# The Myth of Eternal Return in *Heart of Darkness*

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Joseph Conrad is a moralist, a writer who emphasizes the inner struggle of the main characters, their confusion and subsequent wishes and illusions which, ultimately, trigger their damnation. Conrad, often, employs various meanings hidden in the linguistic form. Cedric Watts compares him with god Janus[1] due to the multiple ways of interpreting what a character says and the actual meaning embedded in the textual message. The critic goes as far as to impress on the writer the semblance with a typical "homo duplex" (Watts, 1994:1) the master of the words who attains to plain language a code of moral rules, moralistic teachings which seem to take the form religious parables. One such example is Marlow's recount of the Roman campaign in the British Isles which took place in AD 43 and the barbarous consequences to both the natives and the invaders who experienced confusion, despair and forthwith death (HD*,* 1994:9). It serves to foreshadow the main narrative which is a frame narrative, a narrative which embodies "inconclusive experiences*"* (HD, 10), a direct hint to the universality of the truth which the story expresses. It is a universal truth but can be rendered from multiple points of view as it is "inconclusive."

A textual hint which links Conrad to god Janus is when dusk approaches over the London harbour and the narrator reveals that the sun looks like sinking into the sea westwards whereas Thames flows into the sea eastwards: the opposition of the elements of the nature hints to the implications of the choices made in the past over the future times. Conrad, in this way, alludes to archaic values, like myths, which have survived the passage of time for they are eternal. Conrad discloses himself as a philosopher meditating upon time, human condition and an imminent disaster, paralleling Eliade's depiction of the "Lunar Myth", myth which envisions disaster as an intermediary state between cycles of relative peace and spiritual elevation (Eliade, 1959:88). The "Lunar Myth" period of *Heart of Darkness* takes place before the eyes of the reader as the African lands look like a "God forsaken wilderness" (HD, 19) or as a place "where the merry dance of death and trade goes on […] as of an overheated catacomb." (HD, 20).

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[1] Janus is a Roman god having two faces which stand for past and future at the same time: the multidimensional meanings are also another feature of the same god.



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An unnamed narrator introduces Marlow, a man of the sea[2] who, according to William Bysshe Stein, is identified in the "Lotus position" (Watts, 8): Marlow, the European, is identified in the cultural position of an Indian prepared for deep trance meditation in the search of spiritual illumination. What Marlow prepares for is the revelation, in front of the audience of the main narrative and to the reader, of a prophecy, an eternal truth hidden within the unconsciousness of humanity. Thus, the Jungian "collective unconsciousness" (Jung, 1980:42) is activated in Marlow who tells a parable, a religious teaching foreshadowing the biblical tribulations, manifold in the hypnotic state. What Marlow is about to recount is a universal truth inherited from the ancestors in the unconscious side of the mind, the side which is constantly suppressed by the modern man through the colonial enterprise in this particular case. This issue demands for Freud's famous tripartite division of the human psyche (Jacobs, 2003:61-4). What Marlow recounts is the struggle between the Eliadean primitive society and the modern one, both physically and at the cultural level. Eliade does not mention a conflict between the two anthropological visions but a co-existence, an acceptance of one into the other. The Jewish people, says Eliade, experienced an inner torment when they would adopt the Christian, modern perspective but would also return to the ancient culture. They would swap positions according to the wrath of God that, whenever followed a period of bounty, the Jews would often revere their gods as Baal and, whenever followed abomination, God's wrath ensued (Eliade, 102-4).

The main narrator characterizes Marlow's narrative style as "the nut itself" engulfed in "its own meaning" and a simile is also delivered: "misty halos […] made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine" (HD, 15). The framed narrative stands for the moon and the moonshine, whose values glow into the darkness of time, makes visible the unseen. It is like a candle lit in the altar of a church illuminating its interior and, to embody a ritualistic element. The "sermon" takes place in a ship, Nellie, the biblical symbol for the church. The narrative's deep meanings parallel the "misty halos" of the moon in the night sky. The narrator assumes Marlow's story is one of initiation which discloses universal truths independent of the linguistic structure, eternally pervasive.

The narrator interferes when Marlow has finished creating the parallel, the foreshadowing recounts of the Roman invasion in the British Isles, to describe the settings just before the framed narrative: "Flames glided in the river, small green flames, red flames, white flames, pursuing, overtaking, joining, crossing each other... *"* (HD, 10) rendering ships passing by one another. The personal impression regarding this scene is that of an altar where candles flicker and Marlow, in the Buddhist pose (HD, 6), prepares for his "religious sermon." He is depicted as a monk who meditates upon two different worlds in looks and culture but identical in the human origins. Thus, Marlow is fashioned in his boat, the church, preaching a universal truth, the sermon, before the readers and his crew, the congregation. Marlow performs the rituals typical for Eliade's primitive society in that a certain

[2] The Conradian seaman is a solitary, meditative human being who is puzzled by the contemporary colonial enterprise: the seaman holds the universal truth, generally not interested in material gain but expiation from sin, guilt or confusion.



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ritual ensures spiritual illumination but he uses these values to operate on the mentality and the activity of the modern man, a man without rituals, without Christian faith, a man in utter separation from nature, a man who has lost faith but is overwhelmed by confusion, despair and illusion.

*Heart of Darkness* focuses on the voyage of Charles Marlow from a British port to the centre of Africa, Congo, at the end of the 19th century. Conrad envisages a moral tale with philosophical implications, religious standpoints and the analysis of the mental state of the individual of modernity when entering the primitive based society. As such, Conrad deals with what Mircea Eliade proposes in his anthropological study under investigation, that is the depiction of the ancient man with no interest in the personal history, totally involved in the act of reverence towards gods or supernatural beings. The primitive man acknowledges religion and religious practice as the ideal way of living in the material world. He performs rituals to reenact the primordial deeds performed, in their turn, by the supernatural beings as gods or legendary heroes. As a consequence, he achieves spiritual value (Eliade, VII –VIII, 3-4). *Heart of Darkness* illustrates such passages when Marlow reaches the shores of Africa.

As he prepares to leave London, "the whited sepulchre", (HD, 20) Marlow feels he is "*about to set off for the centre of the earth"* (HD, 18), a place which resembles hell, the shelter of evil spirits and the connection with the spiritual dimension: this is what a centre stands for in Eliade, and is usually at the top of a mountain or on a mound. The centre can also be revered as a holy place, a shelter for palaces or temples and represents the point from which all the creation began and extended. The central point and the temple at the top of it resemble the act of primordial creation performed by gods and, whenever a pre-Christian individual performs such a ritual, the Egyptian pharaohs building pyramids, he or she reenacts the primordial times and turns sacred the profane world. In other words, when building a temple, for example, new territories that are still in chaos are being conquered and transformed into order and life. Eliade triggers a parallel to the modern man where Christianity itself was used as a means by the Spaniards and the Portuguese to baptize the natives of the New World into Christian values and conquer heathen lands, settlements of demons. (Eliade, 9-17). Throughout the journey, Marlow feels that the forest, the vegetation of Africa is alive and the struggle of resistance against the agents of modernity ensues. He does not know exactly whether this spirit is a friend or foe and, at nightfall, it claims what has been stolen by the modern man during the day (HD, 43). One day he thinks he hears cries of nature as he stays in the shade of a tree: he then specifies that the cries are sounds coming from the natives who are engulfed in despair and starvation (HD, 25).

Eliade states that in order for a building to last and the primordial creation ritual be effective, a sacrifice should be made so that a spirit may rest at its foundation. The performer impresses in the building spiritual value and enters in eternity. Then, Eliade mentions "Meşterul Manole's" myth where the wife of a stone mason is buried alive within the walls of the church so the construction may not crumble again. The answer is provided in sleep to Manole, the realm where spirits can communicate with humans. (Eliade, 18 – 21). In *Heart of Darkness,* Kurtz's outpost is guarded by six heads impaled on sticks, displaying threat and death for the



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visitors. The spirits of the beheaded ones, the sacrificed, fulfill the role Eliade assigned to a compulsory sacrifice for a construction to last.

When Marlow begins his narrative, he specifies his passion for maps and, especially, an attraction to a particular spot: the centre. Marlow has always been fascinated about centres and the centre on a map he sees in a window shop stands for the centre of Africa. He identifies this centre with what he calls "heart of darkness*"* (HD*,* 50), the epitome of nature unleashed. In fact, when Marlow reaches "heart of darkness" he experiences the revelation of a hidden truth, an epiphany of the sort of James Joyce which produces mental and behavioural changes. Marlow sees and hears natives singing rhythmically as he crosses the river to the Inner Station: he cannot tell whether the songs are out of joy or sorrow. Kurtz's Inner Station rests upon a hilltop, surrounded by vegetation and, near it, there are six poles, on the top of which there are impaled six native heads: *"*...and there it was, black, dried, sunken, with closed eyelids – a head that seemed to sleep at the top of that pole, and, with the shrunken dry lips showing a narrow white line of teeth, was smiling, too, smiling continuously at some endless and jocose dream of that eternal slumber" (HD, 82-3). Marlow is overwhelmed by the scene for it renders human sacrifice. Seeing six heads of beheaded natives hanging on top of six poles, arranged in line, like a wall creates an impression of utmost primitivism. There are two elements common in Eliade and Marlow's narrative concerning the "symbolism of the centre": the former is that the central building of the Inner Station is on the top of a hill whereas the latter is that near the central point of the respective station, there are leftovers of human sacrifices. In addition, Marlow mentions that the dream like state is what can be read on the smiling face. One can extrapolate that dream has the same meaning in "Meşterul Manole's" legend and "Heart of Darkness", that is, to disclose eternal, universal truths about humanity. Whereas Manole experiences an epiphany about what to do for an effective enactment of the primordial creation act, Marlow experiences the eternal, congenital human sacrifice ritual for the maintenance of Kurtz's company running. Kurtz's outpost rests upon spirits of the dead. What Kurtz does is to influence the "symbolism of the centre" to his own interest: he has demanded for the heads be put in front of his house to inspire fear among the rebels. As such, he prolongs the existence of his colonial station. Thus, we can conclude that Conrad makes use of what Eliade refers to as the "symbolism of the centre" (Eliade, 12).

When Marlow leaves the Central Station, downriver, for the Inner Station he feels that "Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings*."* (HD, 48). It is like the protagonist is about to enter into another dimension where the notion of time does not exist, where nature is the manifestation of gods in the material world and man is left at the mercy of the supernatural beings. Another quote indicates the same meaning: "We were wanderers on prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet." (HD, 51). Both quotes serve to support the Eliadean depiction of the primitive world from the anthropological point of view. Marlow is an individual coming from the modern society, London, into the realms of an ancient culture. He does not understand anything about the natives, their behavior but feels connected to them: at a certain point he wants to get off the



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boat and join a group of natives singing on the riverbank but his status as a captain, modern trace, will not allow him to do so. Marlow experiences what Eliade refers to as the identification with another in order to manifest oneself, to understand but Marlow has not reached comprehension, yet. (Cifor, 2007:133).

Further on, Conrad and Eliade suggest that humans are all the same, the perspective makes them think otherwise. In other words, prejudices and different cultural perspectives, the Eliadean historical viepoint, make humans perceive the others as aliens. Therefore, there is an ongoing conflict between the ones who see history as an inheritance of the predecessors, on the one side, and those who annihilate the influence of it in daily life, on the other side. The former society believes in the power to influence the future, to possess free will whereas the latter perceives as valuable the ritual. The archaic man sees ritual as a way to purify oneself, to join the revered gods, to achieve perfection. We may state that whereas the ritualistic individual longs for a return to the primordial act of creation, the Christian individual wishes for secure future prospects, for constant evolution and estrangement from wilderness. The primitive man sees life in constant present and the evolution of time is perceived as the degradation of material, the world of diseases, wars and despair. (Eliade, 85–6). That is why Marlow cannot understand the new environment: his mind is set to think on an evolutionary scale as he enters eternity. What is worth mention is that in the journey from the Central Station to the Inner Station Marlow becomes confused and experiences errors of judgement: "When you have to attend to things of that sort, to the mere incidents of the surface, the reality – the reality, I tell you – fades.*"* (HD, 49). When the ship is attacked by spears coming from the natives on the shore, Marlow gets busy finding the right way to Kurtz's station. He notices little sticks passing before him as he sails his ship through shallow waters, surveys an idle helmsman and his mind let loose recording the scenery. After a while he realizes the gravity of the situation. When he is once again involved in his duty to manoeuver the ship, during the attack, Marlow does not notice his feet wet with blood coming from the helmsman. Marlow experiences mental instability, confusion, dream and trance like sensations, in the narrative technique of "*delayed decoding*" (Watt, 1981:270). The technique renders the impressionistic value of the character where Marlow is lost in thoughts crossing his mind and reason comes after. The main character undergoes a process of initiation, a descent into the netherworld similar to that of Aeneas and Dante's Inferno (Feder, 1995:280–92).

Why does Marlow get confused? Marlow's confusion is caused by the clash of cultural backgrounds, on the one hand, but also due to the fact that the modern man depicted by Conrad has lost faith. Faith plays a crucial role in Eliade's work under discussion for is the central element which impresses security in the modern man, the hope for the coming of the end of times when God shall release humanity of sufferance and deliver the world of evil. This standpoint has allowed the modern man to develop an evolutionary progression of time and not the cyclical motion envisaged by the archaic individual (Eliade, 108-12). Eliade makes it clear at the end of the study that when the modern man loses faith he is surrounded by despair, confusion and hopelessness. (Eliade, 160-2). Marlow, the agent of imperialism, has lost faith in humanity; he struggles to 'grab' meaning in a world where the modern



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filters rendering meaning do not work. As Eliade stresses it, the modern man looks onwards, leaving aside the mythical world which composes the true nature of the individual and where wilderness is the haven of every living being on the surface of the world: the modern man creates ideals for himself, illusions of civilization which is contrary to nature. The modern man thinks he lives in reality but as E. S. Dallas states it in "The Gay Science" (1866), man lives in illusions which give the impression of reality but it is not reality. The critic identifies illusions, ideals with dreams and suggests that people act others' role in society (Dallas, 2001:55). The modern man has impressed upon himself a false consciousness that one is free and can act by oneself to modify nature and the human nature, respectively.

During his stay in the Company Station and the Central Station, Marlow sees the agents of imperialism in grim, dark features, resembling the Christian version of evil spirits: "I've seen the devil of violence, and the devil of greed, and the devil of hot desire; but, by all the stars! These were strong, lusty, red-eyed devils, that swayed and drove men-men, I tell you."(HD, 23). Marlow's quote hints to the spiritual degradation of humanity to the lowest possible. Furthermore, 'the civilized' people act worse than the primitives and exploit the latter. The European outposts in Africa are nothing more than hell forgeries on earth spreading evil in all parts of the lands. The whites have come to exploit the riches of Africa under the pretense of "civilizing" the natives. They use lofty ideals and elevating language but act exactly the opposite: the Janus symbolism is also materialized in the false apostles of light in the "heart of darkness".

The agents of imperialism in the colonies have spread terror throughout the ages and Marlow expresses the present state of affairs as a cyclical return to wickedness. Marlow introduces his moralistic story through a moralistic inception where the Roman "agents of colonialism" did what the British Empire would do nineteen hundred years later. The modern man's history itself is surrounded by cyclicity, even in behavior. Marlow suggests that advanced societies take possession of people "…who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves…" (HD, 10). Marlow brings into discussion Sir Francis Drake when depicting the 'lofty expeditions' of the great wanderers of the sea and alludes to the atrocities committed in the New World for the well fare of the British Empire. The imperialists touched elevating ideals as the Christening of the heathens and bringing welfare to the natives. The "brickmaker" is described by Marlow as "papier-mache Mephistopheles" (HD, 38) the straight semblance to the devil in the German folklore, the informer of the General Manager, another devil who calls Kurtz another devil. It is, beyond any shadow of doubt clear that the African lands which Marlow encounters are the epitome of hell unleashed on earth. Marlow faces the outer life as a place of utmost decadence, a scene which displays the inner state of the individuals who belong to neither society, without faith and full only of illusions.

One such example is Kurtz, the archetype of the colonial mind and action. He is an agent as Marlow but possesses linguistic eloquence: he delivers vivid speeches, reeking with promises of prosperity of the cause of the mission of civilization. Kurtz is famous for his lucrative actions in ivory production. He is feared and revered. Kurtz resembles the union of the two different worlds which, in reality cannot mingle. He comes from the modern society and educated in the



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European tradition, full of vigour and ideals, at least in his speeches. At first, Kurtz appears as a name to Marlow, a name which gradually transforms into a voice up to an attraction to it. Marlow feels eager to encounter Kurtz, although he has never seen him. In Kurtz, Marlow sees the manifestation of nature taking possession of the soul of the chief of the Inner Station. Marlow indicates that Kurtz is possessed by wilderness and can no longer escape it: "I think it [wilderness] whispered to him things about himself which he did not know […] and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating." (HD, 83). Kurtz is the epitome of the modern man returned to the roots of humanity: the "harlequin*"* mentions that his master usually goes into the forests by himself, performing rituals at midnight, living among the natives and killing for a pile of ivory. Kurtz has become a wanderer between two worlds, a phantom, as Marlow refers to him. Kurtz has become an instrument of what he has planned to destroy: nature. Kurtz appears to Marlow's eyes as a bony creature, barely capable of walking and carried by a group of natives. Later on, Marlow is forced to carry Kurtz back to the ship, at midnight, and he notices that the possessed one is extremely heavy for his appearance. Marlow evinces that Kurtz has taken possession of sin, guilt and despair. Kurtz has left the ship for he has been mesmerized by the call of the tribesmen, call which creates hypnotic effects and makes Marlow to doze off. As Marlow seeks for Kurtz he confuses his heartbeat with the beating of the drums of the natives. Marlow is confused once again and experiences hypnotic states, clue that nature tries to take possession of him too. Marlow's unconscious side longs for union with the real nature but his involvement in the completion of duties, as in other parts of the novella, prevents him from doing so. When Marlow spots Kurtz, the latter's head is illuminated by the fire of the natives which: *"*It had horns – antelope horns, I think – on its head." (HD, 94). We now get the full picture: the modern man, the apostle of light, civilization into darkness, wilderness, primitivism has fallen into the original state. Kurtz is tormented on the inside as he does not belong to either of the worlds: he is a lonely person but worshipped as a god by the natives. At his departure, three native characters appear performing rituals: then, a native woman, dressed in warrior garments, performs another ritual, shouts and the rest of the group accompanies her. The natives see Kurtz as a god, the exact aim he has proposed for an effective conquest in "The Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs" report. As Kurtz leaves his camp, his soul gradually leaves his body: the possessing spirit of the nature fades as he approaches civilization.

Then, the action of the narrative is placed back in London where Marlow feels disgust for the inhabitants who are unaware of the universal truth of humanity. He then pays a visit to Kurtz's *Intended* to give her letters of her beloved. Marlow feels her house is possessed by Kurtz's spirit and that her drawing room resembles a temple where she can worship Kurtz. The piano in the room resembles a "sombre and polished sarcophagus" (HD, 106) which symbolizes Kurtz's tomb. The piano renders lofty sounds as well as Kurtz's voice renders lofty ideals. Lillian Feder acknowledges the Intended's life as a" sacrifice" to a "dead ideal" (Adams, 97). The Intended performs the same ritual as the native woman at the Inner Station by lifting her hands up whereas talking about Kurtz (HD, 98-9): the Intended is the embodiment of Kurtz's worshipper and apprentice. The narrative ends at the same



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point as it starts, in the "sepulchral city" thus, attaining the cyclical form: the real truth resides in Marlow, the only living character who acknowledges that evil is an inherent feature of humanity, whether primitive or civilized.

"Heart of Darkness" is theory set in action when it is contrasted to Mircea Eliade's "The Myth of Eternal Return": it is suggested that humanity is a natural condition. Nature follows a cyclical pattern which is the real truth for the individual. As such, Nature 'teaches' and humanity must decode or represent the truth behind It. In fact, Eliade brings Hegel into discussion who, influenced by the ancient Greek, agrees that circularity is the movement of perfection. (Eliade, 90). Marlow renders a story beginning and ending in the same place, the unnamed narrator begins by describing the settings of the harbor and ends with the same description whereas the meaning of the framed narrative "circles" the narrative itself. "Heart of Darkness" displays the clash of the ancient and the modern societies, the particularities of each, an imminent destruction and a final return, not physically but at the level of mentality: Marlow, illuminated by the eternal and true essence of humanity, retreats into seclusion and deep meditation.

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## Abstract

The present article endeavours to evince in *Heart of Darkness*, a literary work written in 1899 by an English writer of Polish origin, parallels to Mircea Eliade's *The Myth of Eternal Return* in what concerns anthropological and religious perspectives. The English writer, Joseph Conrad, as well as Eliade, is interested in the analysis of the human condition from a cultural point of view in the sense that humanity, mostly, resides on ancestral values, which tend to be forgotten. Whereas Eliade states it clear that, anthropologically, there are two visions concerning human history, Conrad depicts characters in 'modern', Christian times activating in traditional realms and alludes to a return to the primitive society. The



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allusion is flimsily dealt with as Conrad is a master of rendering a plethora of meanings just by stating a sentence. Conrad also uses symbolism which hints to Eliade's primitive view upon history through paradoxes, rhetorical sentences or thorough meditation on behalf of the protagonist. As such, Eliade and Conrad seem as the former is the theorist whereas the latter is the practitioner in depicting a whole range of situations concerning human typology.



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