Penetrating into the Dark: An Archetypal Approach to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

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Abstract—The present paper aims at providing an archetypal analysis of Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness which in turn gets its most effective impetus from Carl Yung's theory of "collective unconscious". Yung believed that our collective unconscious is a primordial treasure of dreams and myths which we have inherited from the time of our forefathers and which contains the universal themes and images. For him, mythology was a textbook of archetypes, and literature contained the whole dream of mankind. In *Heat of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad has created a modern myth which decodes the language of the unconscious via some archetypal images. These images depict the contemporary issues of the time both on historical and psychological levels. In a series of archetypal images, which Conrad has delicately selected, organized, and interwoven, the novel represents the deepest inclinations of the universal man as well as his unconscious desires like the desire for quest, for growth, for truth, and for self-recognition. To see how these images mirror the human nature, the present paper attempts to analyze the construction and interrelations of these archetypes.

Index Terms—Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, Carl Yung, collective unconscious, myth, archetype

I. INTRODUCTION

A myth is, in a mostly used sense, a traditional story about gods, heroes, or supernatural beings. It explains the origins of the natural phenomena and the nature of the human behavior. It also justifies the events and changes in the world. It teaches us how to live, and gives meaning to our lives. When we take the myth in this sense, it is understandable why Pierre Brunel should claim that the light of myth "spills out over us, revealing us to ourselves; it helps us to understand where we have come from" (qtd. in Vivier, 2005, p. 11), for seemingly he wants to acknowledge that the historical man is both a myth-making creature and the product of myth. This seems also to go with Erich Fromm's definition of myth as a message which we send to ourselves and which acts like a secret language that helps us treat the inner events like the outer ones. Myth as massage is also a realm of negotiation of the peoples, a space for the intercommunication of the universal man.

Other thinkers have also dealt with the myth typically for its multiple functions in the life of the universal man. From the eye of these thinkers, myth is, among other things, a multidimensional issue of subjectivity. For example, a scholar claims that myth "has concerned … [many thinkers and researchers] from the time of Plato and the Sophists," and explains that the historical myth has basically been interpreted literally as well as symbolically. He affirms that "Ethnologists have tended to interpret myth literally as an expression of primitive thought …" while "idealistic philosophers and theologians have, …, interpreted it allegorically as symbolizing some transcendental, timeless truth …." (Bidney, 1966, p. 12). In addition, John B. Vickery (1966) sees a myth as "the matrix out of which literature emerges both historically and psychologically" (p. ix). An outcome of this comparison is his affirmation that "literary plots, characters, themes, and images are basically complications and displacements of similar elements in myths and folktales." At the end of his formula, Vickery speaks even more emphatically about the role of myth in literature: the "ability of literature to move us profoundly is due to its mythic quality, to its possession of man, the numinous, or the mystery in the face of which we feel an awed delight or terror at the world of man" (1966, p. ix). Myth-possessing man implies the function of literary narrative via which the blueprint of historical man's consciousness has been provided and up-to-dated in the course of history.

As "depersonalized dreams," these myths are, For Carl Jung, mirrored through "archetypes." And M. H. Abrams says archetypes are the "primordial images" or the "'psychic residue' of repeated patterns of common human experience in the lives of our very ancient ancestors which … survive in the 'collective unconscious' of the human race and are expressed in myths, religion, dreams, and private fantasies, as well as in works of literature" (1999, pp. 12-13). Originating from our "collective unconscious," these archetypes have their abstract language there in us which literary works reveal through images. In different times and places, these archetypes are usually interpreted in the same way, because what they represent is the deepest dreams, desires, joys, aspirations, and fears of the universal man. As Vickery believes, such "mythological archetypes … cut across the boundaries of these cultural spheres and are not confined to any one or two, but variously represented in all" (p. 17). However, Northrop Frye's view about literature and archetypes introduces perhaps a more concrete dimension of them which provides man with a kind of life that is both imaginary and practical: "The archetypal view of literature shows us literature as a total form and literary experience as a part of the continuum of life, in which the poet's function is to visualize the goals of human work" (1957, p. 115). Literature is

not only the total form of our being in the imaginary, it is also the possibility of the continuation of our existence in the practical life.

Now it can be argued that archetypes move us also, because they create voices in our lives which are much stronger than our own voices. They have the power to artistically leave impacts upon us and to take us into a world which is up to now unknown to us. They make a creative process which activates an archetypal image into a finished work. And it is the author's job to translate it into a presently used language by turning it into a conceivable shape. The author raises the image from the unconscious and provides it in relation with the conscious values in order that it could be comprehended and understood by his readers.

The present article intends to read *Heart of Darkness* from an archetypal point of view, because in the context of a number of great archetypal images, it dramatizes decoding the language of the unconscious. It portrays the deepest universal desires of mankind depicted through mythic signs which mirror the human nature.

II. DISCUSSION

Heart of Darkness is the story of heroes who undertake long and unbelievable journeys. To achieve their goals of journey, these heroes "overcome insurmountable obstacles" (Guerin et al., 2005, p. 190). They do something great, gain something universally substantial, and are therefore often considered as "saviors" or "deliverers". Thus, one can understand why Campbell (2004) should acknowledge that "the standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula … of the rites of passage: *separation—initiation—return*" (p. 28). These great heroes on the journey cause man's sensibility to be mended, and the creation to be saved from going rotten.

Heroes with different faces appear in the universal literature, religion, and folktale. But the most common archetypal hero is perhaps the 'hero' in literature. In the world literature, one comes across with different faces of the hero, with different modes and manners of such celebrities. However, literary heroes have many things in common, like a radical determination, a great soul which enables them to play incredible adventures, and the achievement of precious outcomes of their daring quests. Ernest Becker (1975) maintains that

To be a true hero is to triumph over disease, want, death. One knows that [a hero's] life has had vital human meaning if it has been able to bring real benefits to the life of mankind …. Even more, by his own death the hero secures the lives of others, and so the greatest heroic sacrifice, as Frazer taught us, is the sacrifice of the god for his people. … The giants died to secure mankind; by their blood we are saved (pp. 149-51).

Marlow, the main character of Conrad's story, undertakes a symbolic journey to a heart of darkness a physical manifestation of which is Africa as "the center of the earth" while a psychological manifestation of it is his own unconscious soul. However, Sherry Salman (1998) points out that "there is no difference between psychological and physical facts" (p. 54) of this journey. "To see" the truth, Marlow leaves the light of European civilization at his back and goes to the darkness of his own heart, which is metaphorized by the African radical barbarism. He embarks on this self-discovering quest mainly to recognize himself in a space where contrast is strategic, because as Nagy (1999) affirms, "a bright light needs a background of darkness" (p. 30). Marlow accomplishes his "sacred mission" in a clime where his Holy Grail is self-knowledge, while all others are far different from him. As Campbell (2004) maintains, his "mythic quest is the journey of the soul" (pp. lvii-lviii). It is a journey through which he discovers his soul in a background of darkness and difficulty.

Sayeau (2006) says Marlow's inquisitive mind is "tired of resting" (p. 344). So, he seeks refuge in the African wilderness "to see". And one can better realize the implication of "to see," if one imaginatively travels back to the 1890s when the novel was published, for although there was still one and a half decades for the outbreak of World War I, the threat of it was imminent, which was manifested in the form of imperialism, colonization, exploitation. And Marlow's devotion for such a quest for the truth about the heart of darkness of these imperialisms is not involuntary. It has originated from his childhood when "he had passion for maps," when he had chosen Africa to explore. He is fascinated by the river which is depicted in the image of "an immense snake uncoiled" which Guerin et al. say can be considered as the symbol of "evil", "mystery", and "wisdom".

The first step in Marlow's initiation is a separation from home. On an exotic journey, he gets separated from Europe and its civilization, and as he passes a series of obstacles behind, he gets prepared for gaining the holy grail of his initiation. His journey to the dark of his heart reminds one of "Dante's imaginative journey in *The Inferno*; and the allusion to ancient Rome helps to recall *The Aeneid*" (Watts, 1998, p. 48), where both heroes descend into hell and face different trials through their journeys. Like the classical heroes, Conrad's hero through his quest descends into hell to gain knowledge and bring it back to others, where the hell represents the darkness of his unconscious.

For Marlow, the steamer crawls to where there is Kurtz on a mission. In fact, the holy grail of the former is the achievement he makes when he goes on the quest to see Kurtz, for it brings him to an "impenetrable darkness," and makes it possible for him to visit a "hollow man" who is also a "universal genius" in charge of the most productive trade of ivory in The Congo. Joseph Warren Beach writes

Kurtz is personal embodiment, a dramatization, of all that Conrad felt of futility, degradation, and horror in what the Europeans in The Congo called "progress", which meant the exploitation of the natives by every variety of cruelty and treachery known to the greedy man. Kurtz was to Marlow, penetrating this country, name, constantly recurring in people's talk, for cleverness and enterprise …. (qtd. in Haugh, 1963, p. 165).

Cole (1998) states that Marlow "quickly turns towards Kurtz as the practical and psychological goal towards which he travels, stressing that his search for Kurtz is connected with his own 'destiny of life'" (p. 259). However, as Marlow progresses through his journey, he gets more obsessed with Kurtz.

For Carl Jung, (1968) the unconscious "contains the hidden, repressed, and unfavorable (or nefarious) aspects of human personality" (p. 110). And Kurtz is the embodiment of this unconscious of which the "impenetrable darkness" is a dimension which is itself a representation of the Jungian archetypal shadow. In his confrontation with Kurtz, that is, when "all real further psychological progress is blocked" (Walker, 2002, p. 34), Marlow sees the dark of human nature. In addition, as he goes further he feels a kinship with the savages and comes to terms with the wild and passionate uproar of the darkness. Now Kurtz becomes one of the savages, and is deeply connected with the wilderness. Therefore, as Hewitt (1961) explains, Marlow "accepts the bond established between them, just as he has accepted the bond between himself and the savage clamour from the river bank on the journey upstream" (pp. 109-110). He cannot spoil the shadow of (the presence of) Kurtz. Therefore, as he identifies himself with him, he comes to be a part of his existence. However, Kurtz is in fact the shadow—the evil side—of Marlow's own soul and nature. Marlow is the ego that undertakes a journey which involves a "descent into the darkness of shadow and ascent towards the light of self" (Coupe, 2003, p. 141).

Jung's "individuation" is, in Frye's words, a "journey" the first step of which is to encounter and recognize the shadow (qtd. in Russell, 2000, pp. 116-117). Therefore, to become a self or a whole personality, Marlow needs "to see" Kurtz as the shadow of his own soul. For this hero, the effect of his encounter with Kurtz is not obscure, because he knows that it has something to do with the expansion of his vision and the truth of his life. Marlow says

It is the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience. It seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me—and into my thoughts. It was somber enough, too—and pitiful—not extraordinary in any way—not very clear either. No, not very clear. And yet it seemed to throw a kind of light (p. 35).

According to the doctrine of individuation, in his meeting with Kurtz as his shadow, that is, as "the unwelcome side" (Hart, 1998, p. 92) of his nature, Marlow gains self-knowledge and becomes aware of the truth of his life. Now, this self-recognition helps him gain a whole personality. Also, Reteif (2004) believes that Kurtz is "the culminating point" of the life of Marlow. And he affirms that if Marlow had never reached Kurtz, his story would have been incomplete. After Conrad's hero puts the two stages of separation and transformation behind and reaches 'the heart of darkness', it is the time for him to return home. So, we see him "Carrying the flag of nostalgia" (Zimring, 1997, p. 332). However, he returns to Europe as "a changed and more knowing man" (Guerard, 1963, p. 170).

He has undertaken a journey of individuation, a "spiritual process by which … his personality is built up" (Goldbrunner, 1965, p. 119). Now we see him as a person who has changed to a wise old man, who is, for Walker (2002), "associated with the source of wisdom and enlightenment" (p. 72). Therefore, he returns home to apprise others of the truth and to transform them. After gaining the wholeness of his personality, Marlow becomes a "Buddha" who is, to speak for Joseph Campbell (2004), "the classic example of mythological hero whose journey takes him to the underworld where he retrieves a lost, secret, knowledge—a boon—by which he is transformed and with which he returns and transformed the world" (Morgan, 2001, p. 45).

The second hero in *Heart of Darkness* is Kurtz who is also sent to Africa. Like Marlow, he undertakes the journey with a "sacred mission" that is to civilize the African natives and bring "light" to the heart of darkness. There in the Congo, he is a "remarkable man" who is in charge of the inner station of the ivory-trading company, a "universal genius" who is musician, orator, writer, politician, poet, and painter also.

Like in the case of other white "pilgrims," Kurtz's lack of humanity makes him into a "hollow man." However, he is different from them also, in the sense that, as Haugh (1963) notes, he is, in the eye of Marlow, "a hero who had shown him the limits of the moral spirit" (p. 167). Kurtz knows what Marlow is searching for, and it is he that helps the latter to see the truth. He sees the truth and gains self-recognition, but his reaction to truth is different from that of Marlow. For him, this self-knowledge is a "disturbing truth" (Bowers, 2006, p. 133). Both of them gain what they quest for: knowledge about man's nature; and both of them are enlightened. But the nature of their enlightenment is different too. Kurtz is, as Panagopoulos (2002) maintains, linked to Dionysus, and is associated with intoxication, ecstasy, and indulgence, while Marlow is linked to Apollo, and is connected with wisdom, reason, and restraint. The reaction of the former to truth is "Dionysian," while that of the latter to it is "Apollonian." "Light and civilization" are associated with the Apollonian, while "darkness and savagery" are so with the Dionysian. Kurtz's direct exposure to truth makes his knowledge dangerous and destructive. Therefore, in the course of his artistic narrative, Marlow shows "an Apollonian response" to it. In this way, the destructive truth of the "incoherent and chaotic Dionysian experience" of Kurtz is put into "a familiar and meaningful Apollonian form" (p. 148). Kurtz's response to this experience is "The horror! The horror!" which he cries at the end of his life, while Marlow's response to it is the lie which he tells Kurtz's Intended, as well as Conrad's story in which his universal readership finds enlightenment. If we consider Kurtz as the tragic hero of the story, Marlow can be labeled a cultivated spectator. And the natives and the Russian are ultimately the chorus of the tragedy.

In the wilderness, if Kurtz is not associated with the light of civilization, he is associated with the gun, with power, with the God-figure. He knows the truth, and is aware of the "omnipresent evil" (Hewitt, 1961, p. 110). As an "enchanted princess sleeping in a fabulous castle" (Heart, p. 70), he is worshiped both by the natives and by the Russian.

This Kurtz has the power to create a Hell into which Marlow is to descend to gain insight. He will restore the hell which will burn the self of Kurtz but in which others are to rot.

Therefore, he can be regarded as a sacrificial hero. As the victim of the evil of the human nature, he is sacrificed to help Marlow see as well as others. According to Guerin et al. (2005), a "sacrificial hero must die … to restore the land to fruitfulness" (p. 190). However, to restore such a wasteland there is only one way: to make others aware of the horror of it. Kurtz's last word before his death is quite enlightening. It is his death — his sacrifice indeed — which brings others to enlightenment.

Other characters of Conrad's story, the pilgrims, the manager, and the Russian for example, go on the same journey as Kurtz and Marlow go on. But they are not able "to see" what these heroes see and experience, and the outcome of their quests is different from the quests of Kurtz and Marlow. The pilgrims too are heroes, but they are materialistic heroes, because their holy grail is only ivory. And there are those who only make the appearance of heroes, but are not capable to understand "the redemptive value of those two 'The horror'! The horror!'" (Heart, p. 98) The Russian declares "I am a simple man. I have no great thoughts" (Heart, p. 86). Therefore, he is also too good to be a hero, for he is simple and sentimental, and he lacks the seriousness needed for a hero. He is not a hero but is a "harlequin". These guys lack the qualifications of heroes, for they are factually "faithless".

There is still another character on "the Nellie" who wants to be a hero. He is the narrator of Conrad's story, but in the whole story he remains unnamed. The story reports that the narrator was once a sailor. But now he is among Marlow's auditors. To gain knowledge, this man undertakes a metaphorical journey to the story of Marlow. But when he is transformed, he brings the truth back, and renders it to Conrad's readers in his own narrative. Gross says his relationship to Marlow is the same as the relationship of Marlow to Kurtz. If Kurtz was the enigmatic purpose of Marlow's journey, Marlow is the narrator's mysterious "voice" as well as the goal of his journey. While others might be sleeping, he is awake and listening to his surroundings. He is different from the other fellows aboard the Nelli, because for him Marlow is the "choice of nightmares" (Heart, p. 90), as Kurtz is for Marlow. As Gross points out, at the beginning of the story he is an optimistic person who looks at experience through a lightened, but hardly enlightened viewpoint. But as Marlow's narrative progresses, he undergoes a transformation and sees the truth. At the end of the story, he sees the Thames as the heart of a great darkness. Williams (1963) maintains that even "the turn of the tide," which is westward at the outset of the story and eastward at the end of it, indicates a "change in narrator's vision" (pp. 206-207). By the time the narrator has completed his initiation, he is a transformed character who discovers the truth. When he returns home, he also returns to share his knowledge with Conrad's readers, and he helps them "to see".

III. Conclusion

In *Heart of Darkness*, the heroes are often on the ship. They undertake a journey to the 'heart of darkness' to gain precious knowledge and "to see" into the things. After that, they return home—"to begin … a new life" (Bodkin, 1965, p. 124), and to share their knowledge with their fellow creatures. In this sense, the hero of the novel on the quest becomes qualified firstly "to see" and then to reveal what he has seen. Therefore, if Kurtz and Marlow are the heroes of Conrad's story, the author himself, as well as The Romans, the Pilgrims, and Conrad's narrator and readers are also on the model of his heroes, because, to speak for Campbell (2004), they "all [are] in quest for the essence of Truth and Wholeness in life" (p. xxviiii). If they are capable "to see" the truth, that is, to witness the nature of the human being, if they can discover the secrets of the creation and then reveal them to the world, typically they are heroes. However, as Jung (1958) mentions, "it is often tragic to see" (p. 9). Thus, undertaking a "heroic journey" is far from an easy task which "few" characters can do. Myth is the language through which Conrad has created a heroic world in *Heart of Darkness* to help his readers realize the secret of things. His story is the mirror he holds up before them to make them witness the reality of their own nature, like when Marlow asks if we "see the story" (Heart, p. 55).

For enabling the reader "to see" this truthful reality, the author depicts "the moral evil" in the contemporary issues of his time, (Brodey & Malgaretti, 2002, p. 236), by which he mainly means "colonialism." He also criticizes and condemns "the Bourgeois materialism and commercialism" (White, 1995, p. 173) of the European society. Instead of narrating the quest story of a hero who imitates the old fashioned motifs of the classical literature, he depicts the nature of the universal man. Conrad is the hero of his own story also. He writes for the purification of his readers in the course of his enigmatic narrative, and he depicts the issues of his times through myths which are deeply rooted in the self and in civilization (Barthes, 1984).

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