

## The Symptoms of a Heart of Darkness

Martin Dempsey

PhD Candidate

School of Social Sciences, Humanities and Language

University of Westminster

United Kingdom (England)

In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad appears to construct a *symptomatic* narrative - a narrative which is, itself, intended to be read as a collection of symptoms indicating an underlying historical agent. This symptomatic approach may be read as extending through every aspect of the novella, from characterisation to Conrad's use of metaphor. Symptoms are subjective abnormalities in the status quo, observed or experienced indications of a change - the end point of a causal chain the measure of which may only be gauged (at least initially) by the extent and the severity of the symptoms it renders. As such, symptoms, by definition, cannot be directly measured and are therefore ineffable. As such, reading *Heart of Darkness* as a symptomatic text also entails the reading of the means by which Conrad depicts causal chains and that which is ineffable within the text.

While a 'symptom' need not apply directly to a physiological state or within the context of disease, there is a strong historical context of physiological symptoms associated with colonialism which were, at the time of the writing of *Heart of Darkness*, poorly understood and referred to (even within the medical community) using the language of symbolism. During the late nineteenth century the 'colonial's disease', or 'sleeping sickness' (known from the 1900s onwards as Congo trypanosomiasis) changed from an illness which mostly infected small pockets of individuals to an epidemic effecting the length of the Congo. The cause of the sickness was unknown, but its spread coincided absolutely with the arrival of colonial forces, and with colonial activities. Similarly, I want to suggest, many elements within *Heart of Darkness* correlate with this epidemic. Not only do many descriptions of individuals - and especially Kurtz himself - strongly correlate with the symptoms of the colonial's disease, Marlow's narrative itself becomes increasingly impressionistic and non-linear in a way that might be read as exhibiting such symptoms at the level of narrative voice and form itself. Indeed, Marlow makes frequent references to the dream-like quality of his experiences, going so far as to link these explicitly to infection: '...the dream-sensation that pervaded all my days at that time.

Perhaps I had a little fever too.<sup>1</sup> Marlow similarly references dreams in describing Kurtz's delirious ramblings as 'words heard in dreams, of phrases spoken in nightmares', and says of his own journey: 'I remained to dream the nightmare out to the end'.<sup>2</sup> Reading the novella in the context of this plague strongly suggests that these aspects of the text could well have been read as references to the sleeping sickness at the time of its publishing. The trypanosomiasis epidemic began in the southern Congo, and spread north along the banks of the Congo - just as Conrad describes Kurtz's own journey.<sup>3</sup> Infection rates of sleeping sickness greatly increased in line with the amount of traffic on the Congo River, and the river traffic, in turn, increased as large numbers of the Congolese were compelled to travel the river as conscripted porters, steamboat crew members or as conscripts into King Leopold's militia, the *Force Publique*. It appears, then, that as Conrad was writing before the disease was identified (and therefore was seen and experienced as more an unexplained 'phenomena' than an epidemic) he, too, was repeating a presumed causal relation between the *act* of colonialism and the disease's symptoms. Just as the sleeping sickness exists within the novella as a reoccurring, undefined and poorly understood phenomena, so too, then, does the administration of the Company appear. Indeed, the sickness and the administration symbolically function within the narrative as different manifestations (symptoms, if you will) of the same malaise - colonialism.

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<sup>1</sup> (Conrad, 1988, p. 43)

<sup>2</sup> (Conrad, 1988, pp. 65, 69)

<sup>3</sup> It was also known as 'the colonial disease' both in Africa and in Europe. The sleeping sickness continued to travel up the Congo River, resulting in an epidemic in Uganda in 1901.

A reading of *Heart of Darkness* which interprets the novella's symbolism as referencing the sleeping sickness, and the sickness as providing an over-arching metaphor for colonial power, is further supported by how the descriptions most indicative of the disease appear concurrently with images of administrative corruption. Congo trypanosomiasis is a parasitic disease akin to malaria, caused by protozoa (parasitic single celled organisms) transmitted by the tsetse fly. Its colloquial name is a reference to the illness' symptoms. The 'sleeping sickness' begins innocuously, with cold-like symptoms. As the disease progresses, the victim develops confusion, clumsiness, sleep disruption, cyclical fatigue, and mania, and as the disease worsens the victim ultimately succumbs to delirium, coma and death. The causative agent, the tsetse fly, remained identified until 1903 (by David Bruce), and effective drugs weren't developed until 1910.<sup>4</sup> Superstitions surrounding the disease attributed its origins to witchcraft, but the correlation between the arrival of westerners and the activities of Leopold's ABIR Congo Company could not have gone unnoticed.<sup>5</sup> Other monikers for the illness, apart from 'colonial's sickness' and 'sleeping sickness' included 'Congo sickness' and 'colonial sickness'. Just as the name 'Congo sickness' speaks to the correlation between proximity with the river and the illness, the idea of it being the '*colonial* sickness' - rather than the '*colonial's* sickness' - is noteworthy for suggesting the *act* of colonialism as itself causal.

The consequences of the sleeping sickness are also interesting in terms of the response to its successful identification. In 1903 a team from the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine investigated sleeping sickness. Subsequently, the School recommended that the Belgians instigate a response composed of 'a score of administrative measures designed to regulate various African activities in order to control the incidence and spread of sleeping sickness'.<sup>6</sup> This speaks to the manner in which the colonial powers viewed the Congo - as something to be dominated through administration, and in which administration (including medical administration) functioned as an extension and continuation of military force. It also implies as a western colonial belief that insofar as it is possible for a phenomena to be identified and systematised (even without full understanding), it could be the subject of administration, and thereby controlled. This historical context appears to speak to the symbolic and moral ambiguity at the centre of *Heart of Darkness*. Indeed, it might be suggested that Conrad was writing against this implicit ideological and political backdrop of systemic attempts to control without understanding, and was therefore attempting to depict a scenario which could not be dismissed with the presumption that 'administrative measures designed to regulate' could 'control the incidence and spread' of the poorly misunderstood barriers to imperial expansion. Just as the cause of Kurtz's apparent illness, and the multiple victims in the 'grove of death', appear to be overt references to the sleeping sickness (without ever being *systematically* described or identified as such), so the administration itself is never *systematically* described. Indeed, within *Heart of Darkness* to be a part of the administration is associated with its own set of symptoms, while, at the same time, the symptoms of colonialism also effect the Congo itself, manifesting in, for example, the grove of death, Kurtz's madness, and, indeed, most famously, 'The horror! The horror!' of Kurtz's last words.

In this way the administration functions as a metaphor for the disease, while the disease functions, in turn, as a metaphor for both the affliction of exploitation in the Congo and the European lust for power. Both the apparent illness and social corruption pervade the events depicted as manifestations of a shared culpable influence, but remain inexplicitly undefined, and therefore outside the remit of institutional, 'administrative measures designed to regulate'. Kurtz, as perceived by 'western eyes' may be seen as a victim of the illness (both trypanosomiasis and colonialism itself), whose condition appears to be a physical manifestation of internal corruption - as if Kurtz himself is being consumed by the 'sickness' of the colonial project. Of course, Conrad is never overt in identifying Kurtz's infection with the sleeping sickness (it is not named), but this was, perhaps, due to the fact that the sickness had yet to be medically codified as a disease, its symptoms and causal agent (the tsetse fly and parasitic infestation) yet to be defined. If Conrad's choice of a undefined and poorly understood malady was therefore deliberate, designed to enhance the sense of a confused attempt to impose order upon a misunderstood phenomena, it appears to be clear that Conrad intended it to reflect deeper problems with the colonial project.

The seeds of this individual realisation of systemic corruption are anticipated by Marlow's conversation with the alienist doctor:

<sup>4</sup> Lyons M: African sleeping sickness: an historical review. *International Journal of STD and AIDS* 1991, **2**:20-25.

<sup>5</sup> Medicine News Online, "African sleeping sickness shrouded in superstition" by Martin Zoutane Daba (AFP) – Jun 10, 2012 - <http://medicinenewsonline.com/18365/african-sleeping-sickness-shrouded-in-superstition-afp/>

<sup>6</sup> Imperial Medicine and Indigenous Societies, Ed: David Arnold, Manchester University Press 1988, Manchester p.106  
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"Ever any madness in your family? ... I have a little theory which you Messieurs who go out there must help me to prove. This is my share in the advantages my country shall reap from the possession of such a magnificent dependency. The mere wealth I leave to others."<sup>7</sup>

Again, it is unclear here as to whether the doctor's 'theory' refers to a disease (of either pathogenic, deficiency, hereditary or physiological causes) or simply to the nature of the colonial enterprise. The phrasing of his question, however, indicates that it pertains to madness. Thus, the doctor's use of the collective term 'Messieurs' suggests it is the colonial activities that are the potential source of some form of personal, institutional or even a systemic 'devolution', foreshadowing Marlow's experiences.

Conrad's use of symbolism and metaphor is often presented in terms of being symptomatic. Marlow's encounter with the knitting ladies, the Doctor and the Man o' War are all presented as having a symbolic significance which Marlow himself indicates towards and attempts to identify. As such these are examples of Conrad's 'compounding' symbolism - layering individually symbolic instances upon one another - until it is as if the reader has been presented with enough evidence to draw conclusions as to a unified 'signified', or 'cause' for the metaphors. In this way, Conrad's use of symbolism directly mirrors that of a series of symptoms from which the reader is invited to draw a diagnosis. The first of the Company's functionaries Marlow encounters, the knitting ladies, appear to symbolically reference the Norns (the mythic Viking weavers of fate), as they 'seemed to know all ... about me ... seemed uncanny and fateful'.<sup>8</sup> These 'Norns' are referenced much later within the text, in book three, as 'a most improper person to be sitting at the other end of such an affair', unifying the final section and reiterating the sense that the events described are united by more than Marlow's personal experience, via the influence of the Administration.<sup>9</sup> Leaving the Chairman's office, Marlow is met by a secretary ('with an air of taking an immense part in all my sorrows') who has 'some clerk' lead Marlow to the doctor.<sup>10</sup> Marlow notes that 'there must have been clerks in the business' but this fact, the nature of their activity, their level of complicity or even the extent of their awareness of the true nature of the Company is less important to Marlow than his impression that 'the house was still as a house in a city of the dead', a fact conveyed through his omission of these details from his narrative.<sup>11</sup>

The doctor is described as an 'alienist' and a philologist, and as attempting to record the mental impact of serving in the Congo upon the Company's agents. Despite this goal, the doctor is depicted as lacking even a base level of empathy, and is apparently blind to the 'mental changes' his questions would provoke within those he quizzes, or, indeed, the effects of telling his 'subject' how 'the mental changes' will affect the validity of any conclusions reached through interacting with those under his 'observation'.<sup>12</sup> Marlow's assertion in conversation with the doctor is that he, Marlow, is not 'typical' ('if I were I wouldn't be talking like this with you') is dismissed with the advice to avoid 'irritation more than the sun'.<sup>13</sup> This suggestion reveals the extent to which the doctor, who presumes to be able to gauge the effect of acting for the Company upon a given individual, is effectively blind to the realities Marlow will encounter. These initial encounters with the agents of the Administration indicate to the reader that the constituent members of the Administration are wilfully blind to its inherently exploitative nature, in the same manner as is Marlow's aunt who sees Marlow, as a new employee of the Administration, as 'an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle'.<sup>14</sup> This wilful ignorance combines with the narrative style in which the primary means by which the reader will experience the influence of the Administration is via Marlow's impressions, rather than via any explicit description of its activities or edicts. These allusions to institutional blindness occur throughout the novella, and continue to expand in their implications to incorporate even those entities presented as beyond the remit of the Company. Such is the case, for example, with the French man-of-war blindly 'firing into a continent'.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> (Conrad, 1988, p. 15)

<sup>8</sup> (Conrad, 1988, p. 14)

<sup>9</sup> (Conrad, 1988, p. 64)

<sup>10</sup> (Conrad, 1988, p. 14)

<sup>11</sup> (Conrad, 1988, p. 14)

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p.76

<sup>13</sup> (Conrad, 1988, p. 15)

<sup>14</sup> (Conrad, 1988, p. 15)

<sup>15</sup> (Conrad, 1988, p. 17)

Marlow's sense that 'there was a touch of insanity in the proceeding' is jarringly paired with the banal motive for this encounter, 'her [the man of war's] letters', which Marlow's ship had been charged with delivering. These letters, and the statement (which appears in the text in parentheses) 'the men in that lonely ship were dying of fever', suggests that the Administration has itself an infectious quality, or that the man-of-war is a symptom of a common illness The Company itself is manifesting through its agents.<sup>16</sup>

The unifying influence of the first person account given by Marlow provides the reader with the sense of a common cause behind the 'high and just proceedings', which Marlow himself encourages, as when he compares this influence to 'a flabby pretending weak eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly', and emphasises a common lack of rationality in the scenarios he encounters ('a vast, artificial hole somebody had been digging... the purpose of which I found impossible to divine' <sup>17</sup>). This sense of 'pitiless folly' is linked, in Marlow's mind, with an event 'several months later and a thousand miles farther'. This allusion to an event, at first sight, appears to be directed towards Kurtz, but the inclusion of a reference to distance ('a thousand miles farther') suggests that Marlow is, in fact, referring to his encounter with Kurtz's intended, and his own apologetics for the colonial project. If the reader is intended to perceive the Company as the primary manifestation of a deeper institutional malaise, here we see the resultant complicity that results from a failure to actively oppose it. Despite this impression being grounded in the style of Marlow's narration, the *clearest* expression of this phenomenon remains the Company, and in order for this collective impression of the Company to form, it is in turn the Company's agents which provide an array of various forms or manifestations of this 'pitiless folly'.

Of course, the 'pitiless folly' of the exploitation of the Congo is also depicted via its direct influence upon the environment and its native inhabitants, and it continues to be Marlow's narration which merges these atrocities into one amorphous activity - again with a presumed common cause. Marlow's description of the 'grove of death', which he visits immediately before meeting the chief accountant for the first time, is of the afflicted occupants appearing as 'black shadows of disease and starvation lying confusedly in the greenish gloom'. Marlow describes one sufferer who:

...had tied a bit of white worsted round his neck - Why? Where did he get it. Was it a badge - an ornament - a charm - a propitiatory act? Was there any idea at all connected with it. It looked starling round his black neck this bit of white thread from beyond the seas.

Although, as previously stated, the causative agent and vector were not identified until 1903, the first western account of the illness to which this appears to refer was published in 1803 (by Thomas Winterbottom), and the symptoms of sleeping sickness were well known, if poorly understood, within the Congo. The physical description of the afflicted former workers matches symptoms displayed by sufferers of sleeping sickness, and, if it is the case that the thread were 'worsted', as Marlow recounts, this item adds to the symbolic impression that the young man is being choked by colonial culture. As far as the young man's situation is concerned, infection by the sleeping sickness combined with failing health due to overwork and cultural invasion, are, in effect, composite manifestations of the same processes behind Marlow's own situation.

Reading the novella with consideration to the history of Congo trypanosomiasis, it seems clear that Conrad intended his depictions of Kurtz's sickness to match the symptoms of an ailment akin to sleeping sickness (*a* colonial disease, rather than *the* 'colonial disease'), which in turn appears to have been intended as an analogy for the corruption of the colonial project (rather than, for example, a deliberate attempt to depict a specific pathology). The increasingly 'diffuse' nature of Marlow's descriptions of Kurtz's mental state, do indeed conform to the progressive nature of the mental deterioration caused by African trypanosomiasis. The progressive mental deterioration of the actual disease trypanosomiasis, which leads to coma and death, appears to be melded, however, with what is also an actual physical dissipation of self, the last physical description of Kurtz being of 'a vision of greyness without form filled with physical pain and a careless contempt for the evanescence of all things - even of pain itself'.<sup>18</sup> Again, this is starkly reminiscent of the description of the company director - the 'impression of pale plumpness in a frock-coat' which emerged from behind 'a heavy writing-desk'.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> (Conrad, 1988, p. 17)

<sup>17</sup> (Conrad, 1988, p. 17)

<sup>18</sup> (Conrad, 1988, p. 69)

<sup>19</sup> (Conrad, 1988, p. 14)

Just as the company director has no real identity within Marlow's narrative outside of the Company itself (and is a being effectively subsumed into its role), so too does Kurtz's true identity remain contentious and unclear throughout the remainder of the narrative. In fact, every character Marlow talks to about Kurtz gives a contradictory impression of him. Conrad strongly implies that Kurtz was seen by the tribe as a supernatural entity: 'unspeakable rites, which - as far as I reluctantly gathered from what I heard at various times - were offered up to him'.<sup>20</sup> This is foreshadowed early in Marlow's account in his description of his predecessor, the Dane Fresleven, who was stabbed and killed by a native. Marlow was able to visit Fresleven's remains, as the 'supernatural being had not been touched'.<sup>21</sup> This anecdote serves to foreshadow the revelation of the native's idolatry of Kurtz, and it heightens the reader's awareness of how Marlow is interpreting the events and imposing his own narrative to explain them. It is Marlow's interpretation that the natives view the colonisers as gods - it is equally plausible that the natives feared corruption.

Similarly, with Kurtz, it could be that the natives were attempting to appease Kurtz, or even to guard against his tyranny. Marlow tells of how, when leaving to ferry Kurtz away from his camp, 'three men plastered with bright red earth from head to foot strutted to and fro restlessly'. Again, Marlow imposes his own symbolic context to explain the events, describing the scene as 'some satanic litany', envisioning the natives as perceiving the ferry as a 'fierce river-demon'.<sup>22</sup> It was common practice for natives to plaster a red clay mixed to a paste with oil over the body to protect against tsetse fly, a tradition which Marlow was, necessarily, ignorant of and thereby unable to separate pragmatism from superstition.<sup>23</sup> Conrad allows it to be clear to the reader that this inability by Marlow and the colonials - the failure to differentiate between superstitious and efficacious practices - extends to the practices of the Colonials themselves. Indeed, Conrad appears unwavering in this representation, as if to implicate *himself*, as author, equally in this judgment - and by implication, the reader and the whole colonial project.

The sources of evidence for what Kurtz is like in action, which Marlow takes as far more accurate than the accounts given by the Company agents, are the artefacts which Kurtz has left behind: the heads on poles, the commissioned report, the painting of the blindfolded lady. These artefacts are interpreted by Marlow as revealing truths about the practical effects of colonialism and state-funded capitalist exploitation which resonate with Marlow's own experiences (regardless of Kurtz's intention for creating them). Marlow's encounters with Kurtz in which they converse leads him to describe Kurtz as not 'a lunatic', and that 'his intelligence was perfectly clear - concentrated... his soul was mad.' Kurtz's final words, 'the horror', for Marlow 'had a candour... a vibrating note of revolt in its whisper, it had the appalling face of a glimpsed truth', 'thrown to me from a soul as translucently pure as a cliff of crystal'.<sup>24</sup> This clarity is an evidential clarity, in stark contrast to the presumed knowledge that the Company's agents purport to possess regarding both the Company and Kurtz himself. The accountant for whom Kurtz is 'satisfactory' and the Manager for whom Kurtz is first 'a visionary' and later 'unsound', both lack Marlow's willingness to listen to Kurtz on his own terms. However, the final judge as to the realities of Kurtz's activities, the state of his mind or the cause of Kurtz's physical decline, is the reader. Conrad's apparent intention is to provide the reader with the second hand experience of a fictional encounter with an individual who embodied the logical conclusion of the 'criminality of inefficiency and pure selfishness when tackling the civilizing work in Africa'.<sup>25</sup> This desire to express an 'African nightmare feeling'<sup>26</sup> strongly suggests that Kurtz is merely the human face of the intended focus of the narrative: the underlying corruption of which the novella itself is a symptom.

## References

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- D'Arcy, P. F. (1999). *Laboratory of the Nile: A History of the Wellcome Tropical Research Laboratories*. Binghamton: Pharmaceutical Heritage Editions.

<sup>20</sup> (Conrad, 1988, p. 50)

<sup>21</sup> (Conrad, 1988, p. 13)

<sup>22</sup> (Conrad, 1988, p. 66)

<sup>23</sup> For more on these practices see: (D'Arcy, 1999, p. 201)

<sup>24</sup> (Conrad, 1988, pp. 69, 70)

<sup>25</sup> (Extracts from Correspondence, letter to Mr Blackwood, 13th December 1893, Conrad, 1988, p. 201)

<sup>26</sup> (Extracts from Correspondence, letter to Mr Blackwood, 8th February 1899, Conrad, 1988, p. 207)