



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS  
JOURNALS + DIGITAL PUBLISHING

---

Marlow's Descent Into Hell

Author(s): Lillian Feder

Source: *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (Mar., 1955), pp. 280-292

Published by: [University of California Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3044393>

Accessed: 25/03/2011 11:10

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=ucal>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



University of California Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

# Marlow's Descent into Hell

LILLIAN FEDER

**M**ARLOW'S JOURNEY in Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" is usually interpreted as a study of a descent into the unconscious self. Of course, the voyage into the heart of darkness is, on one level, a symbolic representation of an exploration of the hidden self and therefore of man's capacity for evil. However, Conrad is not merely narrating a psychological experience; he is dealing with a significant moral conflict. If this were simply a story concerned with the two aspects of the mind of man, the conscious and the unconscious, what would be Conrad's point in treating so extensively the condition of the natives in the Congo? Moreover, without studying some of Conrad's most powerful and most consistent imagery, it is impossible to explain the role of Kurtz's "Intended," which is important in the development of the theme. In "Heart of Darkness," Conrad is depicting Marlow's discovery of evil and the responsibilities to himself and to others which this knowledge places upon him. In telling the story of Marlow's attainment of self-knowledge, Conrad does not use the language of psychology. Instead, he employs the imagery and symbolism of the traditional voyage into Hades.

By associating Marlow's journey with the descent into hell, Conrad concretizes the hidden world of the inner self. Through image and symbol, he evokes the well-known voyage of the hero who, in ancient epic, explores the lower world and, in so doing, probes the depths of his own and his nation's conscience. A study

---

Lillian Feder is an instructor in English, Queens College, Flushing, N.Y.

of "Heart of Darkness" from this point of view discloses some interesting parallels, but, more important, by setting Conrad's story in relief against a background rich in associations, it reveals the essential unity of his political and personal themes. Moreover, such a reading shows how Conrad, by combining the traditional imagery of the epic descent with realistic details from his own experience in the Congo, created an image of hell credible to modern man.

Though Marlow's journey recalls the epic descent in general, it is most specifically related to the visit to Hades in the sixth book of the *Aeneid*. In Vergil's poem, Aeneas' descent is part of his initiation for the role of leader of the Roman people. Vergil emphasizes the fact that truth is to be found in the heart of darkness; thus, the Sibyl who, in Vergil's words, "obscuris vera involvens" (hides truth in darkness), guides Aeneas. Moreover, just as Aeneas is about to enter Hades, Vergil interrupts his narrative to ask the very elements of hell, Chaos and Phlegethon, to allow him to reveal the secrets buried in the darkness and depths of the earth. Aeneas' voyage to Hades is one means by which he learns of the tragedy implicit in the affairs of men; this is the price he pays for fulfilling his duty as founder of Rome. In the lower world he looks both into past and the future and, having observed the penalties for personal crimes, he is told of the bloodshed and cruelty which are to weigh on the conscience of his nation—the cost of Rome's imperial power. Aeneas, the pious and worthy man, learns truth through a descent into darkness.

The basic similarity between Marlow's journey and that of the epic hero, the descent to find light, is obvious. There are many close parallels between the two voyages, however, which must be demonstrated.

At the beginning of the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, just before Aeneas descends to Hades, Vergil creates an atmosphere of pervading gloom. He speaks of the "gloomy woods" (VI, 238), and repeats the phrase "per umbram" (through the gloom) (VI, 257,

268), in setting the scene for Aeneas' entrance to Hades. Conrad too establishes this somber mood. Even before Marlow begins his story, Conrad repeats the word "gloom" continuously in his description of the friends gathered together to hear the tale. Thus, in the second paragraph of the story he mentions a "mournful gloom" (p. 490);<sup>1</sup> in the third, "the brooding gloom" (p. 490); in the fourth, "the gloom to the west" (p. 491); in the fifth, "the gloom brooding" (p. 491); and in the seventh, once more "a brooding gloom" (p. 493). Marlow, sitting there like an idol, seems to have brought with him the atmosphere of the world he is about to recreate for his friends.

Just before he begins his story, Marlow, looking out at the Thames, mentions the Romans and their conquest of England. "They were men enough to face the darkness," he says. "They were conquerors." He then goes on to speak of the brutality of the Romans: "It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale. . . ." Conquest, he says, "is not a pretty thing. . . . What redeems it is the ideal 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" (pp. 494-496).

Implicit in Marlow's remarks is the theme of the *Aeneid*, for Vergil is concerned with this "idea," the heroic goal as justification for Rome's plunder and cruelty; moreover, Conrad, like Vergil, sees the tragic limitations of those dedicated to the heroic ideal. Thus, at the very beginning of "Heart of Darkness," the Roman legend, prophesied and justified in Hades, provides an archetypal background for Kurtz's deeds and for Marlow's discovery of himself in a hell perhaps more terrible than Vergil's, but no less enlightening.

Before Marlow may descend into the heart of darkness, he must, like the epic hero, perform certain duties. His visit to the company office suggests a necessary rite performed before the fateful journey.

<sup>1</sup> All quotations from "Heart of Darkness" are taken from *The Portable Conrad*, ed. Morton Dauwen Zabel (New York, 1947), pp. 490-603.

The city itself “makes [him] think of a whited sepulcher”; the office is in “a narrow and deserted street in deep shadow,” and there is “a dead silence” (p. 500). The house itself is “as still as a house in the city of the dead” (p. 502). Thus, Conrad creates the deathly gloom of the world Marlow is about to enter.

In the company office, two women are knitting black wool. Conrad plainly uses these women to symbolize the fates, who, like Aeneas' guide, the Sibyl of Cumae, know the secrets of the heart of darkness. Marlow feels uneasy during these “ceremonies” (p. 501). He describes one of the two knitting women:

... a cat reposed on her lap. She wore a starched white affair on her head, had a wart on one cheek, and silver-rimmed spectacles hung on the tip of her nose. She glanced at me above the glasses. The swift and indifferent placidity of that look troubled me.

She seems to know everything. Marlow goes on to say, “An eerie feeling came over me. She seemed uncanny and fateful” (p. 501). Like the Cumaean Sibyl, the two women guard the way to hell.

Often far away there I thought of these two, guarding the door of darkness, knitting black wool as for a warm pall, one introducing, introducing continuously to the unknown, the other scrutinizing the cheery and foolish faces with unconcerned old eyes (pp. 501–502).

Then Marlow uses the Latin farewell, evoking its literary and legendary associations: “Ave! old knitter of black wool. *Morituri te salutant*” (p. 502). Conrad uses images of death, but they do not suggest actual death so much as they do the legendary world of the dead, where, paradoxically, the affairs of the living are interpreted and understood. When he is finally ready to leave, Marlow says that he feels as though “instead of going to the center of a continent,” he is “about to set off for the center of the earth” (p. 504).

But before he may descend into the heart of darkness, Marlow has another duty to perform. Like Aeneas, he must attend to the remains of someone who has died. Aeneas has buried Misenus, a former comrade (VI, 149–182), and Marlow tries to recover the

remains of Fresleven, his predecessor. Marlow feels compelled to perform this rite. "Nobody seemed to trouble much about Fresleven's remains, till I got out and stepped into his shoes," he says. "I couldn't let it rest though. . . ." (p. 499).

In Marlow's first observations about the Congo, he uses the imagery of hell. Thus, the members of the "chain gang" seem to him to have a "deathlike indifference" (p. 509); strolling into the shade, he says, "It seemed to me that I had stepped into the gloomy circle of some inferno" (p. 510). "Inferno," of course, suggests the Christian hell as well as the Latin "Inferna," but Conrad's development of the image is so like Vergil's description of Hades in the *Aeneid* that it seems to evoke the classical hell more readily than the Christian one. His depiction of the natives in the jungle is like Vergil's description of the tormented shades in Hades: "Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees leaning against the trunks," and, like the figures at the entrance to Vergil's Hades, their very attitudes express "pain, abandonment, and despair." Like Vergil's "Diseases . . . Famine . . . and Poverty (terrible shapes to see)" (VI, 275-277), Conrad's figures are "nothing earthly now, nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom." They are "moribund shapes," like suffering shades in hell, "free as air—and nearly as thin." Upset by the sight of one of these men and "his brother phantom," Marlow says, "I don't want any more lingering in the shade," and he returns to the station, but even there, surrounded by the symbols of civilization, the well-dressed agents and their well-kept books, he is aware of "the grove of death" (pp. 510-514).

Up to this point, Conrad has employed the associations of Hades to build up suspense, to tell the reader indirectly that this is no ordinary voyage. He has exploited the strangeness, the mystery, and the pathos of the ancient symbol of hell. Now he uses it with a new brilliance to suggest not only mystery but evil as well. Moreover, through this symbol, he suggests the tragic proportions of his theme and his characters. While he waits at the station, the

wilderness surrounding it seems to Marlow "great and invincible, like evil or truth," and when one night a grass shed containing calico and beads bursts into flames, Marlow says that it seemed as if "the earth had opened to let an avenging fire consume all that trash" (p. 520).

As Marlow goes deeper and deeper into the jungle, the image of hell is intensified, until finally hell and the Congo are equated. Once again there are interesting comparisons between Vergil and Conrad. The ambiguous sign "Approach cautiously" (p. 542), which, Marlow explains, has little practical use since it could only be found after one had reached the place where it is inscribed, is reminiscent of the Sibyl's warning: "*facilis descensus Averno . . . Sed revocare gradum superasque evadere ad auras, / Hoc opus, hic labor est*" (VI, 126-129). The descent into Avernus is easy, but to return into the upper air, this is the task, this the struggle.

When Aeneas first enters Hades, Vergil compares the underworld with a forest (VI, 270-271). To reach the lowest depths of Erebus, Aeneas must take a journey down the river Styx, which is surrounded by marshes. The boat seems unfit for the journey, but finally Aeneas steps out on the mud and sedge of the shore (VI, 411-416). Vergil's description of this journey is brief, but he creates an atmosphere of gloom and ugliness very like that which Conrad suggests in his extended account of Marlow's voyage into the heart of darkness. Marlow too has a difficult voyage on a boat that is unsuited to the journey. He and his companions seem like "phantoms," and the earth seems "unearthly." The "black and incomprehensible frenzy" he approaches is at once the jungle, the region of "pre-historic man," and the depths of hell which Kurtz has created and in which he has been destroyed (pp. 537-540). When Marlow has penetrated the jungle, even the natural world seems unearthly. The trees seem to be "changed into stone." He describes his feelings: "It was not sleep—it seemed unnatural, like a state of trance." The mournful cries of the natives are reminiscent of the groans of the shades in hell. To Marlow, "the rest of the

world was nowhere... Gone, disappeared; swept off without leaving a whisper or a shadow behind" (pp. 544-546).

When he has almost reached the heart of darkness, Marlow loses his helmsman. Here again Conrad seems to be following Vergil, for Aeneas too loses his helmsman, Palinurus, just as his ship is approaching the shore of Cumae. Palinurus loses his balance and falls overboard; when he has swum to safety, "barbarous people attack [him] with swords," and he is killed, his body floating into the sea (VI, 349-362). Marlow's helmsman is killed by a native's spear, and he is buried in the sea. Both die "insontes" (guiltless), loyal to their leaders. Aeneas, meeting the shade of Palinurus in Hades, learns of the tragic sacrifice for his mission, and Marlow feels in the dying look of his helmsman a profound intimacy which he cannot forget, for it is a personal tie with one of the victims sacrificed to the "emissaries of light." Even more than the groans of the natives, the dying helmsman's last insight, innocent and profound, suggests the tragic consequences of Kurtz's betrayal.

In dealing with Kurtz, Conrad constantly repeats the imagery of hell. Marlow speaks of how the jungle has "sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation," and wonders "how many powers of darkness claimed him for their own." Marlow says of Kurtz, "He had taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land—" and insists "I mean literally" (p. 559), thus using Kurtz as a symbol for the triumphant evil powers of hell. Yet Kurtz, at the same time that he symbolizes the spirit of evil, must keep his identity as a man. It is significant that at this point Conrad shifts his image from one associated with the Christian view of hell to one out of the classical Hades. Thus, he goes on to refer to Kurtz not as a devil but as a shade, and, by using the Homeric and Vergilian word for the soul in Hades, he suggests that Kurtz has had a previous existence. Marlow says, "I am trying to account to myself for—for—Mr. Kurtz—" But even his name seems the wrong title for him, and Marlow ends his

sentence with “for the shade of Mr. Kurtz.” He continues, “This initiated wraith from the back of Nowhere honored me with its amazing confidence before it vanished altogether.” He refers to Kurtz or Kurtz’s shade as “it” (pp. 560–561).

In Marlow’s refusal to hear the details of Kurtz’s atrocious ceremonies, Conrad emphasizes again his image of hell. Marlow says that these details would be more “intolerable” than even the heads on the stakes, for “that was only a savage sight,” a sight not untypical of a real jungle. However, what Marlow fears is his feeling of being “transported into some lightless region of subtle horrors, where pure, uncomplicated savagery was a positive relief, being something that had a right to exist—obviously—in the sunshine” (p. 574). Thus, Conrad contrasts the real jungle with the habitat of Kurtz, and the savagery of reality is a relief from the horrors of Kurtz’s hell.

Not only Kurtz, but everyone around him, seems to have both an actual existence in the Congo and a symbolic one in Hades. The natives are described as “dark human shapes,” not moving but “fitting indistinctly against the gloomy border of the forest”; the native woman is a “wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman” (p. 577). And Kurtz becomes, as the climax of his career approaches, more and more the creature of hell,

Marlow is eager to deal with Kurtz, or as he refers to him, with “this shadow,” and he follows him into the depths of the jungle where he is participating in his fiendish rites. In the description of their meeting, Conrad evokes again and again the associations of Hades. As Marlow approaches, Kurtz rises “unsteady, long, pale, indistinct, like a vapor exhaled by the earth, and swayed slightly, misty and silent.” The setting is hell itself, with fires looming between the trees and a constant murmur of voices. A “fiend-like” figure appears. At this point Conrad refers to Kurtz as “that Shadow,” this time capitalizing the initial letter, as one does in a name, for Kurtz here is a shade of hell, “this wandering and tormented thing.”

Moreover, Marlow has one means of controlling Kurtz: the threat, "you will be lost, . . . utterly lost," doomed to hell entirely. These words draw Kurtz back, but even so Marlow, regarding him, says, "I before him did not know whether I stood on the ground or floated in the air," for they have not left hell (pp. 583-586). Indeed, the journey next day merely reiterates the image. The crowd "flowed out of the woods again," and, like the wretched shades of Vergil's Hades watching Aeneas' boat, they stood on the shore murmuring and gesturing (p. 587). And the native woman, like Vergil's shades who "tendebant[que] manus" (stretched out their hands), pleading to be taken aboard (VI, 314), "stretched tragically her bare arms after us over the somber and glittering river" (p. 588).

When Kurtz speaks, Marlow feels that some "supernatural power" has forced the words from him, for even on shipboard Kurtz is described as a "shade"; Marlow says that the "shade" of the original Kurtz "frequented the bedside of the hollow sham" he had become. Thus he implies that the original Kurtz, with all his lofty "ideas," his "station," his "career," and his "Intended," was but a "shade," impotent even at the height of his career. Now he is reduced to a "hollow sham" of his once noble ideal of himself. Marlow too even as he leaves the Congo is still under its influence. He accepts "the choice of nightmares forced upon [him] in the tenebrous land invaded by these mean and greedy phantoms" (pp. 588-589).

Kurtz's last cry, "The horror," does not indicate that he has had a last-minute conversion. Instead, it is another means by which Conrad implies that this lost soul, this dark shade, is also a man. If Kurtz did not retain at least enough humanity to be horrified by a last glimpse at his own life, then what meaning could his disintegration have? As Conrad distinguishes between the actual jungle and Kurtz's jungle which has become a hell, so he distinguishes between the man Kurtz once was and the creature he has become, who retains just enough humanity to cry out in horror.

Even Marlow's memory of Kurtz after his death is different from "the other memories of the dead that accumulate in every man's life." Kurtz returns to Marlow as a remembrance of a shade in hell and as a suggestion of eternal torment and gloom, "a shadow darker than the shadow of the night. . . ." (p. 597). Entering the home of Kurtz's "Intended," Marlow feels that he carries with him the gloom and terror of the heart of darkness.

The vision seemed to enter the house with me—the stretcher, the phantom bearers, the wild crowd of obedient worshippers, the gloom of the forests, the glitter of the reach between the murky bends, the beat of the drum, regular and muffled like the beating of a heart—the heart of a conquering darkness (p. 597).

Moreover, Kurtz's "Intended" is portrayed as no ordinary young woman; she too seems part of the lower world. She lives not in the jungle of Kurtz's hell, but in "a street as still and decorous as a well-kept alley in a cemetery," in a room whose windows are "like three luminous and bedraped columns," and whose piano is "like a somber and polished sarcophagus." This lady with her "pale head," who comes "floating" toward Marlow "in the dusk," her brow "surrounded by an ashy halo," has withdrawn from life to guard the memory of Kurtz (pp. 597–598). She is given no name except the abstraction, "the Intended," for she has no existence apart from Kurtz. Through his imagery Conrad suggests that she inhabits her own section of Hades, the section devoted to the patient and disappointed shades who carry on their own "mysteries" (p. 599).

Marlow's visit to this lady is the last lap of his journey to Hades. She recalls for him the "eternal darkness" despite the fact that hers is a faith with "an unearthly glow." Speaking to her, Marlow is certain that he will remember the "eloquent phantom," Kurtz, as long as he lives, and he will remember her too, a "tragic and familiar Shade, resembling," in her last traditional gesture of the longing shade, her arms stretched out, "another one, tragic also, and bedecked with powerless charms, stretching bare brown arms

over the glitter of the infernal stream, the stream of darkness" (p. 602). Through the image of the "infernal stream," Conrad unites these two shades. On each side of the stream of hell, without understanding, they devote themselves to the darkness Kurtz has created.

I have demonstrated the extent and consistency of Conrad's use of the imagery of hell to suggest Kurtz's world and his influence. My reading offers no new interpretation of the story as a whole, but rather an extension of a long accepted view. It is fairly obvious that "Heart of Darkness" has three levels of meaning: on one level it is the story of a man's adventures; on another, of his discovery of certain political and social injustices; and on a third, it is a study of his initiation into the mysteries of his own mind. The same three levels of meaning can be found in the sixth book of Vergil's *Aeneid*. Like Aeneas, Marlow comes to understand himself, his obligations, and the tragic limitations involved in any choice through this three-fold experience. Kurtz, like Aeneas, starts out as an "emissary of light," but, unlike Vergil's hero, he cannot conquer himself. Through Kurtz's experience, Marlow learns that a man is defined by his work: Kurtz's work has created a hell in the jungle, which destroys him. The symbol of the lower world suggests not only an imaginative union between the ancient world and the modern one, but a judgment on the morality of modern society.

From its beginning, Marlow's journey seems fated. He is destined by the needs of his own spirit, which Conrad concretizes in his response to the knitting "fates," to understand himself through a study of the world he lives in. By viewing that world indirectly, through an image, Marlow comes to closer grips with it than he has ever before been able to.

The epic descent is always a journey to find someone who knows the truth. Marlow realizes long before he has penetrated the Congo that the real purpose of his journey is to meet Kurtz and talk with him. When he discovers Kurtz, he finds, on one level, a man who has committed unspeakable crimes against his fellows.

But on another and more important level, he finds a man who has allowed himself to sink to the lowest possible depths of evil, and, by observing Kurtz, Marlow realizes that in all men there is this possibility. In other words, he discovers the potential hell in the heart of every man.

In the Congo, there are no supernatural beings; all is credible on a purely realistic level. However, the imagery of hell, with its suggestion of the supernatural, implies the terror and violent suffering which Kurtz, the betrayer of light, must face. And, through the imagery of hell, Conrad makes Kurtz's struggle in the Congo symbolic of an inner defeat. Kurtz, on the one hand, has betrayed the natives and reduced them to poverty and subservience, but he has also betrayed the humanity in himself. He has reduced the natives to tormented shades, for he has robbed them of a living will and dignity and, in so doing, he has himself become a shade; his will is the victim and servant of his own hellish whims.

Marlow too has faced the terrors of hell, and, though he escapes, he learns wisdom at a price. He owes a debt to Kurtz, for Kurtz has been man enough to face the hell within him. Unlike the agents who turn away from the challenge of hell, Kurtz has gone all too far in his weird exploration. Through Kurtz's failure, Marlow learns about his own capacity for evil and his capacity to resist it. He realizes that without involvement, there is no restraint, and he makes his choice of "nightmares." He is even willing to experience a kind of spiritual death in the sacrifice of lying for Kurtz. Ironically, the reward of his victory over the elements of hell is his knowledge of human limitation; thus, while he repudiates Kurtz, he remains loyal to him. In this loyalty there is an acknowledgment of the eternal existence of the hell within, to be met and conquered again and again by every man; moreover, there is the tragic acceptance of the eternal possibility of defeat.

I have said that Kurtz's "Intended" is as much a shade as Kurtz is. Indeed, Conrad calls her by that name and identifies her, through his imagery, with the world of the dead. She, like the

natives, has sacrificed all that is living in order to believe in Kurtz. Marlow refers to her at one point ironically as such a “thunderingly exalted creature as to be altogether deaf and blind to anything but heavenly sights and sounds.” For such a person, the “earth . . . is only a standing place.” By contrast, he says, for most people, the earth “is a place to *live* in, where we must put up with sights, with sounds, with smells, too, by Jove!—breathe dead hippo, so to speak, and not be contaminated” (p. 560). Kurtz’s “Intended” sacrifices life to a dead ideal. She has not breathed “dead hoppo”; she has not faced the darkness. Like Kurtz, she has chosen death. He has been conquered by his inhuman guilt; she by her inhuman innocence, by her unwillingness to pay the price of life, the acceptance of a knowledge of ugliness and evil. Marlow does not disillusion her, in part because of his loyalty to Kurtz, and in part because of the futility of telling the truth, brutal and ugly, like the “dead hippo” or the sights, sounds, and smells of the world, to a woman who, because of her unwillingness to face life, has become a shade. Thus, when she asks Marlow for Kurtz’s last word, instead of repeating Kurtz’s remark, “The horror,” Marlow says that the last word he pronounced was her name. This is his final tribute to the world of the dead, his last “ceremony.” For this reason the lie has a taint of mortality for him.

Speaking of the artist, Conrad says that “he must descend within himself, and in that lonely region of stress and strife, if he be deserving and fortunate, he finds the terms of his appeal.”<sup>2</sup> And in *Victory*, he says, “It is not poets alone who dare descend into the abyss of infernal regions, or even who dream of such a descent.”<sup>3</sup> In “Heart of Darkness” Conrad used the imagery and symbolism of Hades to create that otherwise formless region into which not only the artist but every man must descend if he wishes to understand himself. Moreover, through the imagery of hell, with its timeless associations, the private struggle is united with man’s public deeds, his responsibilities, and his history.

<sup>2</sup> *The Portable Conrad*, p. 706.

<sup>3</sup> *Victory*, The Modern Library ed. (New York, n.d.), p. 207.