

Outline of [and notes on] Rabinowitz's "Reader Response, Reader Responsibility ['responsibility' to whom? for what?]: *Heart of Darkness* and the Politics of Displacement [what's being 'displaced,' and by whom?]"

¶1–2: Reviews recent critical controversies over HOD, w/Achebe as touchstone; but R. not interested in Conrad's politics as much as our own—particularly in the political implications of *how we read*.

¶3–6 or 7: What "interpretation" encompasses for him: basically, all responses to a text are "interpretive" in some way.

¶7 &/or 8 [Transitional paragraph(s)]: the differences among interpretative acts are not so revealing as the similarities: he's not concerned with individualistic readings, but with communal interpretations resulting from certain shared conventions of reading.

¶9–14 or 15: what are "conventions" of rdg? Interpretive conventions drive all "serious" or "educated" responses to texts; these are not monolithic—there's room for variation—but (¶9) all conventions have political implications (reminder of thesis, reformulated in ¶15).

¶11–14: the categories of interpretive convention: rules of notice (prioritizing details—what matters, what doesn't?), rules of signification (when do details picked out according to rules of notice have symbolic value?), rules of configuration (fit 1 & 2 into expected narr conventions; 'nother one is the battling couple that will eventually fall in love, right?), rules of coherence (the most important for R's essay: rule that permits a large 'theme' to be extracted from other rules to provide a coherent 'meaning' for text as a whole)

¶16–18: *HOD* as case study: survey of typical results of application of rules of coherence to HOD, past & present (& thr pblms).

¶19–23: Particulars of responses vary, but generated by same procedure, same assumptions about literary text: Rule of Abstract Displacement (¶19): literature is always figurative, metaphorical; nothing in literature ever means what it literally says. **Dangers of Abstract Displacement illustrated: the lesson of *Cat People* (no metaphors where none intended?) Persistence of abstract displacement in reading Art.** ¶23: restatement/transition: although interpretations vary in terms what they come up with, they all make the same move: i.e., they insist that specific passages in the novella "mean" something else other than what they literally indicate.

¶24–27: How is Abstr Displcmt 'political'? Political because it hierarchizes: it valorizes the abstract over the literal, and, in case of *Heart of Darkness*, it encourages us to see horrors of European imperialism as mere tropes; this is often what gets taught in classroom about novella, even despite best intentions of critics.

¶28–9: Does Conrad himself invite such a reading? (Doesn't Achebe accuse Conrad of making the same move of abstract displacement—i.e., Africa ain't Africa; it's the darkness in all humanity, etc.? Colonial Africa merely convenient, fantastic bkdop for Euro's to reflect upon how twisted they are?)

¶29: Real point is danger of unself-reflexive criticism; we need to think about what we do when we read, and what we're implicitly valuing and privileging in our approaches to texts. [Overloaded paragraph, actually; takes on Conrad's intention and our und'g of/response to that intention, and then dismisses it as moot. Essay ends rather abruptly, somehow; is he merely exhorting critical self-awareness? If pblm is that we've been colluding in the erasure of dirty specifics of implsm & racism fr/Conrad's text, wh/do we gain by confessing this? What do we do w/that self-knowledge? He doesn't say... Wh's it mean that we want to 'abstract out' the historical particulars of political content of s/t like Euro Implsm—or, for that matter, of American Implsm?]

Smith

¶1: Announcement of overall project: a feminist reading of *HOD* can critique the interrelated ideologies of gender & empire operating in it—the ways in which the book “colonizes” & “pacifies” both savagery & women. Marlow silences laundress/company-women/mistress in order to make them “dark” & unknowable; sequesters aunt & Intended to help keep “darkness” at bay.

What’s ideology, how do we detect it, what does an examination of it potentially reveal?

¶2: Definition of “ideology”: consciously or no, ideology tries to mystify or disguise contradictory experiences by making social constructs appear “natural.” Although such internalized ideologies condition and shape what we can perceive & experience, they’re always changing, & in the course of changing, they may become visible.

¶3: Specifies how ideologies can reveal themselves in literary texts: ideologies may be “inscribed in discourse,” act as raw material for literary texts—but if an ideology is in flux, a text may reveal that flux in “gaps” where more than one version is trying to get out.

¶4: Gives particular example from *HOD*: Kurtz’s treatise illustrates/foregrounds the inherent contradictions of the “conquest-as-humanitarianism” ideology, which is under pressure at the turn of century.

¶5: Further example: Marlow’s ironic/ambiguous reaction to Kurtz’s treatise shows him evading his complicity in this contradictory ideology. Reminder of project (fr/¶1): examining such “gaps” in Marlow’s discourse reveals or foregrounds the contradictions that his ideologies of gender & empire work to mystify.

How do women in particular fit into all this? Gap #1: “Native” Laundress

¶6: Demonstrates Marlow’s collusion in “imperialist -masculinist brutality”: #1 - Imperialism: his ironic assessment of the accountant allows him to identify with an imperialism full of “backbone” rather than “flab.”

¶7: #2 - Masculinism: by remaining silent on what allows the accountant to gain his “backbone,” Marlow also implicitly naturalizes/conceals the exploitation of “native” women.

Gap #2: “Savage” Mistress

¶8: Another instance of silencing where Marlow’s purposes are clearer; namely: to control & distance both woman & jungle by insisting that they’re enigmas.

¶9: (Demonstrates how, in *HOD*, mistress symbolically represents jungle.) Doing so (i.e., insisting on their inherent “mystery”) helps neutralize the potential threat of both female sexuality & jungle savagery.

¶10: She/jungle otherwise threaten masculine knowledge, restraint & order.

¶11: Reiteration: the silencing that Marlow carries out serves imperialist & masculinist ends; in his “stress”-ful gesture, these ideologies reveal themselves.

¶12: Follow-up/afterthought: his misinterpretation of the Savage woman’s adornments even robs her Amazon-like appearance of its “formidable” silence.

Gap #3: Company Women

¶13: By symbolizing the Company women as mysterious Fates controlling his destiny, he displaces responsibility for his collusion in imperialism onto *them*.

¶14: His attempt to “hide behind gender difference” (i.e., it’s *their* fault) is only partly successful: the return of the repressed signals a problem in his project to separate feminine sphere fr/masculine. [The “boundaries” of gender diff he erects here are qualitatively different th/those below, though...]

“Separate Spheres”: Aunt & Intended

¶15: Ideology of “separate gendered spheres” helps M resolve the contradictions of his reaction to K (in his seduction by/idolization of K, he too is very like the Ladies): his contradictory beliefs in “idea” & “horror” can coexist if they’re consigned to separate spheres. Mere “idea” is naively feminine, while encounter w/truth is masculine (Boys have stared into abyss); total effect is to shore up ideology of imp’lsm.

¶16: Distinction between “idea” and “sentimental pretence” is intro’d in M’s preface.

¶17: Aunt’s belief in “glorious idea” has no connection w/him (& his more jaded/seasoned view): he’s embarrassed by having to depend on bourgeois domesticity for a job, so he takes pains to show how he despises bourg domesticity.

¶18: Her “emissary of light” version of imp’lsm is rejected in favor of his jaded realism.

¶19: What distinguishes aunt’s beliefs fr/Kurtz’s: women’s beliefs are impossibly idealistic, men’s are rooted in facts.

¶20: To capacity to “face truth,” M adds manly “d eliberate belief,” which surfaces thru adventurous experience (which women can’t have). Masculinist mystification thus produces ideological defense of belief in imp’l’st “idea” which redeems ugly reality.

¶21: Yet K’s final recognition of “horror” seems t o belie this idea, & Marlow is profoundly unsettled by it (& women’s intrusion into it?).

¶22: Solution: further reinforce the separation of spheres. Women must be *kept* out of this in order to keep masculine world of “fact” from deteriorating. In this way, the deliberate construction of feminine ID shores up masculine imp’lsm. (“Field -tested” idea of Kurtzian implsm can now be purified & contained in women’s/Intended’s “unselfish belief.”)

¶23: Elaboration: M “constructs” the Intended, too, then —as a location where K’s eloquence can be contained & transformed by her faith (to which M bows down, as to an idol). [Still, he knows how callow this is: he calls it a “great & saving illusion”! One pblm w/Smith is th/she dsn’t acknowledge how ironic Conra d has made Marlow, what a dubious or ambiguous figure he is.] M needs this construction of femininity in order to fulfill his ideological project of creating a “redeeming idea” for imp’lsm.

¶24: Furthermore, idolization requires sacrifice. His underlying hostility towards her prompts him to humiliate her, with what he takes to be her consent. [These twisted psychodynamics seem to make the whole business less tidy th/Smith implied in previous ¶.]

¶25: The “protective lie” also functions to protect, once again, the separation of spheres: M has essentially sacrificed her w/a lie so as to maintain the integrity of a masculine sphere where men can “face truth.” (Slightly different spin on ¶22.) [Then the paragraph spins out of control, ending w/:] The pain M inflicts on Intended is related to M’s browbeating of his listeners & even to Conrad’s heavy -handed, “domineering” style —& all of this is indicative of the ultimate brutality of discourses of empire & gender.

¶26: [Postscript: remarks on the centrality of Conrad’s stylistic “trickery” in recent critical debates over *HOD*. Some of these *also* show how the construction of a particular ideology of gender serves to shore up ideology of imp’lsm.]

Miller

¶1: Is *HOD* “apocalyptic”?

¶2-3: It’s at least “parabolic”: uses realistic trappings to reveal an otherwise abstract, inexpressible truth.

¶4: Parable shares w/apocalypse an emphasis on (revelation of a mystery of) the future.

¶5: *HOD* fits both generic categories, and lkg at it as parable/apocalypse can shed light on it. (Interpretation, like parable & apocalypse, aims to “enlighten.”)

¶6: Two ways in which stories may be related to their meanings: shell:nut & haze:glow.

¶7: First analogy suggests an easily expressible moral [metonymic synecdoche: container:contained].

¶8: Just the opposite w/Marlow’s tales: his story illumines meaning from inside out [what’s being proposed is an *inherent*, not a contingent, reln’sp bet. story and its meaning].

¶9: (Furthermore, this figure [the “likeness of the haze: the halo”] is itself a figure for its own mode of working. [See ¶12])

¶10: (Examination of exact terms of the metaphor.) Haze=invisible, intangible meaning enveloping the story: Truth, Horror.

¶11: Seems simple: invisible haze will show up as moon’s halo—everyday phenom. expresses an obscure & more transcendent truth.

¶12: But this particular metaphor is also about how parables work—how they’re directed at the already-initiated: they’re supposed to illumine a darkness which it’s impossible to see (unless we already “see” it, understand it).

¶13: *HOD* is, therefore a “revelation of the impossibility of revelation.”

¶14: Elaboration: in Conrad’s analogy, the darkness itself is never illuminated; the halo only gives *indirect* knowledge that the darkness (i.e., the meaning of the story) is there. The *expression* of the mng is merely a parabolic “likeness” of the meaning.

¶15: *HOD*’s reader, like M’s hearers, dsn’t have direct experience of story, only an experience mediated through “names,” i.e., words.

¶16: Hearers can, however, see the teller (more than he h/s can do); experiencing through another, in a “proliferating relay of witnesses” (each of whom reveals only another witness), is exactly the (apocalyptic) form of *HOD* [see ¶20-21, below].

¶17: (Furthermore, unveiling must be only about unveiling, since revelation of “ultimate” truth would be death.)

¶18: Complicating factor: and actually, M’s auditors don’t even “see” the teller/witness; the narrative has no ultimate “source”; it’s just a voice.

¶19: For us readers, too, *HOD* has no identifiable narrator (as if darkness were speaking itself)—another feature of apocalypse.

¶20: [Confusing sidetrack/partial summary re: all of the figurative similarities bet. *HOD* & the apocalyptic genre.]

¶21: Most explicitly apocalyptic feature of *HOD*: announcement of imminent end/degeneration/hollow core of Western Civ.

¶22: Apocalyptic twist unique to *HOD* is that darkness can never be enlightened.

¶23: Marlow claims to know the enlightening secret, but he’s undercut by his own irony: he’s as much a mere relay for the “darkness” as he is its revealer.

¶24: In a final irony, I. J. Hillis Miller, as a commentator unveiling the lack of decisive unveiling, am also guilty of covering over while claiming to illuminate.

Nutshell summary of **Thomas**:

By the end of the nineteenth century, belief in the possibility of an “objective” description of the past was crumbling, giving way to “modern subjectivist philosophies”: the West lost faith in its ability to arrive at some ultimate truth about culture or philosophy over the course of history. This loss of faith is encapsulated in Conrad’s novel: Kurtz can be read as an embodiment of the nihilism that comes with Europe’s recognition of the relativist abyss, while Marlow is struggling to maintain faith in the narrative of Progress, which he can only do by lying (a lie which speaks the truth in a backhanded way, actually). Modernist *literary* forms shared the same anxieties as historiography: fractured narratives, distorted chronologies, narration-within-narration-within-narration characteristic of modernist texts all reflect the same loss of belief in “master narratives,” the revelation of ultimate truths. As a narrative describing an encounter with the Other, meanwhile, *Heart of Darkness* illuminates one of the major provocations of Europe’s anxieties: it was precisely the encounter with the Other (which was put in high gear by imperialism) that helped to “decenter” the European narratives of progress and Enlightenment (even as those ideologies were used to *justify* imperialism). Nevertheless, the fallout from this encounter remained determinedly Eurocentric; these “Others” merely became a cause for more self-reflection.

Brantlinger

[HOD cancels its own best intentions, critiques implsm & racism in ways that are implst & racist. Seeing how it does/doesn't make use of historical sources and pop-culture conventions (in this case, of Gothic romance/adventure novels) helps us see how it (deliberately) does this. Obfuscatory stylistic 'impressionism' is what enables racism?]

Intro

¶1: Summary of Achebe's objections to HOD (that ppl miss the obvious racism of the bk indicates the utter normalcy of racist views it purveys).

¶2: Critical resp to Achebe: No, Conrad rises above, even debunks, racist myths, bec. he exposes implst rapacity.

¶3: Brantlinger: true, but can't tell how far we can genlize C's critique beyond *Belgian* implsm.

¶4: This critical ambiguity complicated by C's 'impressionistic' style, which expresses/disguises HO D's 'schizophrenia' twds implsm as harmonious whole.

Section I

¶5: Documentary evidence shows Conrad appalled by 'high-sounding rhet' masking 'sordid ambitions' of Belgian implsm, of wh/he knew fr/direct exp & fr/news exposes.

¶6: Apart fr/one letter on behalf of Congo Reform Assn, though, C wasn't an anti-impl activist.

¶7: His abhorrence does show up clearly in one other little-known allegorical work, though...

¶8: ...where what rllly bothers him is the 'lying idealism' used to cover up horrific actions.

¶9-10: Conrad saw little evidence of mutilation or cannibalism while in Congo, but learned about it fr/exposé lit after. ¶11-13: Detailed descriptions of such exposé lit. ('Atrocities' were products of implsm & war, not 'native customs.')

[So PB asks: if we want to believe Conrad's main ambition here was to write a startling expose of what imperialism was 'really' about, why did so many of the facts get left out? How is Conrad manipulating the details of what went on in the Congo, and to what end?]

Section II [Deliberateness of 'racist' imagery in svce of 'anti-impl' message]

¶14: Marlow suggests th/implsm may be redeemed by 'idea'—wh/has been betrayed by practitioners on ground; it's this betrayal HOD attacks.

¶15: But Marlow also pts out that 'id eals' may also be betrayed by being fetishized as 'idols'; idolatry replaces idealism.

¶16: Difficulty w/this inversion is that it shows European idolatry as no better than African—wh/ (in keeping w/repertoire of Victorian racism) is depicted as inherently evil.

¶17: Any subversion of light-dark dichotomy C attempts is therefore incomplete: M/C are fixated on blackness.

¶18: C's failure to use his historical 'sources' works only to sharpen symbolism of blackness, white/black dichotomy.

¶19: A real exposé of implsm wdn't have done this; C must've bn conscious of the contradictions he was building in, employed racist (manichean) imagery for calculated effect.

¶20: He stresses ambiguities of his story & refuses to resolve them [so how can anyone confidently proclaim it's either anti-implst or racist when Conrad's fudging, obfuscating?].

Section III [This deliberate ambiguity rooted in attempted appropriation of pop-cult conventions]

¶21: Many critics have marked this deliberate ambiguity, this 'dislocation of meaning' (paging Prof. Miller) as HOD's 'finest feature.'

¶22: 'Modernist ambiguity/impressionism/will-to-style vs. pop-cult adventure-story conventions' almost corresponds to 'Anti-imperialist critique vs. racist stereotypical imagery' (or vice versa).

¶23: Binary oppositions of adventure stories ironically appropriated by Conrad; his impressionist “will to style” encompasses his aim to remake those conventions as high art; but they in turn undercut his critique of implsm. (W/the genre’s conventions come its assumptions).

¶24: This schizophrenia seems to have inspired critics to empty HOD of social/historical/political content. (Abstract Displacement all over again!)

¶25: The pt. shd be to restore what those critical rdgs neglect, yet Conrad seems to be both leading us further astray & foreclosing our possibilities.

Section IV [All this obfuscation masks real mng: self-indictment]

¶26: [Epigraph fr/Morel’s *Red Rubber*]

¶27-9: Since M isn’t led astray, neither should we be: mng of HOD isn’t in spectral illumination, but in K, who’s paradoxically vacuous. Or rather, an empty vessel who “contains” a number of historical sources, including Conrad h/s. Historically, there were plenty of European Kurtzes ready & eager to “go native.”

¶30-2: Remarkable, then, th/s/o like Lionel Trilling wants to read K not as abomination, but as “heroic” messenger of modern lit’s critique of European Civ. Congolese bkgd, & 6 million dead, is for him entirely incidental. (Sounds like Thomas’s rdg, as do next 2 paragraphs?)

¶33-4: Trilling can do this partly bec. of an ingrained racism th/overlooks crimes vs. blacks (A’s charge).. & partly bec. he’s right: Conrad saw K as heroic confronter of nihilism, too—mutilation & cannibalism are just “melodrama props.”

¶35: Moreover Kurtz is an “artist” w/a voice, in contrast to the mute or unintelligible Africans.

¶36: Both K & M are figures for the writer producing “impressionistic” novels which hollow at the core, justifying injustice, capable of any self-deception.

¶37: In fact, K is *literally* a writer; his text is an analogue for HOD & contains its meaning: *viz.*, it condemns an imperative that it voices; it “cancels out its own best intentions.”

¶38: In this light, K’s last words refer to a particular kind of lying i idealism/rationalizing: the “impressionistic” deviousness of art & language.

¶39: In fact, C frequently saw the artist as a figurative empire-builder (who’s abandoned redemptive faith); here, in suggesting his own affinity to K, he suggests his own moral bankruptcy.

¶40: Full of empty nostalgia for a time when empire supposedly *wasn’t* fraudulent, Conrad’s own story possesses a “heart of darkness,” too.

¶41: Not enuf reason to throw it out, though; it at least invokes an idealism it doesn’t contain, & subjects its impressionistic “will to style” to self-scrutiny. [HOD simultaneously illustrates Conrad’s attraction to worlds beyond European morality, where such morality is recognized as hollow, but also his nostalgia for the time before such a fall, when one could have faith in the project of empire. Conrad is just one more disillusioned modernist, then. But at least he’s a modernist who indicts the modernist project, in some sense, who identifies the modernist project, the final stage of Western civilization, as ‘the horror.’]

Brantlinger (alternate “prose” summary):

Intro: Opens with Achebe’s diatribe [hey! just like Rabinowitz!] and its critics, who say *Heart of Darkness* is actually an exposé of racism and imperialism. The style of *Heart of Darkness*—its ‘impressionism’—is what makes this so question so fraught; how do we ever know how to take *anything* in such an ambiguously ironic and non-committal narrative? PB claims *Heart of Darkness* is both: it critiques racism and imperialism in ways that are themselves imperialist and racist—and this paradox, the contradiction, is disguised (*and* made possible? huh?) by the novel’s *style*.

I. Conrad was appalled by the “high-minded rhetoric” that accompanied atrocities in Leopold’s Congo, and sympathetic to the reform movement, but never got too involved with the Congo Reform Association because he thought efforts at reform were useless (so he’s cynical, mainly?). *The Inheritors* suggests to PB that it’s the hypocrisy and propaganda of imperialism that Conrad hates above all [the refusal to acknowledge and embrace power? if you’re gonna be monstrous, at least own up to it, like Kurtz?], rather than the genocide and slavery and mutilations, etc. *per se*. Conrad used a lot of stuff in *Heart of Darkness* he didn’t actually see, but only read about later; there’s also a lot of material he never used at all, like the war between Belgians and Arabs (with any number of English mercenaries, “missionaries,” gun-runners, etc. along for the ride) in the Congo and their common techniques of cannibalism, genocide and mass mutilations of each other’s Congolese troops. So PB asks: if we want to believe that Conrad’s main ambition here was to write a startling exposé of what imperialism was “really” about, why did so many of the facts get left out? How is Conrad manipulating the details of what went on in the Congo, and to what end?

II. In some respects, *Heart of Darkness* is quite obviously critical of imperialism, of its hypocrisy and the hollowness of its ideals. But for Conrad, the ultimate sign of civilization’s collapse is its descent into ‘savagery’ of a specifically African sort: idolatry replaces idealism—the European stereotype of African ‘heathenism’ provides the controlling metaphor of novel. Pilgrims worship ivory, the Intended worships Kurtz, Kurtz worships himself, but the message is clear: Europeans are, at heart, ‘heathens,’ no more advanced than those guys howling on the shore outside Kurtz’s hut. So by default, African culture (or, more accurately, Conrad’s *construction* of it) becomes the vehicle for the expression of universal human depravity. Conrad omits the more complicated facts of history in favor of his “artistic vision”; the Arabs in the Congo vanish, for instance, because they mess up the neat dichotomy of black and white, savage and civilized, that Conrad is working with (even if he’s ultimately trying to undermine our complacencies about such binary oppositions—that is, even if his Artistic Truth is ultimately that “we’re all savages underneath”). Conrad repeats the stereotype of cannibalism as a common African practice, rather than a complicated ritual specific to war, and one which was actually exploited and even perverted by imperialists in Africa (both Arab and European). If Conrad was so intent on critiquing imperialism, how come that sordid detail got reduced to “Catch ‘im—eat ‘im”? This loss or deliberate fudging of the brute facts of colonial exploitation undermines the novel’s claims to be unproblematically anti-imperialist; moreover, Conrad himself emphasizes the ambiguity of the novel, so how can anyone confidently proclaim it to be either anti-imperialist *or* imperialist? [So is PB saying that Conrad has the typical Artist’s discomfort with reducing the “message” of his work to a “mere ” criticism of massive injustice and genocide? That Conrad is beholden to the idea that Art “transcends” the merely political?]

III. Art and Ambiguity in *Heart of Darkness*: the misty moonshine of the novel. With Marlow as our moral guide, we can't judge, we can't come to conclusions [and we therefore can't act? is agency for change denied in a novel like this?]. PB and Jameson call this Conrad's "will to style": *Heart of Darkness* as an artifact of High Modernism [see B. Thomas on implications of modernist narrative style and the decentering of the West]. But *Heart of Darkness* is also a "ripping yarn"; i.e., it's also indebted to pulp adventure stories of Europeans in the jungle (think white guys in safari jackets and pith helmets sipping port in their tents, with dozens of native bearers who call them "bwana"). The ripping yarn gives us the simplistic and propagandistic dichotomies of savagery and civilization, black and white, primitive and advanced. HOD isn't schizophrenic; it isn't that "high" and "low"-culture traditions are fighting for control of the novel, so much as that the crappy conventions of pulp fiction are being "elevated" into the realm of "impressionist," high-modernist ambiguity. Conrad's text is so committed to idea of elevating the pulp jungle adventure into Serious Art that the ostensible reason for the book—the critique of imperialism—is undermined. Two fictional traditions—one elevated, the other "low" or mass-culture—carry with them versions of "truth" that override the novel's efforts to reflect some other reality (ergo, the Arabs vanish, cannibalism gets its familiar face, etc.) that these traditions don't acknowledge.

IV. So is the "horror" what Kurtz did, his recognition of his own depravity, and by extension the depravity of imperialism, or is it his recognition of the abyss, the meaningless of everything (a/k/a nihilism), which knowledge he achieved *through* his depravity? Is the Truth the horrors of imperialism or Something Even Greater that imperialism reveals? Do we revile Kurtz as a psycho mass-murderer, or do we admire Kurtz, as Trilling does, for having the courage to stare into the abyss? Or does the novel try to have it both ways? Does it both condemn Kurtz for his actions (anti-imperialist), while it holds out the possibility that Kurtz "knows" more than we do, that he's been to the edge (as we've been saying in class) and looked over the side at what average humans couldn't bear to know? And in which case, don't the degradations of imperialism pale? Are sins even possible in a world with no rudders, no absolute values, no centers? Can imperialism be condemned in a world where all humans share the same depraved natures? Or is Europe let off the hook, finally, by such a "vision"? And does the novel itself acknowledge the horror of this kind of equivocating for the sake of some Ideal (whether that ideal is Civilization or Art or some nihilist vision)? Is Kurtz a doppelganger, not only for Marlow, but for Conrad himself?

If Conrad is more upset by the hypocrisy of imperialism, by its lies and propaganda, rather than the injustices and brute physical suffering it inflicts, then he's really mourning a lost world of absolutes, in which there *were* concrete values that everyone subscribed to and that were more important than individual ambition or such sordid things as greed; he's *nostalgic*, rather than nihilistic, and the novel mourns that lost world of certainties. Conrad isn't a proto-deconstructionist, à la J. Hillis Miller, so much as a disillusioned logocentrist ("Things fall apart, the center cannot hold").