows instead humanity as an unsettled and incidental wanderer across nature" (McCarthy, 2009, p. 641). Even his dying words "The horror! The horror!" (Conrad, 1899, p. 68) confirm this, a haunting echo of nature's silent power over any human who encroaches upon it.

CONCLUSION

To conclude this essay, nature in *Heart of Darkness* represents the uncommunicativeness and disruptiveness of Lyotard's notion of ecology. In the words of the philosopher and environmental thinker Margret Grebowicz (2016), "This silence/danger, the opacity of untameable nature to communicability, is precisely what exceeds the mechanism of development/complexification" (p. 105). In this way, nature

emerges as a Thing in itself that has to be listened to and sought for through the power of art. In fact, in its artistic depiction of nature's exceeding the colonists' epistemological and linguistic authority, the novella enacts Lyotard's belief in the ecological role that literature can play in tempering the unsustainable effects of Western development on the environment.

END NOTES

1. For a useful sampling of most recent scholarship on this, see Melissa Free; Li TANG; Annika J. Linskog; Adam J. Engel; Stephen Skinner; and Dorothy Trench-Bonett.
2. There are compelling arguments in favour of the agency of nature. Eminent environmental philosopher Val Plumwood (2002), for instance, observes that "human-centred ideas of contingency support the mechanistic-rationalist obsession with mastery and control over a passive world conceived as transparent and incapable of agency" (p. 227). Similarly, for Linda Nash (2005), "the very idea of agency concentrates a vast amount of power in a supposedly rational center, while constructing nonhuman elements as always external and secondary" (p. 68). She contends that the "so-called human agency cannot be separated from the environments in which that agency emerges" (p. 69). Arguing in a similar vein, Ted Steinberg (2002) notes: "Taking into account the independent world of nature should cause us to rethink the meaning of human agency. We need, in short, a less anthropocentric and less arrogant view of the concept" (pp. 819-20). Finally, "The recognition of more-than-human agency," observes John Cianchi (2015), "radically alters the sociological gaze from a view of a passive nature filled with objects, to a multi-faceted, dynamic world of manifold, constitutive relationships with non-human subjects" (p. 34).

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