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The motif of the water journey as a metaphor for philosophical enquiry in selected novels of Herman Melville and Joseph Conrad

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Chapter Two – *Moby-Dick* and *Heart of Darkness*

Ishmael's whaling voyage and Marlow's journey into Africa

Experienced sailors are familiar with the perils of the sea and the vicissitudes of fortune. For them, every voyage is – to some extent at least – a journey into the unknown, and the promise of an exciting adventure. It would not be surprising, therefore, if they were to find life on land relatively predictable and, even, rather boring. Ishmael and Marlow, the respective narrators of Moby-Dick and Heart of Darkness, are two such men who have "followed the sea"[1] for much of their lives, and a lengthy sojourn on shore soon becomes anathema to them. The former decides to go whaling as "a way ... of driving off the spleen" and countering "a damp, drizzly November in [his] soul",[2] while the latter "get[s] tired of resting"[3] and enlists the help of an aunt to achieve his ambition of being appointed as the captain of a steamboat on the Congo River. The physical journeys of both narrators may be regarded as circular: Ishmael is rescued by the "devious-cruising Rachel",[4] which, we must presume, eventually conveys him back to Nantucket, while Marlow returns to "the sepulchral city",[5] the starting-point, as it were, of his expedition into the "heart of darkness".

The physical journeys of Ahab and Mr Kurtz, by contrast, are linear. Ahab's passionate hatred of Moby Dick dictates that he should direct the appropriately-named *Pequod* [6] towards a final confrontation with the white whale. The consequences of this are dire, since Ahab and all those under his command (with the solitary exception of Ishmael) perish in the mid-Pacific. Not much is said in Heart of Darkness about the physical journeys of Mr Kurtz. We assume, without being given explicit details, that he made the trip to the Congo at some time in the past. We are told that he went on raiding expeditions into the interior,[7] and that, on one particular occasion, he travelled towards the Central Station with a consignment of ivory before turning back.[8] After reports have been received that Kurtz is seriously ill, a "rescue" mission is mounted, but the Manager of the Central Station contrives that there is a considerable delay

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[1] Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness, ed. Robert Kimbrough, 3rd ed. (New York : W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1989), p. 9.
[2] Herman Melville, Moby-Dick, ed. Hershel Parker and Harrison Hayford, 2nd ed. (New York : W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 2002), p. 18.
[3] Heart of Darkness, p. 11.
[4] Moby-Dick, p. 427.
[5] Heart of Darkness, p. 70.
[6] The *Pequod* is named after a native American tribe which had been virtually wiped out in 1637. Tom Quirk, the compiler of the notes to the Penguin Classics edition of Moby-Dick, observes: "The name is appropriate, for the description of the ship and the prophecies that accumulate around the fated voyage mark the *Pequod* as a death ship." – Herman Melville, Moby-Dick, or, The Whale, introd. Andrew Delbanco, with notes and explanatory commentary by Tom Quirk (rpt. Harmondsworth : Penguin Classics, 2003), p. 639.
[7] Heart of Darkness, pp. 55-57.
[8] Heart of Darkness, p. 34.

before it is able to proceed. This effectively ensures that Kurtz succumbs to the unhealthy tropical climate shortly after boarding the steamboat under Marlow's command.

Ishmael and Ahab experience the "howling infinite"; Marlow and Kurtz peer into the "heart of darkness"

I think it is important to introduce my analysis of a number of (what I have proposed to call) experiential journeys with the observation that Ishmael and Marlow perform dual roles in Moby-Dick and Heart of Darkness respectively: they are *narrators* as well as *characters*. When they assume their roles as the narrators of Moby-Dick and Heart of Darkness,[9] they do so as older men who report and interpret events that occurred earlier in their lives. It follows that their narratives represent their thoughts at the time of their experiences and/or at the time of writing. But, since Ishmael and Marlow often fail to distinguish between what they thought in the past as *characters* and what they think in the present as *narrators*, it is only on rare occasions that a reader will be able to differentiate between their experiences as *narrators* and their experiences as *characters*. It is worth pointing out, though, that the reader of Marlow's narrative will find the task somewhat easier than the reader of Ishmael's, simply because the narrative orientation in Heart of Darkness fails to dominate the narrator's original experience to the same extent that it does in Moby-Dick.[10] However, the difficulty remains, even in the case of Marlow's narrative, and so I shall not strive to make such distinctions where the distinction is not already clear.

It is no accident that the physical journeys of Ishmael and Marlow are circular: we are meant to see them as emblematic of their experiential journeys. These journeys follow spiral trajectories that move "from an initial unity through multiple divisions back to a complex integrity which replicates the simple unity of the origin but on a higher level."[11] An attentive reader of Moby-Dick and Heart of Darkness soon realises that the two narrators undergo processes of intellectual growth and character development (both as *narrators* and as *characters*). Although, by the time their respective narratives end, Ishmael and Marlow have had a number of disconcerting experiences, and although they continue to be puzzled by many things, I would argue that they are wiser than they were before. Marlow has acquired greater self-knowledge, and both he and Ishmael have gained greater insight into those with whom they have come into contact. I also hold the view that the frequent philosophical conjectures of our two narrators

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[9] Although I am aware that a frame narrator (and *not* Marlow) speaks at the beginning and at the end of Heart of Darkness, in this research report I shall refer to Marlow as the narrator of the novella, since he tells almost the entire story, and we read *his* part of the narrative in his own words (which the frame narrator encloses within quotation marks).

[10] I will expand on this statement when I discuss narrative journeys at a later stage of my argument.

[11] Abrams, "Spiritual Travelers in Western Literature", in The Motif of the Journey in Nineteenth-Century Italian Literature, ed. Bruno Magliocchetti and Anthony Verna (Gainesville : University Press of Florida, 1994), p. 10.

have enhanced their ability to interpret the world in ways that are meaningful to them. The character development of Ishmael and Marlow may be inferred from the fact that each of them finds it necessary to alter his outlook on life – and, hence, also, his habitual response to others and to the world around him – during the course of the novel or novella in which he appears.

Let us look more closely at Ishmael's experiential journey in Moby-Dick. It is abundantly clear, even before he sets out, that Ishmael expects to enjoy whaling. He declares that for him "the whaling voyage was welcome; the great flood-gates of the wonder-world swung open".[12] But his blithe optimism is soon shaken. At New Bedford and, later, on the island of Nantucket, a number of occurrences unnerve him. He enters a negro church by accident and it seems to him as if he is in the midst of "the great Black Parliament sitting in Tophet."[13] When he goes to enquire about accommodation at "The Spouter-Inn", he notices that the landlord is the rather ominously-named Peter Coffin. Because the inn is full, Ishmael has no option but to share a bed with an evil-looking South Sea harpooneer named Queequeg. And, before the two of them finally embark on their whaling voyage, the shabbily-apparelled Elijah hints darkly that they have been unwise to enlist on a ship under the command of Captain Ahab.[14] It becomes apparent that the Elysian "wonder-world" of Ishmael's imagination is soon replaced by a reality that is far less appealing, if not positively malign.

However, despite the fact that Ishmael's first night at sea is a "frigid winter [one] in the boisterous Atlantic," he looks forward to "many a pleasant haven in store".[15] Subsequent events prove his confidence to have been misplaced, since the *Pequod* does not call at any ports on its long voyage halfway around the world. The only "pleasant havens" which lie in store for Ishmael are figurative ones: he enjoys expanding his knowledge of whales and whaling, interacting with the crew of the whaleship, and engaging in metaphysical speculation (whether for fun, or in order to broaden his – and our – understanding of the universe). He also relishes the prospect of encountering Moby Dick. But, although Ishmael takes considerable delight in such thoughts and activities, he does not attempt to conceal his anxiety about many of the dangers – physical and metaphysical – which confront him. For instance, in Chapter 60 ("The Line"), he avers that "all men live enveloped in whale-lines ...; but it is only when caught in the swift, sudden turn of death, that mortals realize the silent, subtle, ever-present perils of life."[16] Again, in Chapter 48 ("The First Lowering"), he and all the other occupants of Starbuck's boat

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[12] Moby-Dick, p. 22.

[13] Moby-Dick, p. 24. Although it seems as if Ishmael exaggerates his trepidation in order to amuse the reader, "Tophet" is associated with evil, since it denotes a place of human sacrifice in the valley of Hinnom (Jeremiah 7 : 31), and is now a synonym for hell.

[14] The name Ahab is ominous, because the biblical Ahab was a king of Israel who "did evil in the sight of the Lord, more than all who were before him." (1 Kings 16 : 30). His wicked reign was denounced by the prophet Elijah.

[15] Moby-Dick, p. 95.

[16] Moby-Dick, p. 229.

face death after being tossed into the ocean by an escaping whale. “Drenched through, and shivering cold”,[17] they spend a miserable night in their flooded craft before being rescued by the *Pequod* the following morning. And, even if Ishmael quite frequently expresses admiration and sympathy for Ahab, his portrayal of him as someone associated with supernatural forces of darkness and destruction (whether these are embodied – for instance – in the person of Fedallah, or in the guise of the corposants which flicker from the masts and yardarms of the *Pequod*) indicates that he has grave misgivings about the mad intensity of purpose with which the captain of the *Pequod* pursues his goal of finding and then killing Moby Dick.

In Chapter 41 (“Moby Dick”), Ishmael expatiates at some length on the intimidating reputation of Moby Dick. After noting the conviction of some whalemen that the white whale is “not only ubiquitous, but immortal”, he goes on to describe Moby Dick’s “unwonted magnitude, ... his deformed lower jaw ... [and] that unexampled, intelligent malignity which, according to specific accounts, he had over and over again evinced in his assaults.”[18] But in Chapter 42 (“The Whiteness of the Whale”), Ishmael confesses that it is “the whiteness of the whale that above all things”[19] appals him, and he embarks on an extended meditation on why this should be so. Interpretations of whiteness are at issue here, and we need to explore their implications more fully.

Ishmael begins by recording some generally-accepted interpretations of white creatures and white objects, and observes that the whiteness of many animate or inanimate referents has positive connotations: it may signify (for example) beauty, royalty, gladness, innocence, benignity, justice or holiness.[20] But, when white is “divorced from more kindly associations, and coupled with an object terrible in itself, [it] heighten[s] that terror to the furthest bounds.”[21] If we wish to explore why the colour white has both positive and negative connotations, we might consider the problem in terms of Jacques Derrida’s critique of Western logocentric thought. He has shown that much of our thinking is based on the construction of innumerable binary oppositions, such as speech/writing, good/evil, and white/black. Almost invariably, the first term of each binary opposition (“white”, for example) is considered superior and privileged, whereas the second term (“black”, for example) is deemed to be derivative, adversarial, and inferior. As a consequence of this, we usually feel inclined to approve of everything that is white (taking our example again), and to disapprove of everything that is black. This is not always the case, however, for reasons that are made explicit in Derrida’s

[17] Moby-Dick, p. 187.
[18] Moby-Dick, p. 155.
[19] Moby-Dick, p. 159.
[20] Moby-Dick, pp. 159-160.
[21] Moby-Dick, p. 160.

interview with Julia Kristeva.[22] In that interview, Derrida denies the existence of a transcendental signified, and maintains that we are all implicated in a web of language, in which there are no positive terms – only relational ones. For him, signification is a play of differences, and meaning is constantly deferred. Derrida's term for the seemingly metaphysical source of all individual differences is *différance*, and it is to *différance* that we should attribute the wide range of meanings given to whiteness in Chapter 42. Each interpretation of the word (or sign)

> is the result only of a "self-effacing" trace – self-effacing in that [the interpreter] is not aware of it – which consists of all the nonpresent differences from other elements in the language system that invests the [word] with its "effect" of having a meaning in its own right.[23]

Differences in meaning are produced not only by different interpreters: meaning is constantly displaced *even* for the individual interpreter. As we have seen, Ishmael himself is uncertain about the "meaning" of whiteness (because he records several different "meanings" without being so bold as to insist that any particular "meaning" is the correct one). Furthermore, he wonders why the colour should terrify him:

> Is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way? Or is it that in essense whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows – a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink?[24]

It is evident from the quotation that Ishmael considers the colour white to be both an empty sign (since it is "indefinite", as well as "the visible absence of color") and a full one (since it is "the concrete of all colors"). His ambivalent response indicates that, for him, the two terms of the binary opposition (i.e. "the visible absence of color" and "the concrete of all colors") implode into one another, leaving only the disconcerting flicker of *différance*. The "colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink" is a reference to the aporia into which his interpretative endeavours lead him. (Here, I take "atheism" to mean "not believing one

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[22] Jacques Derrida, "Semiology and Grammatology : Interview with Julia Kristeva", in Positions, tr. Alan Bass (London : The Athlone Press, 1981), pp. 15-36.
[23] M.H. Abrams, "Deconstruction", in A Glossary of Literary Terms, 7th ed. (Orlando, Florida : Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1999), p. 57.
[24] Moby-Dick, p. 165.

interpretation or another", which may be rephrased as "a loss of faith in the reliability of interpretation".) Notwithstanding the hermeneutic problems posed by the whiteness of the whale, Ishmael does not adopt the standpoint that all interpretative acts are exercises in futility; he remains committed to speculating about the meanings of most things. Clearly, he believes that interpretation has considerable value, and that it can be fairly reliable (since it *is* possible for us to "*shrink*" from the "colorless, all-color of atheism"). However, as in the case of his attempt to interpret "whiteness", he often fails to arrive at a single, "ultimate" interpretation that is completely satisfying to him. Paradoxically, in such cases, the very human desire to interpret leads to "a colorless, all-color ... from which [he] shrink[s]", and it is precisely this feeling of uncertainty which would be his experience, also, if he chose *not* to interpret. This interpretative impasse may be looked upon as another of those "implosions" which are caused by the ever-present play of *différance*.

We also notice in the quotation that Ishmael's discussion of "whiteness" is couched in the language of symbol and metaphor. It is almost as if he resorts to the language of poetry because he cannot explain the "meaning" of "whiteness" philosophically. However, this strategy is of no avail to him, and his discussion succeeds only in deconstructing itself. And so, we come to realise that whiteness – whether regarded as a sign or as a referent – possesses an indeterminacy (or even a strangeness) which Ishmael is unable to decipher. From his lack of success in arriving at an ultimate interpretation of the colour white, we may infer that the interpretation of signs, as well as the interpretation of the universe, is fraught with difficulty. Such interpretative difficulties exist both because the complexity of the world renders it unfathomable to human understanding, and because the nature of language ensures that meaning is endlessly deferred and multiplied.

Despite the difficulties attendant upon the interpretative endeavours of human beings, Ishmael devotes quite a considerable proportion of his narrative to cetological exposition. As Richard Brodhead puts it, "he is determined to subject one piece of organic reality to consciousness."[25] Whales, in general, and sperm whales, in particular, are examined from almost every conceivable angle. We read about, inter alia, the size and the outward appearance of different species, how whales have been portrayed in paintings and drawings, the whale as a dish, the dimensions of a typical sperm whale, and the different parts of a whale's anatomy. Although Ishmael's numerous and detailed descriptions of the physiology of whales suggest that it might be possible to acquire a thorough knowledge of these creatures if one is sufficiently interested (as he obviously is) to make a careful study of them, he is quite explicit in stating that this is not the case: "Dissect him [i.e. the whale] how I may, ... I but go skin deep; I know him not, and

[25] Richard Brodhead, Hawthorne, Melville, and the Novel (Chicago and London : The University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 152. Much of my analysis of Moby-Dick is indebted to Brodhead's fine commentary on the novel.

never will."[26] Here, Ishmael expresses an awareness of the limitations of interpretation. Although he essays several interpretative strategies in an effort to "know" the whale, these do not, whether singly or in combination, succeed in eliminating the gap which always exists between the referent and its sign. They also do not solve the problem of integrating the sign into a coherent semiotic system. In addition, it should be stated that human beings cannot attain the Godlike perspective that encompasses all possible points of view, nor are they able to construct a perfect and comprehensive semiotic system. For all these reasons, even the most perceptive of interpretations is to be considered little better than one fiction among many.

However, Ishmael continually strives to go more than "skin-deep" by probing beneath the surface of things, just as the whale dives down towards the ocean floor. Almost any observation or experience is a sufficient pretext for the narrator of Moby-Dick to embark on reflections of a metaphysical nature. Brodhead succinctly describes the basic pattern:

> Whether [Ishmael] is arguing with comic eagerness that the spine reveals the man or pursuing with grave earnestness the relations of wisdom, woe, and madness, the pattern is the same: in face of a specific situation he catches at a large hypothesis, then presses and presses his insight, revising and extending it in line after line... [H]aving vigorously pursued his conclusions he then effortlessly drops them.[27]

Such metaphysical "diving" may be construed as looking for the signified "beneath" the signifier. Ishmael's metaphysical journey does not lead to a final destination because the prospects for interpretation are so diverse that no single account can hold sway. Moreover, each interpretation will also give rise to further interpretations. The destination of his metaphysical explorations, therefore, is the journey itself, and "the measure of dignity and greatness consists, not in absolute achievement, but in [the way in which he maintains] the discrepancy between infinite reach and finite grasp."[28]

If we turn to Marlow's experiential journey in Heart of Darkness, we notice that he matches Ishmael in his eagerness to venture out into the unknown. He is drawn to

> "a mighty big river [the Congo] that you could see on the map, resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country and its tail lost in the depths of the land. And as [he]

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[26] Moby-Dick, p. 296.
[27] Brodhead, pp. 151-152.
[28] Abrams, "Spiritual Travelers in Western Literature", p. 14.

> look[s] at the map of it in a shop-window it fascinate[s] [him] as a snake would a bird – a silly little bird."[29]

The fact that the river resembles a snake is not a good omen, nor is the comparison between Marlow and "a silly little bird". It seems likely that the latter comparison is made by Marlow, the older, worldly-wise *narrator* (who has the benefit of hindsight), rather than by Marlow, the younger, adventure-loving *character*. It is also significant that Marlow's childhood perception of a "blank space of delightful mystery"[30] on the map of Africa is succeeded by his conviction as an adult that the same space "had become a place of darkness."[31] A reading of Conrad's novella reveals how the "*blank* space" (my emphasis) of Marlow's expectations is given the lie by the "*darkness*" (again my emphasis) of his actual experiences. Indeed, the contrast between black and white, the deceptive interplay between them, and the dominance of blackness are themes that keep recurring in Heart of Darkness, as we shall see.

Just as Ishmael is somewhat disconcerted by events at New Bedford and on the island of Nantucket, so Marlow is discomfited by his experiences at the Company's offices in Brussels (Conrad's "sepulchral city"). He is given a frosty reception by "two women, one fat and the other slim, [who sit] on ... chairs knitting black wool",[32] and, shortly afterwards, he is asked by an old doctor whether there is a history of madness in his family. We are meant to realise that the two receptionists symbolise Clotho and Lachesis, two of the Fates in Greek mythology. This interpretation is confirmed by Marlow's description of them a little later:

> "She [the old, fat one] seemed to know all about them [two youths] and about me too. An eerie feeling came over me. She seemed uncanny and fateful. Often far away there I thought of these two, guarding the door of Darkness, knitting black wool as for a warm pall, one introducing, introducing continuously to the unknown, the other scrutinising the cheery and foolish faces with unconcerned old eyes. '*Ave!* Old knitter of black wool. *Morituri te salutant.*'"[33]

Readers with a knowledge of the Classics will recognise that the key elements in the description are the old woman who seems uncanny and fateful; the two women who guard the door of Darkness (i.e. the door of Death) and knit black wool as for a warm pall (rather than spin the thread of each person's life); and the words of those about to depart to the Congo

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[29] Heart of Darkness, p. 12.
[30] Heart of Darkness, p. 12.
[31] Heart of Darkness, p. 12.
[32] Heart of Darkness, p. 13.
[33] Heart of Darkness, p. 14.

(words which are almost exactly the same as those addressed to the Roman emperor by the ancient gladiators when they entered the arena of combat and faced possible death). The use of the phrase, "as for a warm pall", is particularly suggestive of the moral, as well as physical, oblivion which threatens to envelop those who are rash enough to venture into the Congo.

Marlow's voyage to Africa on a French steamer does not help him to regain his equanimity. His discomposure continues because of his unfamiliarity with his new environment. He expresses his feelings as follows:

> "The idleness of a passenger, my isolation amongst all these men with whom I had no point of contact, the oily and languid sea, the uniform sombreness of the coast, seemed to keep me away from the truth of things within the toil of a mournful and senseless delusion."[34]

This is the first sign of that sense of cultural dislocation which Jacques Berthoud correctly identifies as central to Marlow's African experience.[35] Whereas Marlow had felt secure and even complacent in the midst of European civilization, in the primitive African jungle he is forced to reassess both the validity of his previously-held beliefs and the efficacy of the interpretative tools which he had used in the past. The consequences of this reappraisal are that he becomes more aware of the variety and the complexity of human experience, and that he acquires a greater degree of self-knowledge than he possessed before he travelled to the Congo.

Although Marlow's comment that the Company is run for profit shows that he does not agree with his aunt's conception of his role in the Congo as "an emissary of light" who "wean[s] those ignorant millions from their horrid ways",[36] nevertheless, he is convinced that "what redeems [imperialism] is the idea only[,] ... an unselfish belief in the idea"[37] of bringing the light of civilization to the dark places of the Earth. However, if he had imagined that the great majority of Company officials would display such an "unselfish belief in the idea", his experiences in the Congo soon disabuse him of that notion. As he walks towards the Company Station, he witnesses the ill-treatment of the black workers who have been employed to build a railway, and he foresees "that in the blinding sunshine of that land [he] would become acquainted with a flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly."[38] Marlow's premonition is correct, because, shortly afterwards, he meets the Manager of the Central Station, a striking personification of that "devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly." The

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[34] Heart of Darkness, p. 17.
[35] Jacques Berthoud, Conrad : The Major Phase (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 44-49.
[36] Heart of Darkness, pp. 15-16.
[37] Heart of Darkness, p. 10.
[38] Heart of Darkness, p. 20.

Manager belongs to the party which exploits the native population, and he is scornful of Kurtz's suggestion that "each station should be like a beacon on the road towards better things, a centre for trade of course but also for humanising, improving, instructing."[39] In the words of Marlow, the Manager has "no genius for organising, for initiative, or for order even... He [originates] nothing, he [can] keep the routine going – that's all."[40] And yet, his career continues to prosper, but only because he is fortunate to enjoy extraordinarily good health. Perhaps this is Conrad's way of suggesting that the subtle horror of imperialism is fortuitously self-perpetuating: the institution of imperialism is undeniably dependent on an accidental disparity in technological development between two different societies; the more advanced society is able to overpower and exploit the more primitive one, and the relative ease with which it accomplishes this makes further exploitation almost inevitable.

If Marlow is shocked by the callousness of the Company officials, he is fearful of, yet, also, strangely captivated by, the African jungle and its native inhabitants. As he steams up the Congo River towards Kurtz's Inner Station, he is ever-conscious of "the overwhelming realities of the strange world of plants and water and silence."[41] He specifically mentions "silence", because, for him, this is an environment which refuses to disclose its secrets, and which easily assumes the spectre of "an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention."[42] The imprecision of this last phrase is not necessarily an indication of metaphysical vagueness on the part of Conrad, but, rather, Marlow's acknowledgement of two things: firstly, that he cannot completely understand his experiences in the Congo; and, secondly, that the vocabulary of "civilized" Europeans (like himself) is inadequate for the provision of a reasonably accurate description of "primitive" African reality. Later, when Marlow and the company officials are nearing their destination, they enter an area shrouded in dense fog. The landscape is all but hidden from view, and, quite rightly, Marlow deems the conditions too dangerous for the steamer to continue on its journey. These depictions of an invisible landscape and an inscrutable jungle are evidence of Marlow's encounter with the two types of darkness – the

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[39] Heart of Darkness, p. 34. In a similar vein, the Belgian king, Leopold II, had written: "I am pleased to think that our agents [in the Congo] ... are animated with a pure feeling of patriotism; not sparing their own blood, they will the more spare the blood of the natives, who will see in them the all-powerful protectors of their lives and their property, benevolent teachers of whom they have so great a need." ["The Sacred Mission of Civilization"], in the 3rd Norton Critical Edition of Heart of Darkness, pp. 128 and 130.) However, the reality of what happened was very different. Joseph Conrad had first-hand experience of Belgian imperialism in the Congo (he went there in 1890), and he scathingly described it as "the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration." ("Geography and Some Explorers", in Joseph Conrad, Last Essays, ed. Richard Curle (London : J.M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1926), p. 17.) An American, George Washington Williams (who had also travelled to the Congo in 1890), was even more forthcoming in exposing Belgian maladministration of the region. In an open letter to Leopold II, he gave numerous examples of "the deceit, fraud, robberies, arson, murder, slave-raiding, and general policy of cruelty of your Majesty's Government to the natives ..." ("An Open Letter to His Serene Majesty Leopold II, King of the Belgians and Sovereign of the Independent State of Congo", in the 3rd Norton Critical Edition of Heart of Darkness, p. 112.)

[40] Heart of Darkness, p. 25.

[41] Heart of Darkness, p. 36.

[42] Heart of Darkness, p. 36.

physical and the metaphysical – which Conrad regularly explores in his novels.[43] Paradoxically, though, the afore-mentioned fog is white: perhaps this is Conrad's way of intimating that the "darkness" is in the white imperialists just as much as (or, even, more than) it may be in the primitive Africans, many of whose practices certain ignorant Europeans mistakenly categorise as "savage".

Although Marlow is far less prejudiced against the native inhabitants of the Congo than the Manager and his subordinates are, he finds the behaviour of the Africans who live along the river-banks rather disturbing, largely because he struggles to interpret it. Not surprisingly, he comes to the conclusion that the Africans are a primitive race whose culture is radically different from – as well as inferior[44] to – his own:

> "The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us – who could tell?... We could not understand because we were too far and could not remember because we were travelling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign – and no memories... They howled and leaped and spun and made horrid faces, but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity – like yours – the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar."[45]

Here, Marlow presents his encounter with "primitive" people as an anthropological regression to the roots of humanity. Although he has difficulty in comprehending the "wild and passionate uproar" because of his temporal distance "from the night of first ages", he has "a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it"[46] for him. He senses that the response of the Africans to the steamboat and its passengers is instinctive and natural, unlike the carefully-considered and somewhat "artificial" behaviour (exemplified by the sheer hypocrisy of the pilgrims) that is

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[43] J. Hillis Miller discusses Conrad's treatment of both the physical and the metaphysical darkness in his illuminating study, Poets of Reality : Six Twentieth-Century Writers (New York : Atheneum, 1969), pp. 27-39.

[44] Contending that Conrad fails to distance himself from the views expressed by Marlow (a debatable point), Chinua Achebe accuses Conrad of being a "thorough-going racist." ("An Image of Africa : Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*", in the 3rd Norton Critical Edition of Heart of Darkness, p. 257.) I cannot subscribe to this view, and concur with C.P. Sarvan in his refutation of it.

Sarvan argues that Heart of Darkness shows that "to the Romans, the people of Britain were barbarians;... when the Europeans come to Africa, the Africans in comparison seem savage, but deep down in the European breast there still lurks the old savagery. ...When the Romans looked down upon the people of Britain, and the Europeans upon the 'natives,' it was because they felt that they had achieved a much higher civilization than the people they were confronting and conquering. The contempt was not on grounds of race itself ...

"Surely the contrast between savage African and 'civilized' European, in the light of that greedy and inhuman colonialism [depicted in Heart of Darkness], is shown to be 'appearance' rather than reality... This is not to claim that Conrad was free of all prejudice, nor to deny that he has wholly resisted the temptation to use physical appearance and setting as indicators of nonphysical qualities... [As such,] he was not immune to the infection of the beliefs of his age, but he was ahead of most in trying to break free." ("Racism and the *Heart of Darkness*", in the 3rd Norton Critical Edition of Heart of Darkness, pp. 283-285.)

[45] Heart of Darkness, pp. 37-38.

[46] Heart of Darkness, p. 38.

characteristic of civilized[47] man. Marlow believes, therefore, that the uproar embodies "truth stripped of its cloak of time."[48] This "truth" is surely "the wild animal clamor ... of [primitive societies], which modern man has gone beyond to become civilized."[49] While Marlow appears to distance himself from such a display of unrestrained frenzy (he refers to it as "ugly enough"[50]), his comment, "... what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity – like yours", intimates that civilization is no more than a thin veneer, which conceals the primitive in all of us. This is confirmed much later in the novella, when Marlow follows Kurtz into the jungle and "confound[s] the beat of the drum with the beating of [his own] heart".[51]

Before he meets Kurtz, Marlow is given various snippets of information about him. At the Company Station, the Chief Accountant describes Kurtz as "a very remarkable person" who "[s]ends in as much ivory as all the others put together";[52] at the Central Station, the so-called brickmaker rather patronisingly characterises Kurtz as "an emissary of pity, and science, and progress" who belongs to "the gang of virtue";[53] and one evening, while Marlow is "lying flat on the deck of [his] steamboat",[54] he overhears a conversation (part of which I have already quoted) in which the Manager portrays Kurtz as a contemptible fool, and the civilizing mission as hypocrisy or self-delusion:

> "And the pestiferous absurdity of his talk ...; he bothered me enough when he was here. 'Each station should be like a beacon on the road towards better things, a centre for trade of course but also for humanising, improving, instructing.' Conceive you – that ass! And he wants to be Manager!"[55]

Reports such as these make Marlow impatient to meet Kurtz, because he believes that Kurtz is an idealist who ennobles the practice of imperialism by striving to bring the light of civilization to the Congo – one of the dark places of the Earth. When Marlow begins to have fears – which prove to be unfounded – that Kurtz might already have died, he confesses that he "couldn't have felt more of lonely desolation somehow had [he] been robbed of a belief or had [he] missed [his] destiny in life.[56] It is particularly Kurtz's voice which he had wanted to hear:

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[47] In the context of the novella, I define "civilized" as "being technologically advanced, and professing to subscribe to behaviour that is ethically sound."
[48] Heart of Darkness, p. 38.
[49] Miller, Poets of Reality, p. 29.
[50] Heart of Darkness, p. 38.
[51] Heart of Darkness, p. 64.
[52] Heart of Darkness, p. 22.
[53] Heart of Darkness, p. 28.
[54] Heart of Darkness, p. 33.
[55] Heart of Darkness, p. 34.
[56] Heart of Darkness, p. 48.

> "I [said] to myself,... 'Now I will never hear him.'... The point was in his being a gifted creature and that of all 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."[57]

Marlow not only gets his wish of hearing Kurtz's voice after Kurtz has been brought on to the steamboat, but he also has the opportunity of reading the report which Kurtz had compiled for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs. He is enthralled by some of the noble sentiments contained in the report, and, in an enthusiastic outburst of idealistic exaggeration, he confesses that Kurtz "soared and took me with him."[58] I hold the view – a view which Marlow seems to share – that, when Kurtz arrives in the Congo, he believes that imperialism can be a force for good, and that he genuinely wishes to bring the benefits of European civilization to the native population; at that stage, his "gift of expression" is, indeed, a "most exalted" and "pulsating stream of light". However, the discrepancy which emerges between his original intentions and his subsequent conduct tarnishes his eloquence, reducing it, in the eyes of Marlow, to a "most contemptible" and "deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness." The discrepancy arises because, unlike Marlow, Kurtz does not possess the "innate strength"[59] to remain faithful to his vision when his resolve is put to the test in the alien environment of the jungle, where there is almost a total absence of external pressure to sustain behaviour that is ethically sound. Kurtz abandons all restraint, and this is forcefully impressed upon the reader by Marlow's quotation of the scrawled comment which Kurtz had added "evidently much later" to the last page of his report: "Exterminate all the brutes!"[60]

It becomes clear to Marlow during the course of Heart of Darkness that the wilderness "had patted [Kurtz] on the head" and "sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation."[61] From being a passionate advocate for the upliftment of the native population of the Congo, Kurtz becomes a self-serving megalomaniac who has "taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land".[62] In his thirst for almost infinite power, he resembles Marlowe's Doctor Faustus, who wants to be "great emperor of the world".[63] The mental outlook of the later Kurtz is also a typically modern one, and is the product of a world which

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[57] Heart of Darkness, p. 48.
[58] Heart of Darkness, p. 50.
[59] Heart of Darkness, p. 50.
[60] Heart of Darkness, p. 51.
[61] Heart of Darkness, p. 49.
[62] Heart of Darkness, p. 49.
[63] Christopher Marlowe, Dr Faustus, Second New Mermaids edition (London : A. & C. Black (Publishers) Ltd., 1989), Sc. 3, l. 105.

has been responsible for what Friedrich Nietzsche termed "the death of God." As Hillis Miller observes, when the ego no longer believes in the existence of God as the creator,

> it has defined all outside itself as the object of its thinking power ... [and] man becomes a nihilist. Nihilism is the nothingness of consciousness when consciousness becomes the foundation of everything ... The devouring nothingness of consciousness is the will to power over things.[64]

Kurtz demonstrates just such a Nietzschean will to power by "kick[ing] himself loose of the earth"[65] as he single-mindedly sets out to refashion the world in his own image. His habitual references to "my Intended, my ivory, my station, my river" and so on, confirm that his actions in the Congo are predicated on the belief that "everything belong[s] to him."[66] He strives to maintain what Fichte called "the unity of the absolute ego"[67] by constantly seeking to subjugate and assimilate everything outside himself to his own ego. In this, he assumes a Godlike power that permits him to fix the meaning of everything that he encounters. Clearly, such a procedure also represents an implicit denial of aporia, *différance* and the play of language.

In order to achieve his megalomanic aims, Kurtz associates himself with the primitive customs of the native inhabitants by presiding, as a quasi-god, over "certain midnight dances ending in unspeakable rites".[68] Here, Michael Levenson is accurate in his assessment that Kurtz has replaced the imperialists' rule of bureaucracy with his own rule of charisma,[69] which proves, ultimately, to be a more effective method of coercion. Kurtz uses his forceful personality to intimidate the Africans so thoroughly that they look up to him with a mixture of awe, fear and veneration. This enables him to procure all the ivory that he requires for the realisation of his ambition to be the most successful ivory agent in the Congo. However, the harsh physical reality of the African jungle exposes the folly and the futility of Kurtz's aspirations to mould the world according to his own designs, and, in the end, he succumbs to the impersonal, yet "implacable[,] force" of the jungle.

Kurtz's descent into savagery[70] represents a tacit admission on his part that "the Apollonian realm of reason and [idealistic] intention is [a human construct and, therefore,] a lie."[71] The universe is, in essence, a place of darkness, and this darkness can be displaced only partially by

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[64] Miller, Poets of Reality, pp. 3-4.
[65] Heart of Darkness, p. 65.
[66] Heart of Darkness, p. 49.
[67] Johann Gottlieb Fichte, quoted in Abrams, "Spiritual Travelers in Western Literature", p. 12.
[68] Heart of Darkness, p. 50.
[69] Michael Levenson, Modernism and the Fate of Individuality : Character and Novelistic Form from Conrad to Woolf (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 47-48.
[70] I define "savagery" as "showing a lack of self-control, and behaving in a violent manner."

balanced attempts at interpretation (such as those made by Marlow). The darkness asssumes many different forms, as Hillis Miller suggests in Poets of Reality. These include, inter alia: the absence of physical light; the primeval chaos from which all things emerge and to which they return; the material world when it is perceived as pure, meaningless phenomenon; and the potential for savagery that exists within all people, however civilized they may be.[72] I am of the opinion that Kurtz's oft-quoted cry, "The horror! The horror!",[73] is a response to the darkness within his own soul[74] and within "all the hearts [like his own] that beat in the darkness."[75] But, perhaps it is also an expression of dismay that events in the universe might be no more than meaningless phenomena.

Marlow greatly admires the honesty and the insight of the dying Kurtz, who seems not only to sum up – and pronounce judgement on – the adventures of his soul on Earth, but also to face up to the apparent anarchy and violence of the universe. Marlow expresses his admiration in these terms:

> "This is the reason why I affirm that Kurtz was a remarkable man. He had something to say. He said it. Since I had peeped over the edge myself, I understand better the meaning of his stare that ... was wide enough to embrace the whole universe, piercing enough to penetrate all the hearts that beat in the darkness. He had summed up – he had judged. "The horror!" He was a remarkable man. After all, this was the expression of some sort of belief; it had candour, it had conviction, it had a vibrating note of revolt in its whisper, it had the appalling face of a glimpsed truth – the strange commingling of desire and hate."[76]

As we have already seen, Kurtz's experiences in the jungle contribute to his degradation: he turns away from philanthropic idealism in order to embrace exploitative brutality. However, in the eyes of Marlow, he is redeemed by his last words, which reflect a "strange commingling of desire and hate". As such, they reveal that Kurtz had relished the opportunity of acting without restraint while he was the chief of the Inner Station, but, more importantly, they are a final acknowledgement that the darkness of savagery (to which he had succumbed by behaving in a manner contrary to the values he had formerly espoused) is, in itself, abhorrent. Marlow appreciates the full significance of Kurtz's cry, quite correctly calling it "an affirmation" and a

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[71] Miller, Poets of Reality, p. 33.
[72] Miller discusses these in greater detail in Poets of Reality, pp. 27-39.
[73] Heart of Darkness, p. 68.
[74] I define "soul" as "the principle of thought and action in a person, regarded as an entity distinct from the body" or "a person's spiritual, as opposed to his corporeal, nature."
[75] Heart of Darkness, p. 69.
[76] Heart of Darkness, p. 69.

"moral victory".[77] It seems to me that Juliet McLauchlan explains the nature of this "affirmation" and "moral victory" particularly well:

> The tremendous power of *Heart of Darkness* consists in its revelation of the capacity of a human soul, without external religious sanctions of any sort, to struggle with itself, to find within itself values by which it can and must judge its actions – and condemn them. That is Kurtz's undoubted victory, a confirmation of the validity of his ideals, intentions, even his words.[78]

Kurtz's career provides convincing evidence that, if human beings are to counter the darkness of the universe, they need to interpret the world and its phenomena to the best of their abilities, to be honest in their assessment of themselves, and to show integrity in their dealings with other people.

Marlow is partly responsible for Kurtz's "moral victory", since it is he who persuades Kurtz to return to the steamer (a symbol of civilization) after Kurtz has crawled into the jungle (a symbol of metaphysical darkness) with the intention of joining the Africans in their performance of rites which Marlow appears to regard as depraved and illicit (but which are probably associated with shamanism). For this reason, and also because he is the sole witness of Kurtz's "victory", Marlow declares himself willing to defend Kurtz's character:

> "That is why I have remained loyal to Kurtz to the last, and 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 of crystal."[79]

Here, we should be careful not to equate Marlow's loyalty to Kurtz with the sort of unthinking hero-worship that epitomises the Russian "harlequin's" attitude towards the chief of the Inner Station. Marlow admits quite openly that his experiences in the Congo present him with a dilemma, a "choice of nightmares."[80] He feels obliged to show allegiance either to the ruthless Manager (who is so envious of Kurtz's success that he cynically delays the mission to "rescue" him, thus increasing the chances that Kurtz will succumb to the unhealthy tropical climate) or to Kurtz (who, in his apparent authorization of unnamed iniquities – perhaps, even, human

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[77] Heart of Darkness, p. 70.
[78] Juliet McLauchlan, "The 'Value' and 'Significance' of *Heart of Darkness*", an article reprinted in the 3rd Norton Critical Edition of Heart of Darkness, p. 382.
[79] Heart of Darkness, p. 70.
[80] Heart of Darkness, p. 62.

sacrifices offered up to himself – belonging to "some lightless region of subtle horrors,"[81] could be said to have "taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land"[82]). Given such a choice, Marlow sides with Kurtz, not only because Kurtz's original ideals are laudable, but also because, before his death, Kurtz is honest and courageous enough to judge and condemn his own conduct in the Congo. By contrast, the Manager remains, throughout the novella, no more than a mean-spirited, self-serving opportunist, whose "choking contempt for [Kurtz's lofty ideals] places him morally [as] hostile to positive human values."[83] When the Manager tells Marlow that Kurtz's methods for obtaining ivory (that is, his murderous raids) are "unsound", Marlow angrily replies, "No method at all".[84] As Berthoud observes, "The Manager's complacent nihilism so revolts him that his thoughts turn towards Kurtz 'positively for relief': better moral collapse than sub-moral success."[85] The amoral attitude of the Manager indicates that he does not believe that there is a spiritual dimension to life which requires human beings to behave virtuously. Although Marlow also has doubts about the existence of such a spiritual realm, he refuses to accept that morality is no more than an empty concept.

Marlow's loyalty to Kurtz extends beyond Kurtz's death and Marlow's return to Europe. When he finally visits Kurtz's Intended, Marlow is immediately struck by her "mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering",[86] and he finds that he cannot bear to destroy the illusions which she harbours about Kurtz and his accomplishments. Marlow has been censured by some critics[87] for the the deliberate lie which he tells her ("The last word he pronounced was – your name"[88]), but I am in complete agreement with critics such as Berthoud and McLauchlan that Marlow has every justification for sacrificing his ideal of veracity in this instance. In doing so, he preserves what Berthoud refers to as the Intended's "positive illusion." This is Berthoud's explanation of the term:

> The girl's belief in the essential virtue of mankind, as instanced by her faith in her betrothed, is an illusion, for it is contradicted by the facts; yet it is not unreal, for it is held with all the force of a truly unselfish conviction. It serves to keep alive, in the darkness of Marlow's experience of actuality, the light of visionary purpose.[89]

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[81] Heart of Darkness, p. 58.
[82] Heart of Darkness, p. 49.
[83] McLauchlan, p. 388.
[84] Heart of Darkness, p. 61.
[85] Berthoud, p. 56.
[86] Heart of Darkness, p. 73.
[87] such as Garrett Stewart, for example, in "Lying as Dying in *Heart of Darkness*", an article reprinted in the 3rd Norton Critical Edition of Heart of Darkness, pp. 358-374.
[88] Heart of Darkness, p. 75.
[89] Berthoud, p. 63.

Although Marlow is disillusioned by much of what he sees in the Congo, he regards it as essential that "the light of visionary purpose" should be kept alive in the hearts of men. Even if idealistic intentions are not always translated into actions that make the world a better place to live in, that does not invalidate those intentions. Human beings need to know that goodness *does* exist in human hearts, and that it *can* sometimes overcome evil. The establishment of a totally pessimistic view of human nature threatens to destroy any belief that human beings are capable of goodness. In the absence of such a belief, evil is likely to prevail. That is why Marlow "could not tell [the Intended]" the truth about Kurtz: "it would have been too dark – too dark altogether...."[90]

Hillis Miller correctly points out that the habit of profound reflection is usually inimical to the leading characters in Conrad's novels, since it tends to bring them to the realisation that the darkness is everywhere, and that all human action is – in the words of Miller – "an empty masquerade".[91] Kurtz stares into the abyss long enough "to penetrate all the hearts [including his own] that beat in the darkness",[92] and, as we have seen, sums up the hollowness that he finds there (in both the hearts and the darkness) in the famed words, "The horror! The horror!" Marlow, an "inverted double"[93] of Kurtz, is a fellow-traveller towards the darkness, but he attempts to ward it off by (amongst other things) focusing on his work. Referring to the tasks which he needs to perform to negotiate the hazards of the Congo River, he says, "There was surface-truth enough in these things to save a wiser man."[94] Whereas Kurtz succumbs to the power of the darkness, Marlow manages to resist it – but only with great difficulty. The latter's close brush with death is a symbol of the extent of his struggle – a struggle which ends when he returns to the civilized world of human illusions that are a safeguard against the horrors of despair. However, Marlow's journey to the Congo has opened his eyes to the metaphysical darkness that surrounds him, and he realises that his future actions (with the possible exception of his narrative to those on board the *Nellie*) are likely to be exercises in deception (whether of himself or of others) which attempt to deny the existence of that darkness. Marlow's experiential journey, therefore, must be considered spiral in shape, since the Marlow who returns to Europe is a wiser man than the Marlow who had originally set out for Africa. Kurtz's experiential journey, by contrast, is a linear one whose downward path leads to an extended spell of immoral conduct in the Congo. The journey swings upwards briefly when Kurtz, in his final moments, is honest enough to judge and condemn that conduct, but then it plunges downwards for the last time as Kurtz becomes involved in an unavailing struggle with death.

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[90] Heart of Darkness, p. 76.
[91] Miller, Poets of Reality, p. 34.
[92] Heart of Darkness, p. 69.
[93] Berthoud, p. 57.
[94] Heart of Darkness, p. 38.

The battle ends with Kurtz's physical annihilation: "life ... ebb[s] out of his heart into the sea of inexorable time."[95]

Melville's Ahab is similar to Kurtz in his single-minded pursuit of a goal. Whereas Kurtz is determined to use all the means at his disposal in order to become an ivory agent *sans pareil*, Ahab makes it his mission to scour the oceans in search of Moby Dick, and to destroy him once he has been found. Ahab undertakes his quest not so much because he wants revenge for the loss of his leg in a previous encounter with the white whale, but because the incomprehensibility of the universe frustrates him, and he cannot understand the reasons for the evils that befall us. Ishmael lends support to this interpretation by stating that "it is not probable that [Ahab's] monomania ... took its instant rise at the precise time of his bodily dismemberment"; it was when Ahab's "torn body and *gashed soul* [my italics] bled into one another"[96] that he became mad. When Starbuck objects to Ahab's desire for "[v]engeance on a dumb brute",[97] Ahab responds:

> "Hark ye yet again, – the little lower layer. All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event – in the living act, the undoubted deed – there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him."[98]

Here, the inscrutability of the universe is associated with the blank whiteness of Moby Dick in much the same way as the metaphysical obscurity in Heart of Darkness is symbolised by a darkness that threatens to envelop everything. Indeed, the problem of interpretation is so great that even Ahab has to qualify the account of his metaphysically-informed purpose by conceding, "Sometimes I think there's naught beyond [the material world]." However, he dismisses such doubts from his mind, and resolves to challenge the infinite by "strik[ing at it] through the mask". His strategy to convince Starbuck of the justness of his cause in wishing to hunt down Moby Dick is a piece of interpretative legerdemain. He utilises the first-order sign (composed of a signifier and a signified) of "the white whale" as the signifier of a new sign

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[95] Heart of Darkness, p. 67.
[96] Moby-Dick, p. 156.
[97] Moby-Dick, p. 139.

which presents Moby Dick as the embodiment of inscrutable malice, and, therefore, as a creature which Ahab has every reason to hate and, if possible, to destroy. Such significatory displacement, as Roland Barthes has shown,[99] is characteristic of the language of myth. By resorting to such language, Ahab hopes to make his very unusual and subjective interpretation of Moby Dick appear totally natural to Starbuck and the other crew members of the *Pequod*.[100]

Later in the novel, Ishmael tells us that

> ever since that almost fatal [previous] encounter [with Moby Dick], Ahab had cherished a wild vindictiveness against the whale, [and] he ... came to identify with him, not only all his bodily woes, but all his intellectual and spiritual exasperations. The White Whale swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them[.] ... All that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the lees of things; all truth with malice in it; ... all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby Dick.[101]

As Richard Brodhead puts it, "The whole force of dreadful mystery in the novel is given a local habitation in the white whale; and the whole urge to subject the inscrutable to human understanding and control becomes particularized in Ahab's mission of vengeance."[102] Ahab's quest is rooted in a refusal to interpret signs consistently, and in a desire to collapse the symbol into its meaning or, even, its referent.

Although there is little doubt that Ahab is "crazy" to regard Moby Dick as the personification of all evil, this interpretaton of his has far-reaching consequences, because it determines the way in which he interprets almost everything else. It becomes wholly characteristic of him not to "see accident or neutral fact; everything he sees takes on a determinate meaning in terms of his own quest and fate."[103] Indeed, unlike Ishmael, who tries not to allow his preconceptions to influence his interpretations unduly, Ahab is a self-interested interpreter who reads everything in terms of his own limited needs, values and experience. For instance, when shoals of small fish that had been following the *Pequod* for some days dart away and range themselves alongside the *Goney*, Ahab takes the occurrence as a bad omen, and Ishmael comments that "to

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[98] Moby-Dick, p. 140.
[99] Roland Barthes, "Myth Today", in Mythologies, sel. & tr. Annette Lavers (rpt. London : Vintage, 1993), pp. 109-159.
[100] His tactics, in fact, correspond to the processes of ideological naturalisation, as conceived by structuralist critics.
[101] Moby-Dick, p. 156.
[102] Brodhead, p. 138.
[103] Brodhead, p. 156.

any monomaniac man, the veriest trifles capriciously carry meanings."[104] Later, when corposants flicker from the masts of the *Pequod*, Ahab cries, "Aye, aye, men! ... Look up at it; mark it well; the white flame but lights the way to the White Whale!"[105] And, finally, when Moby Dick escapes on the second day of "The Chase" after having completely destroyed Ahab's boat, Ahab, whether or not in a show of bravado, confidently predicts the whale's imminent death:

> "Then laugh aloud, [men,] and cry encore! For ere they drown, drowning things will twice rise to the surface; then rise again, to sink for evermore. So with Moby Dick – two days he's floated – to-morrow will be the third. Aye, men, he'll rise once more, – but only to spout his last!"[106]

Here, Ahab's words are almost a reversal of the biblical account of Christ's resurrection on the third day after His crucifixion, and possibly function as an implied denial of a redemptive universe.

Whereas, in almost any given situation, Ishmael demonstrates a willingness to accept a number of different interpretations as possibly valid, Ahab believes that, for every particular occurrence, there exists only one correct interpretation. And, as the reader may have noticed, Ahab frequently embraces interpretations of a symbolic kind. Yet, "what most distinguishes [him] from Ishmael is not his habit of symbolic perception but his inability to understand the meanings he sees as products of his own imagination."[107] Such interpretative inflexibility and blindness assumes that language has the capacity to represent the world and its phenomena *exactly*. However, this assumption is incorrect, because there is always an unbridgeable gap between the signified and the linguistic sign: the sign is only representative of the signified, and is not identical to it. Furthermore, Ahab's interpretative approach fails to take into account that there are no positive terms in language; that the apparent "meaning" of a word is not fixed, but variable, and arises as a result of its difference from other words in the language; and that there is no transcendental signified – which could, conceivably, provide the grounds for words (and, therefore, sentences) to have neatly decidable meanings. As a consequence, Ahab does not (or is reluctant to) recognise that every interpretation is subjective; that it constitutes one person's choice of what he considers to be the words (or linguistic signs) which most accurately describe what he has perceived; and, finally, that all linguistic formulations are relative. In short, Ahab's method of interpretation, like Kurtz's, may be characterised as an implicit denial of *différance* and the play of language.

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[104] Moby-Dick, p. 195.
[105] Moby-Dick, p. 382.
[106] Moby-Dick, p. 418.

Ahab is also similar to Kurtz in that he is a charismatic figure whose impact on those under his command is so profound that they are easily cowed into carrying out his wishes, even when it appears likely that the consequences might be devastating for all concerned. That Ahab realises how great an ascendancy he has over the crew of the *Pequod* is evident from his soliloquy immediately after he has prevailed upon them to join him in swearing death to Moby Dick: "'Twas not a hard task. I thought to find one stubborn, at the least; but my cogged circle fits into all their various wheels, and they revolve. Or, if you will, like so many ant-hills of powder, they all stand before me; and I their match."[108] From the hermeneutic point of view, it is easier for the crew to follow Ahab rather than to resist him: he offers them the attractions of apparent certainty about what their ultimate goal should be. However, the destructive potential of Ahab's charismatic character is realised in the eventual fate of the *Pequod* and its crew (with the important exception of Ishmael). That event not only underlines the folly of Ahab's compulsion to slay Moby Dick, but also suggests that the sort of interpretative rigidity practised by Ahab is a mistake and a recipe for disaster.

Although readers of Moby-Dick might disapprove of Ahab's monomaniac quest, they can hardly fail to notice the aura of majesty which surrounds the captain of the *Pequod*. Captain Peleg refers to Ahab as "a grand, ungodly, god-like man",[109] implying by the aporia that, although Ahab's "awful essence"[110] remains hidden, he derives his stature not from anything material, but from a largeness of spirit which sets him apart from ordinary men. Ishmael lends support to such an interpretation in the apostrophe, "Oh, Ahab! what shall be grand in thee, it must needs be plucked at from the skies, and dived for in the deep, and featured in the unbodied air!"[111] But even earlier in the novel, when Ishmael sees Ahab for the first time, he forms a favourable impression of him, which is based on Ahab's bearing and the steadiness of his gaze: "Captain Ahab stood erect, looking straight out beyond the ship's ever-pitching prow. There was an infinity of firmest fortitude, a determinate, unsurrenderable wilfulness, in the fixed and fearless, forward dedication of that glance."[112] Many readers are likely to share Ishmael's admiration for Ahab's strength of purpose in expectantly looking forward to the accomplishment of his goal. As Brodhead perceptively notes, "In its evocation of impatient anticipation,... [Moby-Dick] makes us see as Ahab sees: 'looking straight out beyond', an unremitting and direct thrust forward in space and time, is Ahab's constant physical posture and

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[107] Brodhead, p. 156.
[108] Moby-Dick, p. 143.
[109] Moby-Dick, p. 78.
[110] Moby-Dick, p. 157.
[111] Moby-Dick, p. 127.
[112] Moby-Dick, p. 109.

imaginative condition."[113] However, readers must surely realise that Ahab's greatness is also his undoing, and that his habit of "looking straight out beyond" is a simplification of thought, language and action.

Despite his fortitude and steadfastness of purpose, Ahab often suffers mental anguish as a result of his past sufferings and the vexations of the present:

> [H]is officers ... plainly showed the uneasy, if not painful consciousness of being under a troubled master-eye. And not only that, but moody stricken Ahab stood before them with a crucifixion in his face; in all the nameless regal overbearing dignity of some mighty woe.[114]

Perhaps Ahab's "regal ... dignity" and stature as a man "above the common"[115] make him more vulnerable than most to "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune".[116] This would account for the "mighty woe" that may be read as "a crucifixion in his face". In discussing "Ahab's larger, darker, deeper part", which, Ishmael insists, "remains unhinted",[117] John Wenke identifies different aspects of Ahab's fragmented character.[118] One of these is the "mad, maimed, indigent"[119] victim whose counterpart on the *Pequod* is Pip. Ahab's response to his victimization is to become – figuratively – a demon, a circumstance which is effectively symbolised by Fedallah's presence on the *Pequod*. Ishmael underscores the point that Fedallah is, in a sense, a projection of Ahab's character when he tells us that, as the two men gaze at each other, it was "as if in the Parsee Ahab saw his forethrown shadow, in Ahab the Parsee his abandoned substance."[120]

As if to underline Ahab's demonic qualities, Melville gives him "a bold and nervous lofty language"[121] which is not unlike the defiant, yet eloquent, rhetoric of Satan in Milton's Paradise Lost. Just as Satan refuses to accept that God's power is far superior to his own, so Ahab stubbornly continues to pursue Moby Dick, when everything seems to suggest that the white whale will prevail over his pursuer, and that Ahab has misconstrued the meaning and the purpose of his quest. However, there is an important difference between Satan and Ahab: whereas, in conventional readings, the former opposes the goodness in the universe, the latter

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[113] Brodhead, p. 158.
[114] Moby-Dick, p. 109.
[115] Moby-Dick, p. 78.
[116] William Shakespeare, Hamlet, ed. G.R. Hibbard (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1994), 3.1.59.
[117] Moby-Dick, p. 157.
[118] John Wenke, "Ahab and 'the Larger, Darker, Deeper Part'", reprinted in the 2nd Norton Critical Edition of Moby-Dick, pp. 702-711.
[119] Wenke, p. 705.
[120] Moby-Dick, p. 401.
[121] Moby-Dick, p. 73.

challenges what he considers to be the embodiment of all that is evil and incomprehensible in the world. Arguably, this makes Ahab a more appealing character to the reader than the antagonist of God in Milton's epic – notwithstanding the fact that there is a magnificent and wilful folly in Ahab's determination to outwit the incomprehensible.

Another aspect of Ahab's being emerges from his participation in the godly realm. In Chapter 119 ("The Candles"), for instance, he assumes a cosmic identity by claiming descent from the spirit of fire: "Oh! thou clear spirit of clear fire ... Oh thou magnanimous! now I do glory in my genealogy. But thou art but my fiery father; my sweet mother, I know not."[122] Ahab tries to remedy his apparent confusion about his origins by an obsessive search for metaphysical certainty. In his searching analysis of Platonic thought, Jacques Derrida demonstrates that a similar strategy is adopted by Socrates in the Phaedo:

> Socrates proceeded:– I thought that as I had failed in the contemplation of true existence (*ta onta*), I ought to be careful that I did not lose the eye of my soul; as people may injure their bodily eye by observing and gazing on the sun ... And I thought that I had better have recourse to the world of *idea* (*en logois*) and seek the truth of things...[123]

Although Ahab and the figure of Socrates (as presented in Plato's dialogue) are foiled in their attempts to establish an incontrovertible origin (because such an origin is always characterised by absence), they continue to show their allegiance to logocentrism and Plato's theory of Forms or Ideas (Socrates's reference to "*en logois*" and Ahab's notion of "some unknown but still reasoning thing" behind "the pasteboard mask" attest to this). However, as Wenke informs us, "Ahab is an inverted Platonist. Like any Platonist, Ahab sees the material world as a sign of invisible forms. Unlike a Platonist, he believes that malice animates the 'pasteboard masks' of matter."[124] This accounts for his Promethean defiance of the gods, which is revealed in his reply to the first mate, Starbuck: "Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me... Who's over me? Truth hath no confines."[125] In his efforts to transcend his "indigent self", Ahab presents himself as a quasi-god whose soul is invulnerable to the blows of fate. When, in Chapter 134 ("The Chase – Second Day"), Moby Dick rams his boat, causing his ivory leg to snap, Ahab assures Stubb that

> "even with a broken bone, old Ahab is untouched[.]...Nor white whale, nor

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[122] Moby-Dick, pp. 382 and 383.
[123] Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy", in Dissemination, tr. Barbara Johnson (London : The Athlone Press, 1981) pp. 83-84.
[124] Wenke, p. 706.
[125] Moby-Dick, p. 140.

> man, nor fiend, can so much as graze old Ahab in his proper and inaccessible being... Accursed fate! that the unconquerable captain in the soul should have such a craven mate!"[126]

Wenke perceptively observes that "Ahab's insistence on his soul's incorruptible essence establishes the point to which he proceeds. To vindicate this self-image, Ahab must perform his great action. He must, in body, fulfill the soul's mandate."[127] Ahab's compulsiveness is accompanied by a "self-willed isolation"[128] which effectively deprives him of the benefits of human fellowship.

If Ahab is, to some extent, schizophrenic, he is also "above the common",[129] and not without "his humanities".[130] These character traits combine to make him "a mighty pageant creature, formed for noble tragedies."[131] The tragic dimensions of Moby-Dick are confirmed by the similarities between Ahab and the protagonists in at least two Shakespearean plays: King Lear and Macbeth. The storm at sea and Ahab's relationship with Pip call to mind the storm on the heath and Lear's relationship with the Fool in King Lear. Both Ahab and Lear are unconcerned about their own safety in times of danger, and offer protection to marginal figures whom others deem unworthy of serious consideration. The Fool appears to speak in jest, but he accurately delineates Lear's extreme folly. Similarly, Ishmael tells us that Pip "saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad. So man's insanity is heaven's sense".[132] Ahab's compassion for Pip contributes towards the tragic grandeur which the captain of the *Pequod* attains (a grandeur not unlike that achieved by the eponymous hero in the final scenes of Macbeth) when he confides in Starbuck that he has paid a high price for his obsessive nature: for much of his life he has been a lonely wanderer, unable to experience the joys of family love. In this rare moment of honest self-recognition, he sees what a fool he has been, and, paradoxically, it is when he calls himself a fool that he speaks the truth:

> "When I think of this life I have led; the desolation of solitude it has been ... – and how for forty years I have fed upon dry salted fare – fit emblem of the dry nourishment of my soul! – ... away, whole oceans away from that young girl-wife I wedded ... – wife? wife? – rather a widow with her husband alive! ... and then, the madness, the frenzy, the boiling blood and the smoking brow,

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[126] Moby-Dick, p. 417.
[127] Wenke, p. 708.
[128] Wenke, p. 708.
[129] Moby-Dick, p. 78.
[130] Moby-Dick, p. 79.
[131] Moby-Dick, p. 73.

> with which, for a thousand lowerings old Ahab has furiously, foamingly chased his prey – more a demon than a man! – aye, aye! what a forty years' fool – fool – old fool, has old Ahab been!"[133]

The proliferation of dashes and the repetition of "old" and "fool" emphasise the extent of Ahab's mental anguish, and it is likely that many a reader will sympathise with him. The sentiments which Ahab expresses are similar to those uttered by Lear, when he questions his sanity in Act 4 of Shakespeare's play:

> LEAR Pray do not mock me.
> I am a very foolish, fond old man,
> Fourscore and upward, not an hour more nor less,
> And to deal plainly,
> I fear I am not in my perfect mind.[134]

Although Ahab's confession to Starbuck suggests that Ahab might set his life on a different course, he appears to feel that he is fated to continue as before:

> "What is it, what nameless, inscrutable, unearthly thing is it; what cozening, hidden lord and master, and cruel, remorseless emperor commands me; that against all natural lovings and longings, I so keep pushing, and crowding, and jamming myself on all the time; recklessly making me ready to do what in my own proper, natural heart, I durst not so much as dare? ... By heaven, man, we are turned round and round in this world, like yonder windlass, and Fate is the handspike."[135]

Like Gloucester (who says in King Lear, "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, || They kill us for their sport"[136]), Ahab looks upon human beings as the habitual playthings of unseen powers. At times, as in the quotation, he feels as if there is nothing that he can do to become the master of his own fate. His frustration with an often incomprehensible universe is evident from his decision to "strike through the mask" in a desperate bid to find out what is beyond. Paradoxically, though, this approach to life determines what sort of person he is, and how he responds to the world in which he lives. His destiny is fore-ordained, not, as he imagines, exclusively by powers external to himself, but, to a large extent, by the kind of person he

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[132] Moby-Dick, p. 322.
[133] Moby-Dick, p. 405.
[134] William Shakespeare, King Lear, ed. R.A. Foakes (Walton-on-Thames : Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1997), 4.7.59-63.
[135] Moby-Dick, pp. 406-407.

chooses to be. Ishmael identifies two different forces within Ahab. One is "crazy Ahab, the scheming, unappeasedly steadfast hunter of the white whale", and the other is humane Ahab, who would often emit "a wild cry" and "with glaring eyes ... burst from his state room"[137]:

> The latter was the eternal, living principle or soul in him; and in sleep, being for the time dissociated from the characterizing mind, which at other times employed it for its outer vehicle or agent, it spontaneously sought escape from the scorching contiguity of the frantic thing, of which, for the time, it was no longer an integral.[138]

Because Ahab allows his crazy, "characterizing mind" to prevail over his kindly "living principle, or soul", his predicament is of his own making. Ishmael's understanding of this is reflected in his comment: "God help thee, old man, thy thoughts have created a creature in thee; and he whose intense thinking thus makes him a Prometheus; a vulture feeds upon that heart forever; that vulture the very creature he creates."[139]

As I have demonstrated, the trajectory of Ahab's experiential journey is linear and, often, lonely; it drags him, as well as the *Pequod* and its entire crew (except for Ishmael), inexorably downwards to annihilation. When Ahab recognises the folly of his ways, his journey appears to veer upwards temporarily (rather like Kurtz's), but soon it reverts to its former course and terminates in death. Perhaps the words of Ishmael are a fitting – though somewhat unflattering – epitaph for Ahab: "There is a wisdom that is woe; but there is a woe that is madness."[140] Ishmael fully appreciates that those who think deeply about life must often feel frustrated and depressed when they reflect on the impenetrability of the universe and the apparent senselessness of human suffering; but he realises that it is sheer madness to believe (as Ahab evidently does) that one can wage war against the "howling infinite"[141] and emerge victorious (or, for that matter, relatively unscathed) from the encounter. Ahab's convictions are particularly disconcerting because – by his own admission – he cannot grasp the complexity of the infinite which he is attacking.

Ahab's conception of the world is very different from, say, Stubb's. In the words of Richard Brodhead, "Ahab is obsessively conscious of inhuman supernatural powers. Ordinary actuality simply evaporates before his boiling mind as he projects himself out of it to engage in cosmic

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[136] King Lear, 4.1.38-39.
[137] Moby-Dick, p. 169.
[138] Moby-Dick, pp. 169-170.
[139] Moby-Dick, p. 170.
[140] Moby-Dick, p. 328.
[141] Moby-Dick, p. 97.

contests."[142] This is one of the "woeful" risks of not accepting experience at face-value. Stubb, by contrast, is successful in maintaining his equanimity because he "possesses all the knack for ordinary business and ordinary pleasure that Ahab so singularly lacks."[143]

A narrative of "careful disorderliness"; meaning as a "misty [halo] made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine"

Ishmael's use of language in Moby-Dick regularly reflects this "opposition between a sense of reality as something inhuman that lies beyond the actual and apparent and a sense of it as something visible, tangible, and finally supportive of human security."[144] He adopts the matter-of-fact language of realistic fiction to describe activities or occurrences that are not particularly receptive to symbolic or metaphysical interpretation. The usual operations perfomed on a whaling ship, such as the *Pequod*, fall into this category, especially when they are looked at through the eyes of comparatively unimaginative and down-to-earth men such as Stubb.[145] But, on other occasions (particularly when Ahab's pursuit of Moby Dick is the focus of attention), Ishmael employs an elevated and highly charged language that calls to mind the genre of the prose romance. On such occasions, Ishmael characteristically imbues his story with supernatural elements, encouraging the reader to share Ahab's conviction that some unseen power is responsible for what happens in the universe, and that events on Earth often need to be interpreted in a symbolic or metaphysical way.

For the greater part of Moby-Dick, Ishmael's narrative alternates between these two modes of expression: the language of "portentous romance", on the one hand, and that of "comic realism"[146], on the other. But, in the concluding chapters of the novel, Ishmael casts aside the language of "comic realism", thus ensuring that "the narrative takes on an intense single-mindedness akin to Ahab's absorption in his one dark idea"[147] of killing Moby Dick. Strange incidents, which serve as forewarnings of a disastrous outcome to Ahab's quest, occur far more regularly than before. For example, the needles of the ship's compasses are inverted by an electrical storm;[148] later, when Ahab climbs onto the mainmast to scan the ocean for Moby Dick, a sea-hawk snatches his hat from his head.[149] "The visible spheres become totally and claustrophobically meaningful, each incident charged with a fixed significance that seems to

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[142] Brodhead, p. 146.
[143] Brodhead, p. 146.
[144] Brodhead, p. 148.
[145] Here, it is interesting to note that Ishmael's presentation of Stubb's level-headed approach to work is roughly equivalent to Marlow's faith in the saving power of work as a means of warding off the metaphysical darkness.
[146] Brodhead, p. 150.
[147] Brodhead, p. 157.
[148] Ahab discovers this in Chapter 124 ("The Needle").
[149] Chapter 130 ("The Hat").

derive not from the human imagination but from the intentional order of the world itself."[150] At the same time, the pace of the narrative (which had been leisurely, for the most part, because of Ishmael's frequent digressions) gathers momentum as it hastens towards its apparently inevitable conclusion: the triumph of Moby Dick over Ahab.

A. Robert Lee makes a useful distinction between the "tale" and the "telling" of Moby-Dick.[151] The tale is about a "grey-headed, ungodly old man, chasing with curses a Job's whale round the world, at the head of a crew, too, chiefly made up of mongrel renegades, and castaways, and cannibals",[152] but the method of telling ensures that the progress of the tale is continually interrupted by the insertion of digressions, such as sermons, myths, whaling tales, cetological exposition and philosophical speculation (the last two forming the bulk of this "extraneous" material). Perhaps another way of distinguishing between the "tale" and the "telling" (or – to use the terminology of Tomashevsky – between the "story" and the "plot") would be to say that the "tale" is mostly concerned with (what I have termed) the physical and the experiential journeys of the characters, but that the "telling" (i.e. the way the story is presented) largely determines the trajectory of (what I have referred to as) the reader's narrative journey. Richard Brodhead observes perceptively that, in "Ishmael's disjointed narrative",

> Time ... takes the form Frank Kermode calls *chronos*: instead of seeming to possess a larger order it unfolds as "one damn thing after another." We move through the perpetual present of Ishmael's perception and inventively responsive imagination. But in the narrative associated with Ahab [i.e. the "tale"] time takes the form Kermode calls *kairos*: its moments are felt as "significant seasons," as "charged with a meaning derived from its relation to the end."[153]

It is entirely appropriate that the narrative associated with Ahab should move towards a closed ending, because interpretative certainty, as we have seen, is vitally important to Ahab. However, the "Epilogue" ensures that, despite earlier indications to the contrary, the ending of Moby-Dick remains open: Ishmael survives the sinking of the *Pequod*, and this stroke of good fortune enables him to compose the narrative of Moby-Dick some years later.[154] But, even then (i.e. at the time of writing), Ishmael continues to be baffled by many of his experiences in the

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[150] Brodhead, p. 158.

[151] A. Robert Lee, "*Moby-Dick*: The Tale and the Telling", in New Perspectives on Melville, ed. Faith Pullin (Edinburgh : Edinburgh University Press, 1978), pp. 86-127.

[152] Moby-Dick, p. 158.

[153] Brodhead, p. 158. The embedded quotations are from Frank Kermode, The Sense of an Ending : Studies in the Theory of Fiction (New York : Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 46 and 47.

[154] In "Loomings", the opening chapter, he states: "Some years ago ... I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world." (Moby-Dick, p. 18.)

novel. Symptoms of his continued perplexity are the "disjointed" character of his tale, as well as his obvious reluctance to claim that particular interpretations or interpretative strategies should be accorded priority over others.

Indeed, Ishmael's narrative constantly emphasises the fact that every act of interpretation is subjective and, of necessity, incomplete. It does so by regularly putting forward more than one interpretation of a particular creature, object or event. This tendency is especially noticeable in Chapter 82 ("The Doubloon"). Ahab, Starbuck, Stubb, Flask, the Manxman, Queequeg, Fedallah and Pip all pause before the gold doubloon which Ahab has nailed to the mainmast of the *Pequod* as the prize for the sailor who achieves the first sighting of Moby Dick. Although Ahab designates it as "the white whale's talisman",[155] the coin also has a certain economic value. But these are just two of many other possible interpretations. In fact, the three Andean summits (topped respectively by a flame, a tower and a crowing cock) and the over-arching zodiac which are portrayed on the doubloon encourage "a very zodiac of [readings]: Ahab's solipsistic vision, Starbuck's Christian outlook, Stubb's almanack readings, Flask's comic empiricism, Fedallah's manicheanism, and Queequeg's phallic bafflement. Pip alone is left to conjugate the verb 'to look'",[156] thereby reminding the reader that, for every object of interpretation, there are an unlimited number of conceivable readings. The reasons for this are twofold: firstly, each interpretative act depends on the subjective perceptions of the individual interpreter; and, secondly, the very structure of language precludes the existence of interpretations that are final and definitive. Stubb's comment after overhearing the Manxman's attempted decoding of the doubloon is entirely apposite: "There's another rendering now; but still one text."[157]

A striking feature of Ishmael's narrative is its reliance on texts of all kinds: A. Robert Lee, astutely calls Moby-Dick a "text woven of many sub-texts"[158] – a felicitous metaphor, given the fact that imagery associated with weaving[159] is a notable feature of Moby-Dick. The novel contains many allusions to – amongst others – "the Bible, Montaigne, Burton, Milton, Dante, Cervantes, Shakespeare and his English contemporaries, Melville's fellow Victorians Emerson, Carlyle and Dickens, as well as Plato and the tradition of neo-Platonist thinkers."[160] In addition to taking us along with him on his forays into the world of intertextuality, Ishmael frequently emphasises the fact that that we tend to read aspects of the world as texts. (Here, he seems

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[155] Moby-Dick, p. 332.
[156] Lee, p. 101.
[157] Moby-Dick, p. 335.
[158] Lee, p. 116.
[159] Examples of this occur in Chapter 47 ("The Mat-Maker"), which deals with the mat woven by Ishmael and Queequeg, and in the punning title of Chapter 1 ("Loomings").
[160] Lee, p. 90.

almost to anticipate Derrida's famous dictum, "*il n'y a pas de hors texte*"[161]– "there is nothing outside the text".) For instance, in Chapter 32 ("Cetology"), he divides the various species of whales according to their magnitude into three "BOOKS", with each species given a "CHAPTER" of its own; and, in Chapter 79 ("The Prairie"), he plays the part of a physiognomist hoping to "*read* [my italics] the awful Chaldee of the Sperm Whale's brow"; however, on this occasion, he is forced to admit defeat – an outcome which prompts him to pass on the challenge of interpretation to the reader: "I but put that brow before you. Read it if you can."[162] Queequeg is perhaps a "text" in more ways than one, for he has been tattooed all over his body by

> a departed prophet and seer of his island, who, by those hieroglyphic marks, had written out on his body a complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth; so that Queequeg in his proper person was a riddle to unfold; a wondrous work in one volume; but whose mysteries not even himself could read, though his own live heart beat against them; and these mysteries were therefore destined in the end to moulder away with the living parchment whereon they were inscribed, and so be unsolved to the last. And this thought it must have been which suggested to Ahab that wild exclamation of his, when one morning turning away from surveying poor Queequeg – "Oh, devilish tantalization of the gods!"[163]

If whales are "books" that can be read, Queequeg is a particularly puzzling double-layered text. Initially, Ishmael is baffled by him (just as Marlow is, when he first encounters Africa) and – not surprisingly, given the cultural differences between them – by some of his apparently "strange" customs. But the interpretative challenge presented by Queequeg does not end there, for superimposed on Queequeg-the-person-as-text is an even more arcane text: the "hieroglyphic marks" tattooed on "the living parchment" of his body. By claiming that Queequeg's tattoos – or, for that matter, the Sperm Whale's brow – are "a riddle to unfold", Ishmael suggests that the physical bodies of living creatures often hide, rather than reveal, "the queenly personalit[ies]"[164] that reside within them. And, by stating that the "mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth" was "destined in the end to moulder away with the living parchment [on which it was] inscribed", he intimates that the goal of being able to make interpretation absolute (i.e. the attainment of Truth), rather than relative (i.e. the construction of a subjective frame of reference for an individual interpreter), is beyond human reach. However, because this

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[161] Quoted in Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (ed.), Literary Theory : An Anthology (Malden, Massachusetts and London : Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1998), p. 343.
[162] Moby-Dick, p. 275.
[163] Moby-Dick, pp. 366-367.
[164] Moby-Dick, p. 382.

goal remains so enticing, its elusiveness is felt by the Ahabs of this world as a "devilish tantalization of the gods".

Many readers (especially those who were contemporaries of Melville, as well as those who are not familiar with the experiments of Modernism and Postmodernism) have found, or continue to find, the heterogeneity of Moby-Dick rather disconcerting.[165] Although the book is classified, quite rightly, as a novel, it is, in fact, a bricolage of many different genres – the adventure story, the realistic novel, the prose romance, the cetological textbook, the drama and the epic, to name just a few. This is the case because a work of fiction cannot be too well-ordered if it is to mirror – to some extent at least – the complexity of the world that it depicts. Ishmael makes this point in Chapter 82 ("The Honor and Glory of Whaling"), when he says (with particular reference to his research into whaling), "There are some enterprises in which a careful disorderliness is the true method."[166] In keeping with his conviction, he asks "God [to] keep [him] from ever completing anything", and avers that "this whole book [of Moby-Dick is] but a draught – nay, but the draught of a draught."[167]

The heterogeneity of Moby-Dick extends, also, to its narrative modality. Ishmael begins his tale[168] by drawing attention to himself as a first-person narrator: "Call me Ishmael."[169] This creates the expectation in readers that they will be constantly aware of his presence as the first-person narrator and, quite possibly, as an important character throughout the novel. But, in much of what follows, they lose sight of him as a character, and it seems as if the story is being told by an omniscient third-person narrator. Indeed, in some chapters, even this narrator disappears, and readers are confronted with soliloquies or dialogues, interspersed, on occasion, with song and dance.[170] Moby-Dick may be described as organic[171] in form, because Melville adopts the literary genre, the style of writing, and the narrative voice which are best suited to the realisation of his aims in any particular episode; it is as if the novel develops naturally according to the changing demands of the narrative. Ishmael says as much at the beginning of Chapter 63 ("The Crotch"): "Out of the trunk, the branches grow; out of them, the twigs. So in productive subjects, grow the chapters."[172] The author's strategy implies that the world is so

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[165] One of Melville's friends, Evert A. Duyckinck, expressed the misgivings of such readers, when he complained in an early review of the novel: "It becomes quite impossible to submit such books to a distinct classification as fact, fiction, or essay." ["A Friend Does His Christian Duty"], in the 2nd Norton Critical Edition of Moby-Dick, p. 610.)

[166] Moby-Dick, p. 284.

[167] Moby-Dick, p. 125.

[168] Although Ishmael may – or may not – be the narrator of the "Etymology" and "Extracts" sections, I think that it is reasonable to regard those sections as a preface to – rather than an integral part of – the story that is told in Moby-Dick.

[169] Moby-Dick, p. 18.

[170] Chapters 39, 40, 108, 120, 121 and 122 provide examples of this form of narrative (which has its origins, of course, in drama).

[171] I use "organic" in the sense of "characterised by continuous or natural development that is suggestive of the growth of a living being".

[172] Moby-Dick, p. 234.

complicated that an interpreter must be willing to employ a number of different interpretative approaches if he hopes to understand its intricacies reasonably well. The onus is on the individual interpreter, therefore, to select the method of interpretation which, in his opinion, promises to produce the best results for the particular circumstances under consideration.[173]

The narrative journey which Ishmael devises for the reader of Moby-Dick encourages the latter to join the characters of the novel in their interpretative endeavours. There are at least two recurrent features of the narrative that are responsible for this: firstly, remarks of various kinds that are addressed specifically to the reader; and secondly, passages that comment at a meta-level on the narrative itself. Two examples of the former will suffice. In the prefatory "Extracts" section, Ishmael[174] gives the reader the following advice: "Therefore *you* must not, in every case at least, take the higgledy-piggledy whale statements, however authentic, in these extracts, for veritable gospel cetology [my italics]."[175] Soon afterwards (at the beginning of Chapter 1 – "Loomings"), he again uses the imperative mood as he invites the reader to call him by his first name, Ishmael. Tactics such as these succeed in establishing a bond between the narrator and the reader, who is likely to feel that he and Ishmael are fellow-interpreters, if not friends, and that Ishmael's hermeneutic problems are, in a sense, also his own. I have already cited Ishmael's comments about the disorderliness, the incompletion and the organic form of his narrative. These metafictional asides implicitly deny the feasibility of final interpretations (as does the comment that "the higgledy-piggledy whale statements" which are quoted in the "Extracts" section should not be regarded as "veritable gospel cetology"), thus giving the reader an invitation "to confront *Moby-Dick* as co-creator with the author, [and] to become an accomplice in telling the tale and working out the meanings of the [narrative] journey"[176] on which he has set out.

If, in Moby-Dick, Melville illustrates how the complexity of the world and the difficulties associated with interpretation impose epistemological limits on human beings, Conrad, in Heart of Darkness, deploys "personae and narrative intricacy to provide a multiplicity of viewpoints that ... conceal the artist yet express ... his sceptical view ... of the world's lack of fixed meaning."[177] Heart of Darkness begins with a frame narrator recalling a particular pleasure cruise which he undertook with four other men in the estuary of the Thames. One of these is Marlow, who proceeds to tell the others about his memorable journey into "the heart of

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[173] This does not necessarily make the hermeneutic task any easier, as there do not appear to be any objective criteria for deciding which interpretative approach is best suited to each situation.

[174] I take Ishmael to be the narrator of the whole of Moby-Dick, since there is no definitive evidence to suggest otherwise.

[175] Moby-Dick, p. 8. Considering Melville's well-documented religious scepticism, this might be intended as an ironic comment on the notion of a Gospel or absolute truth.

[176] Lee, p. 105.

[177] Kenneth Graham, "Conrad and Modernism", in The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad, ed. J.H. Stape (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 207.

darkness" – a tale which constitutes the bulk (over ninety-five per cent) of the novella. On a few occasions, the voice of the frame narrator interrupts the tale briefly, and, at the end of the novella, it returns for the last time to describe the profound effect of Marlow's story on those who have heard it. By doubling his narrators in this way, Conrad casts doubt on the possibility of univocal interpretation, and encourages his readers to be constantly on the alert for nuances of meaning as they go about formulating their own interpretations of the text.

However, even if Heart of Darkness consisted only of Marlow's narrative, it would not foster hermeneutic complacency on the part of the reader. For Marlow's tale is unusually complex, as the frame narrator informs us:

> The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical ... and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that, sometimes, are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine.[178]

Although the similes used here do not evoke an entirely consistent image, they suggest that, for Marlow, meaning is seldom well-defined: more often than not, it has fuzzy edges. The phrase, "spectral illumination", also gives the impression that Marlow's tale might possess an illusory quality and an unforeseen subtlety. However, since the metaphysical universe is always seen but dimly, the only way in which Marlow can hope to convey his ideas about it to the reader is to employ the sort of indirect narration[179] that relies on suggestion rather than explicit statement.

And so, Marlow exploits a number of different techniques in order to undermine the notion that meaning can be stabilised. One of these is a method of narration which Ian Watt has termed "delayed decoding".[180] This occurs when a character understands the full import of a specific incident only after he has at first misinterpreted it. The account of the attack on Marlow's boat as it approaches the Inner Station provides a good example of this method. Initially, Marlow notices that his poleman "stretch[es] himself flat on the deck"; that the fireman sits "down abruptly ... and duck[s] his head"; that "little sticks" are flying through the air; and that the helmsman "step[s] back swiftly ... and [falls] upon [his – i.e. Marlow's] feet."[181] Only gradually

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[178] Heart of Darkness, p. 9.
[179] Of course, this kind of indirect narration became the norm in many novels written after 1900.
[180] Ian Watt, Conrad in the Nineteenth Century (Berkeley and Los Angeles : University of California Press, 1979), p. 175.
[181] Heart of Darkness, pp. 45 and 47.

does it dawn on Marlow that the "little sticks" are, in fact, arrows; that the poleman and the fireman behave as they do for the sake of their personal safety; and that the helmsman has been fatally wounded. This device effectively demonstrates "the problematic relation of individual sense impressions to meaning"[182]: things are often not as they appear to be. But, even when an observer thinks that he has arrived at the truth, he often discovers that he is still mistaken, or that he has only a partial understanding of the situation. In our example, it emerges from Marlow's conversations with the Russian "harlequin" that the supposedly hostile attack on Marlow's steamboat "was undertaken under the stress of desperation and in its essence was purely protective"[183]: the natives "[didn't] want [Kurtz] to go."[184]

Univocal signification in Heart of Darkness is undermined still further by the manner in which Conrad invests actions, characters and objects with symbolic meaning. Marlow's journey to Kurtz, for instance, is a sort of Dantean journey into the underworld. As I have already mentioned, the two receptionists at the Company's offices in Brussels represent two of the three Fates, Clotho and Lachesis. The third Fate, Atropos, is the African woman who walks proudly along the riverbank.[185] The Congolese jungle is associated with the instinctual urges of primitive man. London and the Thames, by contrast, are connected with the supposedly admirable values of civilized society. However, it is worth pointing out that there is sometimes an ambiguous shifting of demarcations in Conrad's use of symbols: Marlow, for instance, commences his narrative by observing that London, also, "has been one of the dark places of the earth."[186] This indicates that Conrad is aware of the fact that interpretation changes with the passage of time, and that "meaning" is always provisional. Be that as it may, the overall effect of Conrad's symbolism is to create a multiplicity of associations that extend the limits of interpretation indefinitely: meaning becomes a "haze", or "one of these misty halos that, sometimes, are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine", but exactly where its boundaries are, few will venture to say.

If Marlow's journey to Kurtz is a journey into the underworld, it is also a journey into the innermost recesses of his own psyche. In Freudian terminology, Kurtz may be regarded as Marlow's alter ego, the embodiment of Marlow's unconscious desires prior to their repression by his conscious self. Marlow's mental world (which I define in terms of his physical and

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[182] Watt, p. 174.

[183] Heart of Darkness, p. 44.

[184] Heart of Darkness, p. 54.

[185] In a gesture that calls to mind the cutting of the thread that symbolises each person's life, the African woman "[s]uddenly ... opened her bared arms and threw them up rigid above her head as though in an uncontrollable desire to touch the sky, and at the same time the swift shadows darted out on the earth, swept around on the river, gathering the steamer [carrying Kurtz] in a shadowy embrace." (Heart of Darkness, pp. 60-61.) Clearly, the woman is also associated with the jungle (the almost identical descriptions of her "brooding over an inscrutable purpose" (p. 60) and the jungle's "brooding over an inscrutable intention" (p. 36) confirm this), and it is the jungle and its dangers to which Kurtz finally succumbs.

[186] Heart of Darkness, p. 9.

experiential journeys, as refracted through his narrative and his accompanying hermeneutic practices) is the main focus of attention in Heart of Darkness, and the reader's narrative journey is largely an encounter with that world. The reader observes how the comparatively easy-going character who relishes the prospect of visiting the Congo is transformed by his African experiences into the troubled narrator who admits to his companions on the *Nellie* that he cannot make them understand his story completely:

> "Do you see him [i.e. Kurtz]? Do you see the story? Do you see anything? ... No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence – that which makes its truth, its meaning – its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream – alone...."[187]

Marlow's sense of isolation and uncertainty is an unavoidable consequence of the fact that no two people have identical experiences, and that each person interprets what happens to him in a unique way. Moreover, as I have already stated on a number of occasions, signification is a play of differences, and final meaning is always deferred.

Notwithstanding the slipperiness of language, Marlow's narrative to his friends on the *Nellie* is a manifestation of his compelling desire to comprehend as much of his experience in the Congo as possible, and to impart that knowledge (however tentative it may be) to his audience. In striving to accomplish these goals, Marlow adopts "the dislocating achronological technique of frequent anticipation and flashback".[188] An example of this typically modernist narrative procedure occurs soon after Marlow has described the attack on his steamer, but before he has informed the reader of his arrival at the Inner Station. In an anticipation of future events, he refers to Kurtz's Intended, and quotes what Kurtz said in his presence after they had met. He also gives the gist of Kurtz's report to the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs – a document which, at that stage of his narrative, Marlow had not yet seen. Here, as elsewhere, the reader has the impression that, by yoking together events widely separated in time, Marlow hopes to gain greater insight into the object(s) and the context of his enquiries.

Heart of Darkness is, to a large extent, a record of Marlow's intense brooding over problems in metaphysics, epistemology and ethics. As such, it possesses a seriousness that commands the attention of the reader, who feels persuaded to join Marlow in his search for answers to important philosophical questions. The reader's interest in Marlow's predicament is also

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[187] Heart of Darkness, p. 30.
[188] Graham, p. 212.

maintained by the poetic suggestiveness of the text (which hints at meanings without specifying exactly what they are), and a story that is extremely focused and relatively free of digressions.

In Moby-Dick, by contrast, the leisurely pace and the disjointed nature of Ishmael's tale suggest that much of his thinking about his experiences in New Bedford, in Nantucket and on the *Pequod* took place *after* his presumed return to the United States. And so, as one might expect, the consciousness of Ishmael-the-narrator (rather than that of Ishmael-the-character) tends to dominate the narrative. This makes it extremely difficult for readers to distinguish – on a regular basis, and with certainty – between the thoughts of Ishmael-the-character and those of Ishmael-the-narrator. In Heart of Darkness, there is much less assimilation of Marlow-the-character's thoughts with those of Marlow-the-narrator: the reader is quite frequently aware of how Marlow reacted to events *at the time* that he was experiencing them in the Congo. This difference between Heart of Darkness and Moby-Dick can be accounted for in the light of the the two narrators' divergent responses to metaphysical uncertainty. Marlow aims to find satisfactory answers as soon as possible, while Ishmael is quite content to entertain the possibility that there are none.

It is not at all surprising, therefore, that Ishmael has a keener sense of humour than Marlow. A jocular vein (as, for instance, in Peleg's reported references to Queequeg as "Quohog" and "Hedgehog",[189] and in Fleece's mock-serious sermon to the sharks[190]) which establishes an intimacy with the reader is characteristic of many parts of Ishmael's narrative. Marlow's narrative, by contrast, ensures that a certain distance is always maintained between the reader and the narrator. This is the case for two reasons: firstly, unlike Ishmael, who speaks to the reader, Marlow tells *his* story to a group of friends on the *Nellie*;[191] and secondly, whereas Ishmael is often playful and light-hearted, Marlow is nearly always sober and serious.

Although I have pointed out some of the differences between the respective narrative journeys on which the narrators of Moby-Dick and Heart of Darkness take the reader, it should be stated that the journeys are quite similar in general outline. In each case, the reader is invited to join the narrator in his interrogation of an intricate set of philosophical problems; if the reader is at all perceptive, and if he listens carefully along the way, his own response to the text in question will have acquired an added complexity and depth by the time the journey ends.

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[189] in Chapter 18 ("His Mark").

[190] in Chapter 64 ("Stubb's Supper").

[191] Moreover, once he begins telling his story, Marlow becomes so absorbed in it that he gives the impression of being almost oblivious to anyone or anything else. I am not suggesting, though, that either Marlow's audience on the *Nellie*, or readers of Heart of Darkness, are likely to lose interest in Marlow's story because he keeps them at arm's length.

Of thought-divers, Catskill eagles and the imaginative understanding of a "spectacular universe"

The aforegoing discussions of the physical, the experiential and the narrative journeys in Moby-Dick and Heart of Darkness form the basis for my own interpretations of the two novels. These hermeneutic journeys (the final ones which I describe in this chapter) are self-evidently subjective, and a record of my own efforts to uncover the philosophical orientation of each of the two texts under consideration.[192] I consider the following to be some of the central concerns which Melville and Conrad explore in the two works under consideration here (I put them in the form of questions): What is the relationship between human beings and the physical world, and how might humans view that relationship? What are some of the limitations of the human condition, and how might these be transcended (even if only partially)? What are the problems associated with interpretation, and how might we respond to them? If a metaphysical realm does exist, what can we discover about it, and what are the conceivable advantages and disadvantages of acquiring such knowledge? And, finally, what moral principles should we adhere to in our dealings with other people? Since neither Moby-Dick nor Heart of Darkness is a didactic text, these questions (as well as possible answers to them) are implied, rather than stated. The challenge for the reader is to provide his own tentative answers, based on the evidence before him and his own interpretative procedures.

In the case of Moby-Dick, I believe that the best way of exploring questions such as these is to focus on the dialectic which emerges from Melville's portrayal of the differences in philosophical outlook between Ishmael and Ahab.[193] I agree with Harrison Hayford that

> an initial similarity between Ishmael and Ahab is the way both of them turn every object, situation, and person they confront into a problem, one which cannot be solved, a mystery whose lurking meaning cannot be followed to its ultimate elucidation.[194]

It can thus be said that the epistemological desire of Ishmael and Ahab (their thirst for knowledge about the universe) is continually thwarted by metaphysical denial (the resistance of the universe to human understanding). A further source of irritation to both characters is the

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[192] Of course, my own interests and my own interpretative approach have also helped to shape the experiential and the narrative journeys which I have already analysed in this chapter. Thus, as I have indicated in the Introduction, elements of the hermeneutic journey permeate those journeys too.

[193] Here, I will merely be building on my earlier analysis of the similarities and differences between Ishmael and Ahab in my discussion of: (a) their respective experiential journeys and (b) the narrative journey of the reader.

[194] Harrison Hayford, "'Loomings': Yarns and Figures in The Fabric", in the 2nd Norton Edition of Moby-Dick, pp. 658-659.

fact that human beings cannot escape victimization in this world. However, Ishmael's methods of dealing with these problems are radically different from Ahab's.

In Chapter 1 ("Loomings"), Ishmael notes that most people are attracted to large expanses of water: some become lost in contemplation as they gaze at the sea,[195] while others, who are on their first voyage as passengers, feel a "mystical vibration" when they are told that their ship is "now out of sight of land.[196] After speculating about the reasons for this widespread fascination with water, he briefly recounts – with some modifications of his own – the story of Narcissus:

> Surely this [yearning for, and veneration of, the sea] is not without some meaning. And still deeper the meaning of the story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all.[197]

Ishmael comes to the conclusion that the images which water conjures up are like the mysteries of life. They arrest our interest and hold us spellbound, but because they are ultimately "ungraspable", we experience them, also, as "tormenting". Ishmael does not allow this to disturb his equilibrium, however; he realises that the possibilities of interpretation are endless within "the prisonhouse of language",[198] and so, he puts forward his own interpretations in the full knowledge that they are provisional, and subject to later revision.

Perhaps even more "tormenting" than "the ungraspable phantom of life" are the indignities and woes which we suffer as human beings: Ishmael speaks of "the universal thump [that] is passed around".[199] However, as Hayford observes in his trenchant analysis of the opening chapter of Moby-Dick, "Ishmael has [a number of] nonaggressive strategies for alleviating"[200] the pain of such afflictions. Sometimes he "requires a strong decoction of Seneca and the Stoics to enable [him] to grin and bear it";[201] sometimes he resorts to thoughts about New Testament and democratic equality in suffering and slavery ("What does that indignity amount to, weighed ...

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[195] Moby-Dick, p. 18.
[196] Moby-Dick, pp. 19-20.
[197] Moby-Dick, p. 20.
[198] J. Hillis Miller, "The Critic as Host", in Deconstruction and Criticism (a collection of essays by Harold Bloom et al.) (New York : The Seabury Press, 1979), p. 230.
[199] Moby-Dick, p. 21.
[200] Hayford, p. 664.
[201] Moby-Dick, pp. 20-21.

in the scales of the New Testament?... Who aint a slave? Tell me that."[202]); and sometimes he proposes "fellow-feeling and mutual help"[203] as a remedy:

> [H]owever they may thump and punch me about, I have the satisfaction of knowing that it is all right; that everybody else is one way or other served in much the same way – either in a physical or metaphysical point of view, that is; and so the universal thump is passed around, and all hands should rub each other's shoulder-blades, and be content.[204]

Like Ishmael, Ahab is uncertain about the exact nature of the metaphysical universe, which he envisages as concealed in some way by the visible world of "pasteboard masks". But, unlike Ishmael, he cannot accept the fact that unmerited human suffering is inevitable. Although he is powerless to do anything about the situation, he decides to take action by converting his quarrel with the metaphysical organisation of the universe (as people experience it) into a hunt for a seemingly indomitable white whale.

In Moby-Dick, Melville provides us with at least three different models of how human beings might respond to life. Whereas the down-to-earth Stubb takes experience at face-value, and is not unduly troubled by those aspects of human existence which he does not understand, Ishmael and Ahab are not satisfied with the surface appearance of things, but gaze longingly at "the image of the ungraspable phantom of life". Ishmael realises that the "phantom" is, indeed, "ungraspable", since "the deep truth is imageless";[205] Ahab, by contrast, rarely wavers in his determination to grasp the "ungraspable phantom", and, like Narcissus (in Ishmael's version of the myth), he plunges into the water and is drowned.

While I do not wish to go so far as to identify Ishmael with Melville, I think it is fairly clear that there is a consonance between: (a) much of what Ishmael does and says in his narrative and (b) certain sentiments expressed by Melville in letters to his friends. To substantiate my claim, I quote from a letter which Melville wrote to Evert A. Duyckinck in 1849:

> I love all men who *dive*. Any fish can swim near the surface, but it takes a great whale to go down stairs five miles or more; & if he dont attain the bottom, why all the lead in Galena can't fashion the plumet [sic] that will. I'm ... talking ... of the whole corps of thought-divers, who have been diving

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[202] Moby-Dick, p. 21.
[203] Hayford, p. 664.
[204] Moby-Dick, p. 21.
[205] Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Prometheus Unbound", in Shelley's Poetry and Prose, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York and London : W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1977), 2.4.116.

> & coming up again with bloodshot eyes since the world began.[206]

Melville does not mind if such thought-divers fail to reach the bottom, but come up, instead, "with bloodshot eyes". What is important to him is that they make the attempt, and that they continue to do so, however limited their success may be. Ishmael's narrative in Moby-Dick is characterised by continual diving of the kind advocated by Melville. But, whereas Ishmael appreciates that ultimate explorations are impossible, and adopts an approach of pragmatic expediency to matters of interpretation, Ahab rashly seeks to transcend his human limitations by continuing to probe the extremities of knowledge: this might be seen as an inversion of the myth of Daedalus and Icarus, with Ahab diving too deep, rather than soaring too high (as Icarus is said to have done).

I believe that even more light is cast on the underlying dissimilarity between Ahab and Ishmael by Richard Rorty's analysis of the divergent aims and procedures of Kantian and non-Kantian philosophers. Rorty speaks of

> a philosophical tradition which began, more or less, with Kant, and one which began, more or less, with Hegel's *Phenomenology*. The first tradition thinks of truth as a vertical relationship between representations and what is represented. The second tradition thinks of truth horizontally – as the culminating reinterpretation of our predecessors' reinterpretation of their predecessors' reinterpretation.... This tradition does not ask how representations are related to nonrepresentations, but how representations can be seen as hanging together.... [I]t is the difference between regarding truth, goodness, and beauty as eternal objects which we try to locate and reveal, and regarding them as artifacts whose fundamental design we often have to alter.[207]

Ahab wants to locate truth and then reveal it within a comprehensive philosophical system. However, truth does not present itself to him as an epiphany or, even, as a text of some kind, and so, he constructs his own limited version of the truth, and then attempts to reify this by coercing the crew of the *Pequod* to accept its validity. Ishmael, on the other hand, does not strive for absolute truth because he knows that it is beyond human reach. *His* interpretative approach implicitly denies that "truth" can be determined with complete accuracy; instead, it endorses the view (which, I am fairly confident, Melville would have shared) that "truth" is dynamic, provisional and constantly mutating.

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[206] Herman Melville to Evert A. Duyckinck, 3 March 1849, quoted in Brodhead, p. 120.

It is particularly appropriate that Melville should associate the challenge posed by the metaphysical realm with the *whiteness* of Moby Dick. As the most brilliant of hues, white can dazzle the eye of a fascinated observer and, yet, retain an ambiguity that invites elucidation.[208] Ahab chooses to focus not on the enjoyable aspects of life, but on the wretchedness of the human condition; he admits as much in Chapter 127 ("The Deck"): "So far gone am I in the dark side of earth, that its other side, the theoretic bright one, seems but uncertain twilight to me."[209] Ishmael, by contrast, appreciates all the colours of the spectrum that are refracted within human experience, even if he concedes that

> the sun hides not Virginia's Dismal Swamp, nor Rome's accursed Campagna, nor wide Sahara, nor all the millions of miles of deserts and of griefs beneath the moon. The sun hides not the ocean, which is the dark side of this earth, and which is two thirds of this earth. So, therefore, that mortal man who hath more of joy than sorrow in him, that man cannot be true – not true, or undeveloped.[210]

I think Melville would concur with Ishmael that, while "there is a wisdom that is woe[,]... there is a woe that is madness."[211] For those who think deeply about life, Ishmael puts forward what seems to be the only viable alternative to the gloomy outlook of an Ahab:

> [T]here is a Catskill eagle in some souls that can alike dive down into the blackest gorges, and soar out of them again and become invisible in the sunny spaces. And even if he for ever flies within the gorge, that gorge is in the mountains; so that even in his lowest swoop the mountain eagle is still higher than other birds upon the plain, even though they soar.[212]

Although the Catskill eagle can dive down – like the whale – to explore the depths, it does not become obsessed with them (as Ahab does). Similarly, Ishmael is prepared to "dive down into the blackest gorges", but he always "soar[s] out of them" into "the sunny spaces" of everyday experience and an exuberant *joie de vivre*. The almost playful flexibility of his approach to life is evident in his contribution to the perennial debate about free will and determinism. While

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[207] Richard Rorty, "Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An Essay on Derrida", in Consequences of Pragmatism (Essays: 1972-1980) (Brighton, Sussex : The Harvester Press Ltd., 1982), p. 92.

[208] I have already discussed the problems encountered by Ishmael in his efforts to interpret the whiteness of Moby Dick on pp. 18-20 of this research report.

[209] Moby-Dick, p. 396.

[210] Moby-Dick, p. 328.

[211] Moby-Dick, p. 328.

[212] Moby-Dick, p. 328.

Ishmael does not deny that the role of Providence is the dominant one in human affairs, he acknowledges that free will and chance play their part too. As he and Queequeg weave a sword-mat, he imagines that the fixed threads of the warp represent necessity; the movement of the shuttle, free will; and the unpredictable blows of the sword-shaped slat, chance – "aye, chance, free will, and necessity – no wise incompatible – all interweavingly working together."[213] Ahab, as we have seen, is quite dogmatic in expressing his opinion on the subject: "[W]e are turned round and round in this world, like yonder windlass, and Fate is the handspike."[214]

Ishmael and Ahab also differ in the extent of their self-reliance and in their attitude towards other human beings. It is noticeable that, in Moby-Dick, Ahab is repeatedly associated with fire. He is in collusion with the fire-worshipping Parsee, Fedallah, and, in Chapter 119 ("The Candles"), he even refers to himself as "a true child of fire".[215] I accept Howard P. Vincent's contention that "in ... *Moby-Dick* the fire symbolizes the demonic and irrational forces to which Freud gave the name the 'Id'; the bawdy, maenadic, and orgiastic foundations of the human personality."[216] Ahab's determination to attack the infinite bespeaks a refusal to temper these irrational forces within himself. An equally persuasive interpretation would be that Ahab is mad (and *unable* to temper the irrational forces within himself) because he is the self-made victim of an excessive longing for rationality. However, in dedicating himself to the accomplishment of his goal (of attacking the infinite in the guise of Moby Dick), he cultivates an aloofness which effectively deprives him of the benefits of human fellowship. Even though he knows that he cannot successfully prosecute his mission without the assistance and co-operation of his crew, he resents the fact that this should be the case. We see an example of his attitude when he is forced to ask the carpenter to fashion a new ivory leg for him:

> "Oh, Life! Here I am, proud as a Greek god, and yet standing debtor to this blockhead for a bone to stand on! Cursed be that mortal inter-indebtedness which will not do away with ledgers. I would be free as air; and I'm down in the whole world's books."[217]

This outburst, a sign of Ahab's inordinate pride and his yearning for absolute freedom, is almost Faustian in its sense of man's intellectual and spiritual excess.

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[213] Moby-Dick, p. 179.
[214] Moby-Dick, p. 407.
[215] Moby-Dick, p. 382.
[216] Howard P. Vincent, ["Sources of 'The Try-Works'"], an extract from The Trying-Out of *Moby-Dick*, reprinted in the 2nd Norton Critical Edition of Moby-Dick, p. 581.
[217] Moby-Dick, p. 360.

On one memorable occasion, Ishmael, too, is mesmerised by fire. In Chapter 96 ("The Try-Works"), he watches the trying-out process while standing at the helm of the *Pequod*. In the darkness of the night, the crew appear to be "fiend shapes ..., capering half in smoke and half in fire".[218] Soon, Ishmael becomes drowsy; when he comes to his senses, he realises that he has turned around to face the stern of the ship. "In an instant [he] face[s] back, just in time to prevent the vessel from flying up into the wind, and very probably capsizing her."[219] The lesson which Ishmael's experience teaches him is this:

> Look not too long in the face of the fire, O man! Never dream with thy hand on the helm!... [B]elieve not the artificial fire, when its redness makes all things look ghastly. To-morrow, in the natural sun, the skies will be bright; those who glared like devils in the forking flames, the morn will show in far other, at least gentler, relief; the glorious, golden, glad sun, the only true lamp – all others but liars![220]

Vincent poses the question, "What is the secondary meaning of the event?"[221] His answer is persuasive:

> May [the event] not illustrate the folly of isolation from the social norm ...? ... Without the capacity to sense our relatedness to our fellows we cut ourselves off from the capacity for change, and starve or destroy ourselves. One needs an awareness of one's separate identity but too complete a separation cuts us [off] from human growth... Man – Ishmael – may look into the fire to see the demonic shapes, but he must ... recognize them as his own companions also.[222]

Melville seems to be suggesting that too great an emphasis on the self can lead to an overfondness for metaphysical reverie, which, in turn, may produce a blindness to the everyday realities of the physical world and the unavoidable interdependence of human beings. Those who immerse themselves too deeply in their own imaginative worlds run the risk of destroying both themselves and anyone else with whom they may come into contact. Perhaps the ending of Moby-Dick makes a similar point: whereas the self-absorbed Ahab perishes, Ishmael is buoyed up by the coffin that had been constructed for his "bosom [friend]",[223] Queequeg.

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[218] Moby-Dick, p. 327.
[219] Moby-Dick, p. 328.
[220] Moby-Dick, p. 328.
[221] Vincent, p. 580.
[222] Vincent, pp. 580 and 581.
[223] Moby-Dick, p. 56.

When Ishmael is finally rescued by the *Rachel*, he refers to himself as an "orphan"[224]. Not only has he been bereft of his "mother" (the *Pequod*) and his "father" (Captain Ahab), but he also does not know – as he would, if a transcendental signified existed – whether any of the interpretations which he has put forward in Moby-Dick are correct. However, he shows by his own example that each person should enrich his own life (and make it more meaningful) by constantly interpreting phenomena to the best of his abilities, and by behaving in ways that are in accord with his findings.

Since I have argued[225] that Marlow's mental world is the main focus of attention in Heart of Darkness, I will examine some of the momentous events in his experiential journey (as well as his response to them) in order to amplify my own reading of the novella (which I have already expounded in earlier parts of this report). I will also show that there is a connection between Marlow's world-view and certain philosophical pronouncements made by Conrad during the course of his life.

Although Marlow initially sets out on an adventure, this soon becomes transformed into what Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan has styled as "a pilgrimage in quest of a metaphysical essence or a transcendental authority."[226] This is evident from his frequent use of religious terminology and biblical allusions: Brussels reminds him of "a whited sepulchre"[227]; the grove of death near the Company Station seems to be "the gloomy circle of some Inferno"[228]; the brickmaker is a "papier-mâché Mephistopheles"[229]; the Company officials are "pilgrims with their staves"[230]; and the "harlequin" is "Kurtz's last disciple."[231] The jungle, which lurks in the background as an unnerving presence, becomes a temporary symbol of the "metaphysical essence" which Marlow seeks:

> "I wondered whether the stillness on the face of the immensity looking at us two were meant as an appeal or as a menace. What were we who had strayed in here? Could we handle that dumb thing, or would it handle us? I felt how big, how confoundedly big, was that thing that couldn't talk and perhaps was

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[224] Moby-Dick, p. 427. This is reminiscent of the biblical Ishmael, who is an outcast from a great family. He is the eldest son of the patriarch Abraham, by the Egyptian Hagar, who is the servant of Abraham's initially-barren wife Sarah. Some years after the birth of Ishmael, Sarah miraculously bears Isaac; she then prevails on Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away. In the wilderness, they are protected by an angel. *Vide* Genesis, particularly chs. 16 and 21.

[225] on p. 51 of this research report.

[226] Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan, Joseph Conrad and The Modern Temper (Oxford : The Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 5.

[227] Heart of Darkness, p. 13.

[228] Heart of Darkness, p. 20.

[229] Heart of Darkness, p. 29.

[230] Heart of Darkness, p. 36.

[231] Heart of Darkness, p. 58.

> deaf as well. What was in there?... [S]omehow it didn't bring any image with it – no more than if I had been told an angel or a fiend was in there."[232]

Despite Marlow's efforts to find a "transcendental authority", he has the uneasy suspicion that "the deep truth" may be "imageless".[233] Indeed, his confusion about the essential nature of the metaphysical universe is obvious: he does not know whether it is accommodating or hostile to human aspirations. In fact, he raises two further possibilities. The transcendental realm may be indifferent to human hopes (since it is "perhaps ... deaf"), or it may not exist at all (in which case, the "dumbness" and the "deafness" would be the attributes of a purely material world). The epistemological crisis into which Marlow's enquiries lead him is perfectly illustrated in his later comment that life is "that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose."[234] As Heart of Darkness proceeds, it becomes increasingly clear that

> the promise of an ultimate significance, of illumination at the heart of darkness ... , is voided by the conspicuous absence of the object which would carry the meaning. It is belied and subverted by the impressionistic quality which reflects the utterly subjective, incommunicable, and ultimately undecipherable nature of reality. Marlow's language – the adjectives which blur rather than define, the scarcity of concrete noun-objects, and his frequent avowals of the inadequacy of words – is symptomatic of his predicament. His journey is a metaphysical quest which has no object to project itself onto: the spiritual drive, the 'notion', is there, but the once-blank space on the map, the ultimate destination and object, has now dissolved into the heart of darkness.[235]

Perhaps Marlow's difficulties stem from the manner in which he undertakes his quest. Unlike Ishmael, he is rather reluctant to seek respite from metaphysical enquiry by sometimes giving himself over to the wholehearted enjoyment of quotidian reality. The various approaches of Ahab, Ishmael and Marlow towards the Infinite are instructive. Both Ahab and Ishmael accept that a metaphysical realm exists, and are uncertain about its exact nature (since it presents itself to them as an undifferentiated, blank whiteness). Ishmael is able to accommodate himself to epistemological uncertainty, but Ahab tries to concretise and circumscribe the nature of the Infinite within the physical frame of Moby Dick. Marlow, on the other hand, perseveres in his search for a "transcendental authority", but can find nothing in the impenetrable darkness. His inability to locate the Absolute underscores Conrad's suspicion that Nietzsche was right in his

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[232] Heart of Darkness, p. 29.
[233] Shelley, "Prometheus Unbound", 2.4.116.
[234] Heart of Darkness, p. 69.

"conception of culture as a set of fragile illusions imperfectly overlaid on a chaotic, fragmented, and meaningless reality".[236] In a famous letter written to Cunninghame Graham in 1897, Conrad had portrayed the "meaningless reality" of the material world as the creation of an impersonal knitting machine:

> There is ... – let us say – a machine. It evolved itself (I am severely scientific) out of a chaos of scraps of iron and behold! it knits.... And the most withering thing is that the infamous thing has made itself; made itself without thought, without conscience, without foresight, without eyes, without heart.... It knits us in and it knits us out, it has knitted time, space, pain, death, corruption, despair and all the illusions – and nothing matters.[237]

The impersonal knitting machine calls to mind the two women (in Heart of Darkness) who sit in the Company's offices knitting black wool. Because Marlow presents them to us as symbols of the Fates, we are led to believe that they shape the destinies of all those with whom they come into contact. But, although Marlow hints in this way at a deterministic universe, he does not share the bleak view put forward by Conrad in the quotation that "nothing [really] matters". And so, when Marlow's own efforts to find a transcendental signified founder, he turns to Kurtz in the hope that *he* will be able to illuminate the metaphysical essence at the heart of darkness. However, Kurtz's abandonment of his high ideals and his surrender to savagery undermine whatever faith Marlow might have had in Kurtz's ability to reveal the ultimate truth. This faith is restored somewhat after Marlow successfully struggles with Kurtz's soul and witnesses the latter's remorse for his transgressive behaviour in the Congo. But Kurtz's final pronouncement ("The horror! The horror!"[238]) is terse and elliptic, and no-one can declare that he knows exactly what it means. Perhaps it is an outburst against the ways in which the temptations of the physical corrupt metaphysical potential. Alternatively, as I have suggested previously, it could be an expression of dismay accompanying the conviction that nothing exists beyond the physical world.

In a world characterised by the death of the Absolute, moral values cannot easily be sustained. For, as Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan points out (using the insights of Lezsek Kolakowski as a basis for her argument),

> [r]eality as such does not contain any ethical criteria or guidelines: it is amoral and indifferent. Morality is founded on the tension between what *is*

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[235] Erdinast-Vulcan, pp. 95-96.
[236] Erdinast-Vulcan, p. 4.
[237] Joseph Conrad to Cunninghame Graham, 20 December 1897, quoted in Erdinast-Vulcan, p. 17.

> and what *ought to be*. But any conception of 'what ought to be' refers to values which are, by definition, transcendent and non-empirical. Our criteria for ethical judgement are thus derived from a priori concepts (e.g. our view of 'human nature', 'justice', and other non-empirical entities), concepts which have little to do with the world as we find it.[239]

While I am in broad agreement with Kolakowski's theoretical position, I am of the opinion that he is a little too dogmatic in his assertion that (as Erdinast-Vulcan puts it) "all value systems are ... mythical or metaphysical."[240] Both utilitarianism and situation ethics (to give two examples) seek to relate moral praxis to the world as it actually is. It is clear that, in Heart of Darkness, Conrad attempts to adopt a similar approach: the novella implicitly denies the existence of a transcendental signified that would underwrite morality, yet Conrad repeatedly emphasises the importance of ethical behaviour in human affairs. This is evident not only from Marlow's criticism of the immoral behaviour of the Europeans in the Congo and his contempt for their hypocrisy and greed, but also from the anguish which he suffers as a result of his own lie to the Intended. While Conrad suspects that all real existence is of something material, he remains convinced that human beings need to believe in some kind of ideal (what Berthoud calls a "positive illusion"[241]). If they do not, they are likely to be driven to despair (since there is little point in living in a meaningless universe), or to find themselves having to accept, if not subscribe to, a world in which morality has no place, and in which the strong ride roughshod over the weak in the manner of a Kurtz.

I agree with Berthoud that, when Marlow speaks of "truth stripped of its cloak of time",[242] he is not referring to an idyllic primitivism such as that imagined by Rousseau, but to "a truth which antedates the truth that civilization has brought about"[243] – namely, the savagery which is inherent in all human beings, however civilized they may appear to be. Berthoud continues:

> Having acknowledged that the primitive is fundamental, [Marlow] at once sets up a contradictory truth: a man 'must meet that truth with his own true stuff – with his own inborn strength ... I hear, I admit, but I have a voice too, and for good and evil mine is the speech that cannot be silenced.'[244] In this view, civilization is thought of not merely as a given, but as something achieved – something deliberately constructed and upheld in defiance of an

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[238] Heart of Darkness, p. 68.
[239] Erdinast-Vulcan, pp. 86-87.
[240] Erdinast-Vulcan, p. 87.
[241] Berthoud, p. 63.
[242] Heart of Darkness, p. 38.
[243] Berthoud, p. 52.

> elemental nature... [T]he 'real' truth about man is not merely where he comes from, but where he is going to: his 'essential' nature is not found merely by uncovering his past but also by defining his future. Thus civilization ... should ... be regarded as a potential to be sustained, or a destination to be pursued.[245]

Here, Berthoud makes an important point: Marlow's response to the absence of a god-given authority is that man must *create* his own ideals, and then tailor his conduct to achieve them. Very clearly, Conrad does *not* believe that human beings should disregard the welfare of others in the pursuit of their own selfish aims. The criticism which Marlow levels at Kurtz, the Manager, and all the other exploiters in the Congo bears testimony to this, as does Conrad's endorsement of the moral values which were inculcated into him as a child:

> An impartial view of humanity in all its degrees of splendour or misery, together with a special regard for the rights of the unprivileged of this earth, not on any mystic ground but on the ground of simple fellowship and honourable reciprocity of services, was the dominant characteristic of the mental and moral atmosphere of the houses which sheltered my hazardous childhood: – matters of calm and deep conviction both lasting and consistent ...[246]

The demonstration of such solidarity with other human beings requires an ability to show "restraint in the gratification of [one's] various lusts".[247] The human heads on the stakes outside the Inner Station indicate that Kurtz was unable to exercise that sort of restraint. Although Marlow admits that he was momentarily "thrilled [by] the thought of his remote kinship with [the] wild and passionate uproar" of the Africans, he is able to resist the temptation to "go ashore for a howl and a dance".[248] What helps him to show the requisite restraint is the fact that he has to attend to navigating his boat past all the hazards in the Congo River. Faithfulness to the task which one has taken upon oneself is also one of the principles which Conrad holds dear: "Those who read me know my conviction that the world, the temporal world, rests on a very few simple ideas; so simple that they must be as old as the hills. It rests notably, among others, on the idea of Fidelity."[249]

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[244] Heart of Darkness, p. 38.
[245] Berthoud, pp. 53 and 60.
[246] Joseph Conrad, A Personal Record, quoted in Berthoud, p. 16.
[247] Heart of Darkness, p. 57.
[248] Heart of Darkness, p. 38. The howl and the dance are probably quite innocent activities, but Marlow associates them with savagery because he lacks the appropriate cultural frame of reference.
[249] Conrad, A Personal Record, quoted in Berthoud, pp. 16-17. I agree with Berthoud's assessment of what Conrad believes the concept of "fidelity" entails: "To be faithful is to make a lasting commitment. But what are the conditions

Conrad does not derive the "few simple ideas" which, he claims, form the basis of moral action from any religion. In A Personal Record, he says:

> I would fondly believe that [the] object [of creation] is purely spectacular: a spectacle for awe, love, adoration, or hate, if you like, but ... never for despair! Those visions, delicious or poignant, are a moral end in themselves... And the unwearied self-forgetful attention to every phase of the living universe reflected in our consciousness, may be our appointed task on this earth. A task in which fate has perhaps engaged nothing of us except our conscience, gifted with a voice in order to bear true testimony to the visible wonder ... of the sublime spectacle.[250]

Conrad expects us to be in awe of all that we see in the universe, and to be unselfish in our response to it. The espousal of such an approach will ensure that we obey the "few simple" precepts on which "the temporal world rests". Although the notion of "ideas" or precepts on which "the temporal world rests" implies an agreed value system, Berthoud is correct in saying that "moral action, as far as Conrad is concerned, is not justifiable in terms of abstract principle or revealed dogma, but in terms of *imaginative understanding.*" (My italics.)[251]

Despite the fact that Marlow refuses to succumb to the temptation of (what he regards as) savagery in the Congo, he is, nonetheless, disconcerted and disillusioned by his experiences there. His disillusionment may be discerned in his irritated reaction to the inhabitants of Brussels:

> "I found myself back in the sepulchral city resenting the sight of people hurrying through the streets to filch a little money from each other, to devour their infamous cookery, to gulp their unwholesome beer, to dream their insignificant and silly dreams. They trespassed upon my thoughts. They were intruders whose knowledge of life was to me an irritating pretence because I felt so sure they could not possibly know the things I knew."[252]

It is also evident from the quotation that Marlow is scornful of those who do not probe beneath the surface appearance of things. His narrative in Heart of Darkness is an exemplary refutation

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of a lasting commitment? The first is that the choice must be more than personal, for ... no permanence can be founded on the gratification of appetite or desire. The second is that it must be active, for merely private decisions have no substance until they have issued out in deeds." (Berthoud, p. 17.)

[250] Conrad, A Personal Record, quoted in Berthoud, p. 8.

[251] Berthoud, p. 9.

of such complacency, and an attempt to achieve an "imaginative understanding" of his journey into Africa. That journey was characterised by his inability to find answers to metaphysical questions, and it revealed an almost universal collapse of moral standards. However, Marlow does not allow his scepticism to degenerate into despair; his lie to the Intended is proof of this. It allows him to "survive tragic knowledge without incurring self-deception – that is to say, to affirm the values of the active life [of service to others] without blurring his sense of its underlying contradictions."[253] Marlow has discovered "that culture does not eradicate, but merely keeps in check, [man's] primitive instincts."[254] By keeping alive the Intended's faith in Kurtz, he vindicates the notion of service to others in terms of the "positive illusion"[255] that is needed for the preservation and advancement of civilization.

Perhaps one of the most important differences between Ishmael and Marlow, on the one hand, and Ahab and Kurtz, on the other, is the way in which they make sense of their experiences. Whereas Ahab and Kurtz try to make the world conform to the dictates of their minds (a model of domination), Ishmael and Marlow are willing to adapt their thinking to the demands which the world makes on them (a model of interaction). One of the implicit messages of both Moby-Dick and Heart of Darkness is that an arrogant interpretative inflexibility is destructive, while an adaptable and unselfish approach to interpretation dispels the darkness, and is truly life-enhancing.

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[252] Heart of Darkness, p. 70.
[253] Berthoud, p. 63.
[254] Berthoud, p. 60.
[255] Berthoud, p. 63.