

Marlow as the Buddha in *Heart of Darkness*

Joseph Conrad's 1899 novella *Heart of Darkness* has sparked many debates about race, knowledge, and imperialism. However, a small but important detail seems to have been overlooked in many of these conversations. Charlie Marlow, a dynamic character and the narrator for most of the text, is mentioned several times as a Buddha. His previous journey to Africa puts Marlow in a unique position from the very beginning. On this trip, he witnessed brutal and unusual sites, unfamiliar behaviors, and foreign ways of life. This exposure transforms Marlow's way of thinking and leads him to believe that a higher sense of knowledge was revealed to him through this rare experience. It is this harsh expedition of suffering and revelation that earns Marlow the title of Buddha. Conrad uses Marlow to convey the tensions between the Eastern and Western worlds through his position as Buddha, which entails his higher understanding of the symbolic darkness, skepticism of the so-called civilizing mission in Africa, and his ability to lead others through their personal journeys of reflection.

Near the beginning, the frame narrator says, "Marlow sat cross-legged right aft, leaning against the mizzenmast. He had sunken cheeks, a yellow complexion, a straight back, an ascetic aspect, and with his arms dropped, the palms of hands outwards, resembled an idol" (3). He is described as a figure of higher knowledge, but the text provides no history or credentials explaining why he would have received this prestigious and respected label. His appearance is neither African nor European. Aside from his Buddha-like posture, the words "ascetic" and "idol" suggest a spiritual aspect. The usage of ascetic, meaning to practice self-denial and restraint from indulgence, puts Marlow in a unique category from the very beginning, set apart by both his appearance and his implied consciousness of the world. A few pages later, he is mentioned again: "'Mind,' he began again, lifting one arm from the elbow, the palm of the hand

outwards, so that with his legs folded before him, he had the pose of a Buddha preaching in European clothes and without a lotus-flower” (6). This quote again contrasts Marlow with those around him, specifically mentioning his traces of European origin while striking an Eastern pose. Several times Conrad shines a light on Marlow, hinting towards his involvement with the spiritual realm but simultaneously mentioning his ties to the Western world. However, the focus of my argument is on what Marlow has experienced in his lifetime to deem him worthy to be the Buddha as well as how this position allows him to interpret the events depicted in *Heart of Darkness*.

Siddhartha Gautama, the real Buddha, was born into the warrior/ruler class and was “[shielded] from experiencing any of the disappointments and disillusionments of the world” (Hawkins 37). It was only when he left the comfort of his home and family that he was exposed to human suffering, and began the quest for discovery and the status of Buddha. This is similar to Marlow’s experience because, although not royalty, Marlow was privileged enough to have been born into a middle-class European family. Human suffering of that level was revealed to Marlow only once he visited Africa for himself.

A contributing factor to Marlow’s spirituality is his ability to detach himself from time and the physical world. The first quote spoken from Marlow is “And this also, has been one of the dark places of the earth” (5), insinuating that he might know something more about their surroundings than what is perceived at first sight. Further on, he says:

I was thinking of very old times, when the Romans first came here, nineteen hundred years ago – the other day . . . Light came out of this river since – you say Knights? Yes, but it is like a running blaze on a plain, like a flash of lightning in the clouds. We live in the flicker – may it last as long as the old earth keeps rolling! But darkness was here

yesterday. (5)

In this introduction of Marlow, he removes himself from the physical world by discussing the timeline of the dynamic between Africa and the Western world as if he has been there all along and witnessed it all for himself. It seems that he has been to Africa many times, rather than just one previous time. This connects Marlow to Buddhism through the concepts of reincarnation and rebirth. Buddhist monk Ven. Master Hsing Yun defines rebirth as “the constant state of flux, renewal and metabolic change that we experience physically (birth, old age, sickness, and death) and in our minds (the forming, existing, changing, and ceasing of thoughts)”. This relates specifically to when Marlow equates “nineteen hundred years ago” and “the other day,” and when he reiterates that “darkness was here yesterday,” as if little to no time has passed at all. However, it is impossible for Marlow to have experienced this darkness personally unless he had been present in a previous life. Marlow reminds those around him with these peculiar statements that their awe of Africa should be humbled by what has occurred there before – even if they had not seen it for themselves – and by what is currently happening.

Marlow is suspicious of European colonization and its capitalist goals. He contributes his opinion on the matter throughout the novel, but the first glimpse of it is early on:

It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind – as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness. The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much.

(7)

Marlow’s experience with Africa made him aware of the effects of imperialism, something that was not seen firsthand by many people around the world. He has come to realize what is truly

happening, rather than turning a blind eye to it as so many Europeans did. “At an explicit level, his is the story of the tension between the ideal of colonialism and its embodied reality of horror” (Alpert 16). Marlow understands the disconnect between Europeans’ intentions of acquiring Africa for capitalist gains versus the disguise of obligation to teach the natives as a justification for the Europeans’ unethical actions. Aware of not only what is taking place in Africa, Marlow also has come to realize who Europeans truly are and what horror they are capable of, including realizing this capability in himself. A Buddha is “the one who has woken up,” while “the mass of humanity . . . are asleep in the sense that they pass through their lives never knowing and seeing the world ‘as it is’” (Gethin 8). In other words, they are “someone who has overcome the darkness or existential ignorance and awakened from illusion or delusion” (Schmidt-Leukel 19). This “delusion” of superiority that the Europeans have is not always easy to confront – which is why so few ever can do so – but this is what sets Marlow apart.

Marlow acknowledges this notion of European ignorance near the end of the novella when he returns to Europe once again:

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 . . . I had no particular desire to enlighten them. (70)

This quote addresses the elements of knowledge that Marlow is talking about: Africa, all it holds, and its ability to spark such deep self-reflection if one is willing to accept it. The last sentence seems to contradict the spirit of the Buddha, who wishes to teach those around him. However,

there is another sense in which a parallel can be drawn between Marlow and Siddhartha Gautama: “After the enlightenment the Buddha is reluctant to teach others, thinking that what he has discovered is too profound and subtle for others to understand” (Shaw 3). There is evidence of this in the passage above, specifically when Conrad writes, “I felt so sure they could not possibly know the things I knew” (70).

Near the end of the novella, Kurtz whispers his famous last words: “The horror! The horror!” (69). What follows next is darkness and Marlow’s illness and his takeaway from Kurtz’s death: “Droll thing life is – that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose. The most you can hope from it is some knowledge of yourself – that comes too late – a crop of unextinguishable regrets” (69). Here Marlow claims that the best outcome that can come from a human life is an understanding of who you are, and to be satisfied with whoever that may be.

Although controversy surrounds what Kurtz’s final words mean, they are clearly some sort of epiphany. Kurtz, in the final moments of his life, reflected on all that he done in his lifetime – the good and the terrible. Marlow suggests that Kurtz’s consciousness comes just too late and is not enough to save him. Kurtz, in this sense, serves as a symbol for power-hungry Europeans whose fulfilled desires will come at the cost of their demise. Marlow is distinguished from Kurtz by having a clear grasp on the consequences of his own actions and the acknowledgment of power in moderation.

Marlow and other Europeans traveled to Africa in search of capital through resources and exploitation of natives. What Marlow comes to acquire, however, is a different, more valuable capital in the form of knowledge and ultimate understanding. Through multiple taxing ventures, Marlow struggles with whether to align himself with Western ideals. On the surface, Marlow acts as a knowledgeable guide and storyteller for his crew members, but underneath he primarily

functions as a spiritual medium, an overseer, and an educator to convey the reality of the clash between the Western and non-Western worlds to those who have not yet experienced it.

The images of Marlow as the Buddha and his meditation behave as bookends in *Heart of Darkness*, appearing on both the first and last pages. The final page of the novella says, “Marlow ceased and sat apart, indistinct and silent, in the pose of a meditating Buddha. Nobody moved for a time” (77). The placement of these references, their deeper meanings, and the significance of Marlow as a character support the idea that although *Heart of Darkness* has much to say about the development of imperialism, it is also a novella about enlightenment, realization, and reflection as a result of the changes in Africa.

Works Cited

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