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Much more than a voice: literary symbolism and the voice in Heart of Darkness

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Much more than a voice:  
literary symbolism and the voice  
in Heart of Darkness

by

Patricia Sue Fitch

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This essay deals with literary Symbolism and Joseph Conrad's novella, *Heart of Darkness*. One aim of this work is to define Symbolism by providing a brief history of the movement and by briefly exploring the ideas of those writers who are considered to be part of the movement. A second is to consider some ideas about the literary symbol itself. This defining literary Symbolism and the literary Symbol and discussing Conrad's use of language and the Symbol will eventually lead to an examination of *Heart of Darkness* and its use of voice to reveal this text as a Symbolist work. Penetration of the symbols will bring us to conclusions about the telling of the story by the narrator, Marlow's experience in the jungle and later, Kurtz's redemption and self-knowledge, the Intended's role and her influence on Kurtz and Marlow, and the transcendent reality behind the physical setting.

My thesis, then, is that *Heart of Darkness* reveals itself as having characteristics of a Symbolist work, and that the human and the non-human voice can be regarded as a noun, thus becoming a single entity. For this reason, the voice deserves attention as a symbol.

It seems natural to look at Symbolism and Conrad together, as Symbolism contends that there is another reality than that which can be detected through the senses and that the realm beyond or behind the tangible world is
the more real, the more true. Conrad talks about this other reality that can be achieved in his discussion of fiction in his Preface to the *Nigger of the Narcissus* from Great Short Works of Joseph Conrad:

And it is only through complete, unswerving devotion to the perfect blending of form and substance; it is only through an unremitting, never-discouraged care for the shape and ring of sentences that an approach can be made to plasticity, to color, and that the light of magic suggestiveness may be brought to play for an evanescent instant over the commonplace surface of words: of the old, old, words, worn thin, defaced by ages of careless usage. (59)

Conrad's devotion to his art, then, required that he employ writing techniques that would invite this "light of magic suggestiveness" to reveal meaning beyond the ordinary significations of words alone, taking the reader past the tangible world into another realm, another universe, or penetrating to the essence of this world. The use of Symbolist writing techniques makes this possible.

The works of Joseph Conrad have been of great interest to me since my first exposure to *Heart of Darkness* early in my study of literature. I recall being fascinated with the notion that a character might be identified as a voice, as
darkness, or as light. Later, when graduate courses exploring literary modernism introduced me to Symbolism, I began to find, aside from evidence of Impressionist writing, evidence of Symbolist techniques in Conrad's fiction. The possibilities excited me, and it is this excitement that brings me to an examination of this author and Symbolism.

Lest my assertion that Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is a Symbolist writing suggests that we disregard other techniques he uses, it seems appropriate, at this time, to address this issue. The purpose of this essay is to explore one technique employed by an author whose works are multidimensional, not to discount the obvious; that Conrad's works reveal themselves as fulfilling other Modernist characteristics.

This essay consists of three parts by which I hope to reveal my thesis: the exploration of Symbolism as a literary movement, which is made clear, in part, through defining the Symbol; the examination of the literary Symbol itself; and the development of my argument that voice leads us to regard *Heart of Darkness* as a Symbolist work.

Symbolism: Exploring Other Worlds

The term Modernism refers to a literary movement that appeared during the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth century. But rather than describing writings from a particular time
period or identifying a contemporary piece, Modernism refers to a new and different style of writing. Experimentation in writing became the order of the day, and artists such as Pound, Conrad, Woolf, Stein, Joyce, and Mann set pen to paper to create works reflecting the modern spirit. Because of the diversity of the works produced, one interested in the study of Modernism might be tempted to immerse herself only in the poetry and prose of these artists, but the particular movements beyond the individuals deserve attention as well, for as Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane point out, "Modernism was very much a movement of movements" (191). These movements were made up of phases, theories, social groups, groups of activists, and political and non-political groups occurring in different places at different times, yet having an idea in common to link them, tying them in some way together. The most international of these movements, Symbolism, germinated in France.

Placing this "ism" historically will facilitate an understanding of the movement. While the term "Symbolism has become a label to designate a major movement of the post-Romantic era, and an extension of romanticism for many literary historians, critics and scholars do not agree on the time frame in which Symbolism occurred or on which artistic techniques and which works of art should be regarded as Symbolist. To the French, "Symbolism" still
denotes technically the period between 1885 and 1895, during which numerous manifestos were produced which attracted poets and artists from France and other countries to Paris. Anna Balakian, on the other hand, feels that works dating anywhere from 1857 (the year Beaudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* was published) to the 1930's can be termed Symbolist.

But at the same time, critics in the Anglo-Saxon world tend to think of French Symbolism in terms of the French poetry being produced in the second half of the nineteenth century, which is marked by the works of Beaudelaire, Rimbaud, Verlaine, Mallarme, and LaForgue. Some critics link Beaudelaire, Verlaine, and Mallarme as the avant-garde of the Symbolist movement on the basis of their innovations in literary techniques which appealed to poets like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, calling these members of the Modern community post-Symbolists, because they "attempted to convey a supernatural experience in the language of visible things, and therefore almost every word is a symbol and is used not for its common purpose but for the association which it evokes of a reality beyond the senses" (Bowra cited in Balakian *Appraisal* 149). To use this term to include Modernist poets allows us to embrace writers after Verlaine and his contemporaries who accepted the Symbolist school and who, through their total or partial adherence to its poetic principles or mystical orientation, maintained the presence
of Symbolism as a literary convention into the twentieth century (Balakian 4). In fact, members of this "second generation" of Symbolists are, perhaps, more prominent in the study of literature than those who founded the school. In any case, although Symbolism began as a French or Parisian movement in the second half of the Nineteenth Century, it expanded beyond the limits of the city, of the country, and became an international movement.

So while literary historians continue to speculate about what might seem to be a reasonable solution to the problem of periodization, this essay seeks not to narrowly restrict but, instead, to open up and add to the list of authors usually thought of as Symbolist writers.

Symbolism, as an artistic movement, is difficult to define. In fact, critics who attempt to provide such definitions have been known to disagree even about which artistic techniques and which works should be included on the "list" of Symbolist works. And interestingly, because the term causes so much confusion, there really is no list at all. If one were to gather a group of scholars in one room to sort this out, the clan might or might not be able to decide even on some basics about the movement.

Bearing in mind that this movement eludes easy definition, let us make an attempt to give the confusion some sense of order by using other movements as a basis for
comparison. "Symbolism sought to define itself in opposition to Positivism in philosophy and Realism in art" according to Michael Gibson (11); furthermore, this ideology contends that while there is, perhaps, another reality than that which can be detected through the senses, we can only give valid descriptions of the sensory reality. Gibson further explains that Realism, like Positivism, was based on the idea that reality is the perceivable, that reality "is present before us," and that the task of the artist is "to explore its forms and its laws" (11).

The Symbolists, on the other hand, asserted that the tangible world "is not as real as the true reality hidden 'behind' or 'beyond' the world" (11). Symbolism, moreover, goes beyond the intellectual, the analytical, and the imaginative, and rests ultimately in the realm of the psyche known as the realm of intuition; furthermore, Symbolism makes claims about the world outside the psyche. Symbolism attempted to use language to reveal both inner and transcendent worlds, although Symbolist writers recognized—and this is one thing that critics do agree about—that this language is ambiguous and imperfect in itself. And it is important to note in talking about this language that it is language that runs through an entire text, that it expresses essences within and outside of the text, and that it is a
string of images that strive to make us, as readers, conscious of the magic of language.

This reference to language brings us to the Symbol itself. The Symbolists wanted words not merely to state, but to suggest. For example, the poets wanted their verse to be musical, to break with the oratorical tradition, and in some cases, to break with rhyme; this new style enabled a search for freedom in art that poets had not yet felt. And while playing with poetry's form allowed the poet to search for other realities, the use of the Symbol in poetry and prose gave poets and fiction writers alike new ways of exploring other worlds.

Charged with Meaning: The Symbol

What do we mean by a Symbol if it is to characterize Symbolism and allow us to apply some norm identifying a Symbolist? A symbol, in the most simplified use of the term, is anything which signifies something else; in this way, all words can be seen as symbols. Arthur Symons makes this clear when he asks, "What are words themselves but symbols, almost as arbitrary as the letters which compose them..." (9). Northrop Frye, in the Anatomy of Criticism calls a symbol "any unit of any work of literature which can be isolated for critical attention, in general usage restricted to the smaller units, such as words, phrases, images... (25). But in Symbolist criticism, and for our
purposes, the word "Symbol" applies only to a word or phrase which has a range of meaning beyond its common meaning. Symbols cannot be separated from their meaning.

Symbols are powerful as they enable artists to create patterns of thought and emotion which did not exist previously; moreover, they reveal objects of such thought and emotion, and immediately connect the thought and emotion with the object making possible more communication than ordinary language can accommodate. The Symbol, then, becomes a great tool for authors, who view the symbol in terms of analogical thought. They regard it, according to Anna Balakian, as "a means of correspondence between sensory and spiritual worlds. The Symbol is seen as a passage, an invitation, an access to an always more essential truth" (93). It seems, then, that a Symbol, because it is the outward sign of an inward state, allows us, or perhaps beckons us, to make an abstraction.

One question that may arise in a discussion of the literary symbol is, "How does a Symbol differ from a metaphor?" It is helpful to think of a symbol as having the ability to express on its own while, as W.B. Yeats notes, "metaphors are not profound enough to be moving" (61). Clive Scott makes this even clearer by saying that the symbol differs from metaphor as metaphor has only a local existence under the work; in contrast, the whole work can be
subsumed with the symbol (209). For example, talking about the whale as a character, an entity, and the way in which this entity gathers its meaning in relation to the whole of Melville's *Moby Dick* seems much more satisfactory than approaching it as a single metaphor, as the symbol of the whale requires that the reader penetrate it, intuited meaning beyond its existence alone, so that it absorbs a meaning larger than its ordinary meaning—a meaning, Schneider suggests, "whose limits are defined by the whole pattern of terms of which the symbol is a part" (23). I.A. Richards gives us still another way to distinguish between metaphor and symbol by addressing the "thing" and what it refers to. Richards says that in the symbol, the relation between the "thing" and the "image" is turned around, or reversed. In a metaphor, for example, the "thing" is evident and the image illustrates it, while a symbol assumes materiality and life and the "thing" is merely its accompaniment (cited in Balakian *Appraisal* 26).

So if a Symbol is capable of achieving substance, taking the reader beyond metaphor, how are symbols realized in prose? Writing that shows a renovation of vocabulary, an original use of language, and unusual syntax can allow the existence of a symbol. In short, only through breaking with constricting rules can symbols be created, and it is through this break that the Symbol can unite a signifier to a
signified, or to several different signifieds. In simpler terms, Symbolist works, which separate themselves from other types of works, reveal Symbols, and while these symbols may be discussed in terms of signs, signifiers, and signifieds, the Symbol points to something beyond itself, but it differs from the sign because unlike the sign, it cannot be separated from what it stands for (Tindall 11).

How, then, does the symbol affect the rest of a text? Clive Scott addresses this question by saying that "the symbol informs the whole work and can subsume it, rather as a title does" (209). Scott then continues his discussion of the Symbol in a text:

The symbol--object or person--is both the tacit occasion of the poem, an ordinary reality, and the goal and culmination of the poem, a symbol, with dimensions enough to repossess all the ideas which, as the occasion of the poem, are engendered. The symbol is the precipitate of all the third aspects that have grown out of the metaphors of the poem. (210)

So if one agrees that the Symbol is as powerful as Scott tells us, one must recognize the importance of distinguishing and comprehending the Symbol and its meaning. Here, the role of the reader is important, for if symbols do not merely reproduce, but instead, they go further than
representing, it is up to the reader to realize what it is the Symbol carries her to. D.H. Lawrence discusses Symbols in this light: "they are organic units of consciousness with a life of their own, and you can never explain them away, because their value is dynamic, emotional, belonging to the sense-consciousness of the body and soul, and not simply mental" (qtd. in Beebe 31). Beaudelaire, moreover, empowers the Symbol in saying that an emotion does not exist, or does not become perceptible and active among us until it has found its expression in color, or in sound, or in form, or in all of these (qtd. in Beebe 27). But the reader must possess the Symbol, and this is not an easy task. The responsibility of the reader is discussed by Henri Peyre: "It must be the task of the public that wants to penetrate the mystery and pierce the silence to go at least halfway along to meet the creator" (5), and even the creation itself. Tindall also sees the symbol as unitive for the author and reader:

The symbol may put things together by establishing communication between author and reader, but it can be indefinite in what it presents. In the first place the symbol is an analogy for something undefined and in the second, our apprehension of the analogy is commonly incomplete. Moreover, the terms of the analogy are confused. (17)
So while the business of comprehending a Symbol is tricky indeed, it is this comprehension, Tindall feels, that lessens the gap between author and his audience. But an essential responsibility rests with the reader, who must remain open to the Symbol and what it holds: "What the reader gets from a symbol depends not only upon what the author has put into it but upon the reader's sensitivity and his consequent apprehension of what is there" (Tindall 17), Tindall goes on to say. I would agree with Tindall's suggestion that the Symbol unites author and reader, but I would assert that aside from bonding the two, the true value of the Symbol lies in its ability to communicate between itself and the reader. In any case, the literary Symbol absorbs associations and implications from all parts of the total context in which it participates (Schneider 23), but it is up to the reader, who must meet the text and Symbol with an open mind, to behold what the text, charged with meaning by the literary symbol, has to offer. In this way, one who truly wishes to understand can savor the mystery of the world the Symbol opens.

A Voice Which Remains

While much has been written about narrative voice in Heart of Darkness\(^1\), consideration of voice itself, which can

\(^1\)All Conrad citations in this section, as well as following sections, are taken from Heart of Darkness: A Case Study in Contemporary Criticism.
be regarded as an entity, and thus a noun that refers to human or non-human utterance, is valuable, as it reveals the use of Symbolist techniques in Conrad’s writing. In addition, in Modernist prose, the voice is absolutely central. In *Self and Form in Modern Narrative*, Vincent Pecora discusses this idea:

In Modernism the problem of voice is implicitly related to the problem of the philosophical subject...after it is simultaneously fragmented and reconstructed as an empty, formal category in nineteenth century idealism. (147)

So it would appear that the problem of voice, whether literary, human, or non-human, is tied to the subject. Schopenhauer, in fact, felt that the voice makes the most direct connection between the subject and some voice of human consciousness, and notes that if we attempt to know ourselves fully by directing our knowledge inwards, we lose ourselves in a bottomless void, we find ourselves like a hollow glass globe, from the emptiness of which a voice speaks. (153)

The voice that speaks "from the emptiness" here must be seen as both absent and present--it emerges but cannot be located. This duality of presence and absence is precisely what Derrida, a post-Modernist, labels a sign of pure difference, the term he uses to explain that, because "the
meaning of words lie in the differences between them and the things they name...words are the deferred presences of the things they mean, and the meaning is grounded in difference" (Murfin 201). For our purposes, words can be used as Symbols, or forms of expression, of an "unseen reality apprehended by the consciousness...(Symons 242).

Furthermore, in a Symbol, "there is concealment and yet revelation," according to Carlyle (242). And it is only after we fully understand that the characters and the physical environment are expressed by their vocalizations that we are able to hear the full resonance of the voices in Conrad's text and what their speech reveals.

Joseph Dobrinsky, in The Artist in Conrad's Fiction: A Psychocritical Study suggests that "voice" at its best (as opposed to talks, chatterings, jabbers, and their sterile written correlatives), connotes the genuine writer's art as well as the glimpsed or prompted truths to be conveyed (9). Conrad, too, is convinced that words are unreliable. In a letter to Cunningham Graham on January 14, 1898, he rails:

    Half the words we use have no meaning whatever and of the other half each man understands each word after the fashion of his own folly and conceit. Faith is a myth and beliefs shift like mists on the shore; thoughts vanish; words, once pronounced, die. (qtd. in Hawthorne 15)
But the use of voice as a symbol allowed Conrad to create something that was not doomed to death—words die; voice and its effect on the listener or reader, however, remain.

One way that the author uses voice in *Heart of Darkness* is through the exploration of the voice of the narrator who is telling the story in the night, as it is the narrator's voice, not the narrator himself, which is accessible in the darkness:

It had become so pitch dark that we listeners could hardly see one another. For a long time already he, sitting apart, had been no more to us than a voice. There was not a word from anybody. The others might have been asleep, but I was awake. I listened, I listened on the watch for the sentence, for the word, that would give me the clue to the faint uneasiness inspired by this narrative that seemed to shape itself without human lips in the heavy night-air of the river.

(Conrad, *Heart* 42)

In this way, a relationship between the teller, (in this case Marlow), and the listener (those gathered on the deck of the *Nellie*), and by extension the reader of the story, exists, and this connection is formed by the human voice. So while the words vanish, the voice leaves an effect, as it is voice which carries the story. Voice, moreover,
communicates more than sound as the voice makes what Julia Kristeva calls the semiotic register of discourse: tone, rhythm, music—the body speaking (cited in Hunter). Claire Kahne talks about human voice in this way:

The speaking voice stands somewhere between the body and the symbolic system; like a transitional object, it binds the speaker to the listener at the same time that it signals separation. (136)

This voice, moreover, is a sensitive reflector of emotion, thus it changes in tone and timbre, and this change is not always under the control of the speaker. Because of this lack of control, the listener may be seen as capable of perceiving that which the voice speaks from, and, as a result, the listener has passage to a place within the speaker’s psyche.

This notion of having access to something within the speaker is especially important in Heart of Darkness, as Conrad gives his reader a first person narrator who is telling someone else’s story as Marlow recites the tale of Kurtz and of himself, and is, for the most part, separated from the story (from its characters and their actions, as well as motivations and influences); thus, this primary narrator is removed from the meaning of the story. As a result, those on the Nellie listening to the story have no
access to the story through interrogation or discussion directly with those involved in it, and we, as readers, are even one step further from the story. This voice that narrates, then, becomes our one link to a truth to which we would otherwise have no access, even if one maintains that this is but a distant access.

A Magnificent Eloquence: Kurtz and Marlow

A discussion of voice in terms of Marlow and Kurtz necessitates our bearing in mind Schopenhauer's words regarding the view that voice makes the most direct connection between the subject and some voice of human consciousness, dealt with in an earlier section of this essay:

to know ourselves fully by directing our knowledge inwards, we lose ourselves in a bottomless void; we find ourselves like a hollow glass globe, from the emptiness of which a voice speaks. (153)

Conrad describes Marlow in language that almost seems to echo from Schopenhauer:

For a long time already he, sitting apart, had been no more to us than a voice.... I listened, I listened on the watch for the sentence, for the word, that would give me the clue to the faint uneasiness inspired by this narrative that seemed
This narrative seems "to shape itself without human lips," thus it is a voice without a source. Furthermore, as Pecora tells us, Marlow's voice must be seen in the Modernist context of the spoken word as the proof and sign of an inviolable human presence in the world—a presence that forms the groundwork for a metaphysical and moral order, and that comes to be increasingly relied upon once theological arguments begin to lose their rational credibility (1000). This idea that the spoken word leads us to an inviolable human presence can be taken a step further to include not only a human presence, but a spiritual presence, as well. And just as Schopenhauer had found a voice from "the emptiness," we see in Marlow "no more... than a voice," and Marlow finds in Kurtz "A voice! A voice!" (Conrad Heart 76).

Indeed, throughout his journey into the Congo, Marlow knows of Kurtz mostly in terms of his voice and his ability to talk, as shown in Marlow's conversation with the manager: In response to Marlow's question: "Don't you talk with Mr. Kurtz?" the manager responds, "You don't talk with that man--you listen to him" (69). It is this kind of comment that causes Marlow to regard Kurtz's voice as all-important, a gift, as revealed in Marlow's bemoaning the possibility of
Kurtz's demise further up the river, "We are too late; he has vanished--the gift has vanished...I will never hear that chap speak after all" (63). So it is the voice which Marlow longs to arrive at, not the man himself:

I made the strange discovery that I had never imagined him as doing, you know, but as discoursing. I didn't say to myself, "Now I will never shake him by the hand," but, "Now I will never hear him." The man presented himself as a voice...that of all of his gifts the one that stood out pre-eminently, that carried with it a sense of real presence, was his ability to talk, his words--the gift of expression, the bewildering, the illuminating, the most exalted and the most contemptible, the pulsating stream of light, or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness. (62)

This voice attempts to disregard the traditions and boundaries of language to peel back the layers of the consciousness to realize what exists beyond it in what Conrad sees as the "stream of light," which gives the reader access to "the impenetrable darkness." The human voice, then, becomes that stream, that light, that brings us to that which, through mere words alone, would have remained impenetrable, or dark. Conrad's use of voice allows the
author to show that Kurtz's voice, his gift of expression, is a figure of presence in a realm full of absences. Without the Symbol, Conrad would be unable to communicate this notion, as the voice of Kurtz derives from a realm beyond language; the Symbol, however, allows the author to allude to the source, to bring it to light.

It is at Kurtz's death that his voice has reached the limits of its powers of signification, where it strains almost beyond these limits in order to represent Kurtz's intentions, but where at the same time it is already overdetermined by the cultural expectation of the dying man's "last words." For how many might cling to the last words offered by another, one who is, perhaps, more experienced in life, now beholding the experience of death? Marlow is then faced with words that could represent many things, but are supposed to mean something important at the end. And the words remain forever, as the passage of time (and life), does not allow him to modify them. So what Marlow is left with is a record of Kurtz's revelation of self-knowledge and his recognition of the truth of his existence as a means of moral rectification, which, if possible, might have been retracted by the speaker. And what if, instead of the moral rectification offered at the end, the last words represent fear, uncertainty, and emptiness—the terror of absence rather than the catharsis
of presence? Kurtz's voice, then, becomes the product of an emptiness--the emptiness like that found in the hollow glass globe--which is a consequence of the inability of the voice to sound, to articulate. Death, then, would rob Kurtz of his "gift," his speech, and the worst kind of death would be characterized by his silence. But his voice remains with Marlow, then eventually with the primary narrator, and finally with the reader. And for Conrad, this Symbolist treatment of voice and death at the same time captures the horror of an inability to make his reader see or hear, and celebrates the potential of the Symbol's power to direct his reader to something more than emptiness.

Marlow poses a question of moral significance by saying:

Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision--he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath:

The horror! The horror! (85)

For the reader, the words uttered by this voice suggest several possibilities, which shows how ambiguous expressions coming from the cloudy inner psyche are. In the text, Marlow chooses to hear Kurtz's voice, though now only a
breath, as a signifier for a living presence and moral strength:

That is the reason I affirm that Kurtz was a remarkable man. He had something to say. He said it....He had summed it up--he had judged "the horror!" He was a remarkable man. After all, this was the expression of some sort of belief; it had candor, it had conviction, it had a vibrating note of revolt in its whisper; it had the appalling face of a glimpsed truth....I like to think my summing up would not have been a word of careless contempt....It was an affirmation, a moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats....That is why I have remained loyal to Kurtz to the last, even beyond, when a long time after I heard once more not his own voice, but the echo of his magnificent eloquence thrown to me from a soul as translucently pure as a cliff or crystal. (87)

I would take this one step further and suggest that Marlow has this backwards, and that the echo in Kurtz's voice in its final utterance can, perhaps, be seen as that of the true voice--that of the Intended. For if the voice of Kurtz struggles to represent his intentions, it must, too, represent his Intended, whose essence is also brought to us
through Conrad the Symbolist, and the capacity of voice as a Symbol.

In any case, the Symbol of the voice provides immortality, as it is through Kurtz's voice that Marlow is able to find redemption for himself and it is in Kurtz's memory that Marlow's lie, which earlier would have repulsed him, is sanctified. This redemption is brought by the voice of Kurtz, as shown when Marlow whispers, "Do you know what you are doing?" and then 'Perfectly,' he answered, raising his voice for that single word: it sounded to me far off and yet loud, like a hail through a speaking-trumpet" (81). This voice coming as if from a speaking-trumpet conjures up all kinds of references to redemption, as that from Heaven, for the reader.

But it would be unsatisfactory to deal with Marlow and his voice only in terms of Kurtz's utterances because, as he tells his listeners "Very well; I hear; I admit, but I have a voice, too, and for good or evil mine is the speech that cannot be silenced" (51). His statement reveals that Marlow has his own voice as affirmation or proof of his individual presence, and according to Vincent Pecora, it is this affirmation of the self that makes the difference between Kurtz's experience in the jungle and Marlow's lie (1007). Of course, Marlow sees Kurtz's self-knowledge--his ability to name and perhaps conquer the darkness within him--as
further affirmation of the "self" which holds a presence that resonates in the voice, thus sustaining Marlow. So Marlow comprehends affirmation through the voice of Kurtz, "I saw it--I heard it" (Conrad Heart 82), through what has become a faint breath, and Marlow's self-knowledge and vision of a human and spiritual presence beyond the material world is symbolized by his exhaling breath, too, when he notes that "I blew the candle out and left the cabin" (85).

The Modern World:
Hollow Men in a Vacant Space

This essay's treatment of Kurtz reveals that the voice of Kurtz directs us to an examination of how the spoken word leads to a human and spiritual presence in the emptiness. Without voice, then, the character of Kurtz as a mute or as a being who is defined in mere words alone, would leave us with the emptiness so often encountered in the world of the Modernist. So while Kurtz's hollowness defines the nature of his role as representative of words and speech, it is useful to explore further this absence and presence in terms of the Modern world.

Aside from the human voice of the narrator, Marlow, and of Kurtz, the text reveals other voices, both human and inhuman. Throughout the story, the wilderness and the coast of the jungle are constantly referred to in terms of voice or the lack of it--silence. For example, the coast is
revealed as having a spirit, as being alive, through Conrad's Symbolist treatment of voice: "There it is before you--smiling, frowning, inviting, grand, mean, insipid, or savage, and always mute with an air of whispering come and find out" (Conrad Heart 27). Even the author's phrasing of this passage shows duality; the coast is mute, but this silence is whispering. The water, too, is described as voice; it is not the surf that is heard, but the voice of the surf that is heard, and "the voice of the surf heard now and then was a positive pleasure, like the speech of a brother" (28), thus comparing two examples of discourse, one human and one inhuman, as those of a man and water in human relationship. In Heart of Darkness, the mouth of the river is as capable of speech as the human mouth.

As the story progresses, Marlow begins to listen for oral communication from nature, as evidenced by his saying, "It was so startling that I leaped to my feet and looked back at the edge of the forest, as though I had expected an answer of some sort..." (48). In Symbolist writing, Nature must be seen as a signifier for a transcendent reality behind the material world, thus it shows emotions, something which we normally think of human entities doing. Marlow describes what seems to be a noisy wilderness:

Before it stopped running with a muffled rattle, a cry, a very loud cry, as of infinite desolation,
soared slowly in the opaque air. It ceased. A complaining clamor, modulated in savage discords, filled our ears... (54).

While the cry comes from the savages, Marlow notes what seems to be the scream of the mist:

I don't know how it struck the others: to me it seemed as though the mist itself had screamed, so suddenly, and apparently from all sides at once, did this tumultuous and mournful uproar arise. (54)

This uproar culminates in an outbreak of "almost intolerably excessive shrieking" (55), and eventually becomes silent. These types of experiences in the jungle lead Marlow to begin to look toward the voice of the jungle, which is revealed as being capable of making judgments. "It made me hold my breath in expectation of hearing the wilderness burst into a prodigious peal of laughter that would shake the fixed stars in their places" (64), he tells his listeners, and later, it is Marlow's notion that Nature whispers Kurtz's deficiencies to him:

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, things of which he had no conception
till he took counsel with this great solitude—and
the whisper had proved irresistible fascinating.
It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow
at the core.... (73)

This passage shows Nature, or the natural world, or, more
precisely, the voice of it as that which, like Kurtz’s voice
as the "stream of light," is capable of leading to the
darkness, penetrating it as Kurtz’s voice did for Marlow.

As in the case of the non-human voice of Nature, the
source of the voice of wilderness is the source of the voice
of those working within the jungle, and like the other
characters in the story, these people are dealt with in
terms of orality. Marlow describes the manager in these
terms: "He was commonplace in complexion, in feature, in
manners, and in voice" (36). Later, Marlow encounters the
manager, but the syntax of the following sentence reveals
that it is not the manager, but instead, his voice that is
noted as having spoken: "It is very serious, said the
manager’s voice behind me" (57). The chief agent is seen,
too, through voice. Marlow says "All the carriers were
speaking together, and in the midst of the uproar the
lamentable voice of the chief agent was heard giving it up
tearfully for the twentieth time that day" (33), and the
reader is led, through the author’s phrasing of the
sentence, to hear the voice of the man, instead of the man himself.

Clearly, then, the work presents itself as treating the source of the voice of physical environment not as a metaphor to represent, but as a symbol to signify something beyond itself. This prodding of the symbol, then, links the reader to what is behind it, which, in this case, leads to the Modern world.

Conrad, who lived in the British society that believed in imperialism, was in the middle of a complex system. This order, run by clerks and bureaucrats, focused on the growth of industries and complex systems of mass communication. One result was that relationships with fellow creatures and with the material world were, as never before, considered trivial. What became significant was the power associated with the industrial revolution and capitalism, and although this system sought gains for humanity, it reflected aspects that were very much anti-human.

Conrad confronts this order through his Symbolist treatment of the wilderness, whose powerful presence of absence emphasizes the emptiness of this Western civilization the author must certainly loathe. So while Marlow looks to the jungle for a voice, for that which would be most human-like, he encounters, like Kurtz behind him, a voice which is hollow. For while the voice of the Congo
reveals speech and emotion, it is truly "like the speech of a brother," of a Nineteenth century brother, and its sound approaches from a moral void. And in his travel up the coast, Marlow is, as Ian Watt tells us, "surrounded by beings who are emotionally, morally, and spiritually void" (222), so this hollow world holds hollow men. What the reader is left with, then, is that same thing which Conrad must surely have encountered: a great deal of interaction with his fellow humans and the natural world, but very little real communication. For how can one truly participate with a voice that connects with that which lacks essence; that which is spiritually void? So this presence yields nothing, thus becoming an absence.

What He Intended

It is desirable to balance the nothingness signified by the jungle and empty souls within it with its antithesis: a moral presence. This regard to the existence of some presence brings us to an exploration of the Symbolist use, once again, of voice, to signify the Intended and her meaning, as filtered through the unilluminated perceptions of Marlow.

The Intended is, at times, identified with the wilderness. For example, the following passage describes Marlow listening to her speak of Kurtz's gift of speech:
The sound of her low voice seemed to have the accompaniment of all the other sounds, full of mystery, desolation, and sorrow, I had ever heard—the ripple of the river, the soughing of the trees swayed by the wind, the murmurs of the crowds, the faint ring of incomprehensible words cried from afar, the whisper of a voice speaking from beyond the threshold of an eternal darkness.

(92)

Here Marlow describes both her plea to hear the last words of her beloved, as well as her voice—the low musical voice which evokes for him the sounds from another place, the sonorous undergrowth of the African jungle. But her voice, in contrast with that of the wilderness, signifies not a moral absence, but instead, a moral presence for the fascinated Marlow.

The Intended must be regarded as representing Kurtz's intentions, what he intended, before his contending African continent, and the potential for nothingness in himself, as she is never given any other name within the story. And Kurtz is revealed as having unfulfilled aims and elusive ideals. So, because we have access to her only through Marlow's impressions, she defines goodness, which for the reader, is revealed in Kurtz's valuing the voice heard in oral and written communication, which holds that virtue can
be regarded as a human capacity for imagination to exist within a system which functions in terms of a calculating brand of power, the cold, hard steel of automated machinery, and the stolid, plodding response of the individual. For surely the emptiness this system reveals is a symptom of a vacant metaphysical realm beyond the nothingness of this tangible world.

Marlow acknowledges what he identifies as the moral nature of this woman, whose gaze "seemed to watch for more words on my lips" (91), and it is because of this recognition that he must utter what he sees as the lie. For it is Marlow's idea that the Intended sees the world through a feminine perspective, and her impression is of a world that is, like the world seen by the other Victorian women in the story, "too beautiful altogether" (27). Marlow, then, perceives that the "horror" of the truth that the world is a vast emptiness, would be "too dark altogether" (94) for her to behold. In this way, the relationship between Marlow and the Intended duplicates that between Kurtz and her: Marlow reproduces illusions for her. It is this supposed preservation of innocence that permits him to reconcile the emptiness, and as Kurtz's voice redeems him, so does Marlow's voice, which carries the lie, redeem Kurtz's Intended. And it is only in this way that the telling of the untruth could be justified: the Intended, who, through
the clouded vision of Marlow, signifies the potential of imagination in an otherwise unimaginative world, must not be faced with the horror, the savagery of the jungle. Instead, her spirit, her essence, must be allowed, indeed encouraged, to continue as a shade of light in a potentially inescapable darkness.

I shall see this eloquent phantom as long as I live, and I shall see her too, a tragic and familiar shade, resembling in this gesture another one, tragic also, and bedecked with powerless charms, stretching bare brown arms over the glitter of the infernal stream, the stream of darkness. (93)

So her innocence is sustained, thus is a moral presence within the absence sustained as the human capacity and potential for the luminous color of imagination in an otherwise unlit darkness.

CONCLUSION

This essay has attempted to deal with literary Symbolism by defining the literary Symbol and through discussing the Symbol in one work produced by Joseph Conrad. One thought that I would like to stress is that, while Symbolist writers are able to empower their poetry and prose through using the Symbol, the reader must also bear responsibility for comprehending the meaning behind and
beyond the Symbol. As Conrad declares in a letter to Cunningham Greene:

I am very sincerely delighted to learn that you can stand my prose. It is so hard to realize that I have any readers!—except the critics, who have been very kind and moral, and austere but excessively indulgent. To know that you could read me is good news indeed—for one writes only half the book, the other half is with the reader. (qtd. in Hawthorne)

So it is clear that Conrad worries about communicating with his readers, and the use of Symbolist techniques allows him the chance to communicate more than words alone. It is in this way, and through the use of the voice as a Symbol, that the reader is left with much more than Marlow when he remarks, before meeting with Kurtz face to face: "He was just a word for me" (42).

My reading of the Heart of Darkness has led me to understand that the story is very much alive, and that it is recreated for me with each new reading. And it is the voice which sustains that life, and in reading it my voice is joined with that of the narrator, and this uniting makes dialogue and communication possible. One vital aspect dealt with in this text's narrative, then, is the idea of having "summed up." Since it is a "summing up" that Marlow has
discovered to be what most he has been seeking—that summary illumination that retrospectively makes sense of all that has gone before—his insistence that Kurtz has summed up is important. At the end of Kurtz’s journey lay not ivory, gold, or a fountain of youth, but the capacity to turn experience into language: a voice (Brooks 247). Furthermore, it is the capacity for imagination that enables us to translate that experience into meaningful language for ourselves and our listeners.

Marlow, upon hearing of Kurtz’s death, describes this scene and asks:

There was a lamp in there—light, don’t you know—and outside it was so beastly, beastly dark. I went no more near the remarkable man who had pronounced a judgment upon the adventures of his soul on this earth. The voice was gone. What else had been there? (86)

Through prodding the text, through contemplation of the meaning created by the Symbol in the writing of a Symbolist like Conrad, the voice does remain. And if the reader will only ask, as Marlow did, "What else had been there?" she will find access to a new realm beyond the tangible world created by the Symbol.
WORKS CITED


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