The Heart of Darkness: A Case Against ‘Going With The Flow’

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The character of Marlow in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* employs an imprecise, impressionistic description of a river to chart his emotional and intellectual journey toward understanding the purpose of the colonizing mission, and his struggle to feel actively in control as he continues to blindly 'go with the flow' of 'strange' colonial orders.

The first sentence locates the reader in a liminal, nonexistent place rather than in the geographic setting of the river described. Rather than describing the literal geographic space the river flows towards, Marlow emphasizes his experience of the river as a magical, transcendent force, moving him geographically and temporally to "the earliest beginnings," an extreme and imperceivable location within the equally abstract site of "the world" (59). This description creates the impression of the setting as defiant of human order and structures, possessing a power and will that undermine human ability. In fact, Marlow endows the uncivilized setting with the capacity to "riot" and rule as "kings", coveted behaviours and roles that humans gain or exercise power through (59). Therefore, by the first sentence, readers can recognize Marlow's description of the setting as a reflection of his powerlessness and lack of agency as a traveller on a foreign river and as an uninformed member of the colonial project.

The subsequent three sentences depict the natural environment, focusing on features characteristic of any earthly environment—water, land, air, and the sun—but their unconventional descriptions further separate Marlow from a 'universal' human experience. The second sentence of the passage is a simple descriptive catalogue of his surroundings, lacking any verb or action, freezing the reader in the 'strange' temporal and spatial location of general features —water, forest, and, most disorienting, nothing (59). This nothingness is focused on further in the third sentence, using four adjectives in succession—the most description any noun is given in the entire passage—to describe the air. This account of atmospheric warmth,

thickness, heaviness, and sluggishness forces readers to sensorially encounter the pressure, discomfort, and burden that Marlow experiences as he reaches the central station, the metaphorical heart of their mission's most remote and criminal, or dark, activity (59). Marlow's following sentence describes the sun, a feature of his environment that readers across time and space will recognize as a constant and standard of the Earth. This sense of familiarity and comfort is undermined by a negative, apocalyptic description of the sun as a "brilliance" that bears "no joy" (59). Thus, light becomes a force of feeling and mood, and this weakened light complements the growing sense of supreme and overpowering moral and emotional darkness in the colonial central station.

The fifth and sixth sentences aggrandize these features of the setting to reflect Marlow's feelings of inferiority in his current situation. The fifth sentence returns readers' attention to the river, the literal and symbolic propelling force behind the narrative, yet the account fails to enhance the description or create a more detailed image of the river and wider setting. It also structurally emulates the enduring flow of the river towards the "gloom", running on and overflowing with amplificatory adjectives which enhance the endless obscurity of the surrounding setting (59). In fact, Marlow stretches his already lengthier sentence by interrupting the main clause to note the "deserted" nature of the emerging sights—a redundant, yet purposeful adjective that describes nothingness in the part of the sentence that should enhance detail (59). By subverting the expectation that longer, descriptive sentences provide a clearer mental image, readers encounter a sublime darkness in their comprehension that remains consistent and stagnant despite the progressive forces of the river and the narrative. Similarly, the sixth sentence broadens the descriptive image to include a precise and concrete observation of the environment beyond Marlow's impression of it. However, the stylistic elements of the sentence further

emphasize and centralize Marlow's distress and powerlessness, and thus the surroundings act as a foil to Marlow's experience. While Marlow is at the mercy of an active river, other living beings—"hippos and alligators"—harmoniously rest on a magical, precious "silvery" sandscape, embracing warm light from the same sun that Marlow describes as unsensational (59). Further, two-thirds of the words in the sentence feature a repeated 's' sound, suggesting a beauty and simplicity that naturally occurs in the landscape, yet is unachieved by Marlow's crew as they intrude upon the space to fulfill a colonial assignment. Also, it is worth noting that while this captured moment may carry a romantic, utopic magic, the animals in the scene are both dangerous predators that pose a serious threat to the travellers, inferior in strength and in kind, vulnerable to and disconnected from the natural world as they serve greedy and violent colonial missions.

The seventh and eighth sentences starkly shift the passage's pacing, forcing readers to pause and linger on Marlow's emotional landscape rather than the external landscape**.** The seventh sentence broadens, like the "broadening" waters, into a series of connected clauses, crowding the flowing narrative like the "mob of wooded islands" the river flows through (59). Conrad uses a semi-colon to attach clarifying thoughts, delaying a punctuated end to such an extreme that the text following the semi-colon is five times the word count of the preceding clause. Despite this, Conrad maintains the scene's obscurity in his additional descriptions, providing no further details about the setting they are in or the one they are approaching, thus placing readers in the same position of subjectivity and unknowing estrangement as the crew on the river. He writes of the liminal and uncertain process of being lost, describing Marlow's actions through a register of uncertainty and insecurity as he "tries to find" things, eventually meekly admitting thoughts that "perhaps" he is "bewitched" and controlled by a superior, sinister

force. This suggestion of a supernatural force reducing their agency is supported by hyperbolic and vague language about time and space, travelling "all day long" until they are "cut off for ever from everything," leaving their old life "somewhere – far away – in another existence" (59). Finally, as a testament to the colonial author's challenge of communicating 'strange' encounters to an alienated audience, Conrad masterfully uses a simile to compare a body of water to a "desert," a setting that famously lacks water. Though oxymoronic and highly ironic, it serves as a perfect description of Marlow's experience, feeling helplessly lost in an unfamiliar, barren territory. The subsequent run-on sentence lingers in the domain of feelings and thoughts, mimicking Marlow's account of forgetting his surroundings and being reminded of his past. Marlow discusses the act of remembering as a nothingness—like "uneventful silence" encountered when he has "not a moment to spare"—or as an excess—like "noisy" dreams that fight with an "overwhelming" reality—creating an extreme state of conflict and disorientation against his will (59-60). He emphasizes that he cannot control what he encounters or when, whether it comes from his past or his present, and that the repeatedly "strange world of plants, and water, and silence" surrounding him indiscriminately corrupts his perspective (60).

The final two sentences return to the environment, focusing specifically on the "silence" that Marlow catalogues as a part of the natural forces to which he must heed in the previous sentence. By beginning the ninth sentence with the coordinating conjunction "and," Conrad suggests that despite the period, the clause has not yet ended, defying grammatical limits and boundaries. The silence is described in a similarly defiant way, as a "stillness of life," any oxymoronic association considering movement is one of the necessary features of living organisms on Earth, whether that be through respiration, growth, or even responses to stimuli. The very atmosphere of the environment creates a resounding, suffocating nothingness that does

“not in the least resemble” Marlow’s or Conrad’s intended audience’s experiences in the world, where silence is peaceful and full of life (60). The tenth and final sentence repeats the word “stillness,” further extending the discussion of the specific silence encountered through a short sentence (60). This sentence summarizes the entire passage, emphasizing Marlow’s consistent and growing lack of knowledge and, thus, of control, as he nears the central station. The triple alliteration of ‘i’ in “implacable force” and “inscrutable intention” suggests a relationship between the words supported by Marlow’s description of the environment across the passage (60). Looking closely at the diction, implacable suggests defiance of time and space—of natural laws and order—while inscrutable conveys perceptive incompetence—a lack of understanding and sense. The suggested connection is one of powerlessness and weakness, one in which you are unequipped to make sense of your surroundings and thus make any informed decisions. Marlow is still in pursuit of this metaphorical “heart of darkness,” or source of evil, because he has yet to identify and scrutinize the intention behind the colonial forces he serves under. By alliterating and concluding with the word' intention,' Conrad emphasizes the importance of uncovering true motivations through actions, despite the charming words or comforting promises of those in power, to orient oneself and understand the surrounding world.

Though the passage should work to establish the setting for readers, Marlow spends little time on concrete sensory details of his surroundings, prioritizing his emotional experience in the ‘strange’ environment. Ultimately, the river’s role as a forceful propeller provides creative ground for discussing the ‘darkness’ of agentless servitude, obscured information, and unrestricted actions that supported European colonial practices during the scramble for Africa.

Works Cited

Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness, with The Congo Diary*. Edited by Robert Hampson, Penguin Books, 2000.