

# The Quest Motif in the *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad and in *Le Regard du Roi* (*The Radiance of the King*) by Camara Laye

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## Abstract

This essay will compare the quest motif as expressed by the two protagonists of *Heart of Darkness* and *Le Regard du Roi (The Radiance of the King)*. Both novels are set in Africa and the main characters are Westerners with differing kinds of prejudice toward Africans and non-European cultures. Both protagonists undergo moral and spiritual transformations through their experiences in Africa, coming to reassess their attitudes toward non-Western cultures and the nature of evil in the world. In different ways, both characters evolve into higher states of awareness through their experiences in Africa. This essay traces the stages they experience in their quest for knowledge and redemption. Although Christian, Islamic and native cultural values are alluded to in these novels, it should be clear that these are blended together in unique ways, especially by Camara, so the correspondences are of a broad symbolic nature and not specific to the numerous nuances of diverse Christian sects.

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902) is one of the most controversial works of colonial/postcolonial literature. It has been lauded as a masterpiece and vilified as a work of unrepentant racism. Both European and African scholars have weighed in on both sides of the controversy. While most critics agree that its message is virulently anti-colonialist, the Nigerian writer, Chinua Achebe, charges that Conrad was an incorrigible racist. One thing not disputed is that the novel is a multi-layered quest in which the protagonist Marlow is seeking more than a man on his journey to the mysterious Kurtz. By way of contrast, the African novelist, Camara Laye, writing during the final phase of colonial rule in his country of French Guinea, depicts another kind of quest in his masterpiece *Le Regard du Roi (The Radiance of the King)*, published in 1954. Yet his tone and conclusion differ so strikingly from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* that we might call this novel *Heart of Light*.

The comparison of these two novels reflects much more than the considerable fascination each of them has held for readers since their dates of publication. They reveal visionary, futuristic worlds of the colonial and postcolonial experience and their representations in literature. Although Conrad writes with a European perspective of a European power's exercise of colonialism, one should not forget that he grew up Polish in a family that suffered terribly under Russian colonial rule. One could say that he represents the experience of having been a citizen of both colonized and colonizing nations (Poland and Britain respectively). Camara is, of course, an African writer, drawing an imaginary

portrait of his own people in his own voice (though in a language borrowed from the colonizers).<sup>1&2</sup> Among African writers of his era, he was unique in his avoidance of the dichotomies often found in the postcolonial tendency to separate the world into black and white, European and non-European, colonialist/colonized, the Christian and non-Christian, the privileged/the other etc.<sup>3</sup>

To complicate matters, neither *Heart of Darkness* nor *The Radiance of the King* can be called “typical” of their respective milieu or *genre*. They are unique in their own rights, and express themselves very differently in respect to authorial voice, social satire, philosophical preoccupations, and the thorny matter of “universal” human values.<sup>4</sup> The story in *Heart of Darkness* is delivered through two narrators, but the telling of most of the tale is left to Marlow. He is a novice employee of a French trading company that has dispatched him to Africa on a journey down the river Congo to replace a captain who has been killed in a skirmish with the natives. His ostensible mission is to facilitate the company’s greed for ivory, which has been delivered in great quantities by a man called Kurtz. The quest for Kurtz, and what he stands for, is the central theme of the novel, and it is expressed, first, through the nature of Marlow’s journey, thwart as it is with danger both to his physical and mental survival. Underlying this quest is a moral and spiritual dimension in which Marlow eventually understands that he is confronting an abyss of absolute evil in the demented figure of Kurtz, who has become corrupted by his complicity in the systemic evil of the colonialist enterprise. But this realization comes too late for Kurtz and in a sense too late for Marlow, who will remain intimately bound to Kurtz through the lie he tells to protect the latter’s memory.

*The Radiance of the King* has an altogether different, yet no less strange, beginning. The main character, Clarence, comes to Africa for dubious reasons and has ended up on the street totally without resources, due to his reckless gambling debts. He is deluded in assuming that skin color alone will enable his survival. Like Marlow, he assumes an air of racial superiority toward Africans, but unlike Marlow, he has no authority over them. They do not harm him, but either ignore him with an air of disdain, or take pity on him (to a certain degree) and shield him from serious harm. In the opening scene Clarence is making his way through a crowd of Africans, who are awaiting the arrival of the King with great anticipation. Clarence has no thought but to solicit the King for employment purely on the grounds that as a white man, he surely will be needed for some kind of unspecified work. He has no chance of getting near enough to the King even to plead his case, but in the effort to do so, he encounters an old beggar and two mischievous boys, Nagoa and Noaga, who offer to assist him. The almost identical names of the two boys suggest they are interchangeable parts, thereby suggesting that to Clarence all Africans may be considered interchangeable. Though the boys and the beggar are not without ulterior motives, it is through their assistance that Clarence embarks on his multi-leveled quest: first, the one of

physical survival in an unfamiliar and threatening land, and second, his spiritual journey to the King, and through him, the recovery of his humanity.

One of the significant motifs underlying both novels is the nature of truth and falsehood, which implies both the deception of others and the deception of self. In *Heart of Darkness* Marlow establishes early on that this will be a central concern of the novel when he first inquires about the mysterious Kurtz and is told that he is a “prodigy,” “an emissary of progress,” and so forth. He then tells us:

I would not have gone so far as to fight for Kurtz but I went for him near enough to lie. You know, I hate, detest and can't bear a lie, not because I am straighter than the rest of us but simply because it appalls me. There is a taint of death, a flavour of mortality in lies—which is exactly what I hate and detest in the world—what I want to forget. (Conrad, 172)

The deception underlying *The Radiance of the King* is less overtly insidious, but it is also an equally essential element of the story, because Clarence's journey to salvation depends on his uncovering his own blindness to reality and human worth. To complicate the issue of truth and falsehood further, the essentially realistic mode of narrative is occasionally confounded with Kafkaesque, surrealistic scenes that neither the reader nor the characters can interpret with certainty. Early on in the narrative we are confronted with the first of such scenes that cast doubt on the veracity of both the boys and the beggar, as well as put in question Clarence's own grasp of what is real and what is merely imagined. When Clarence hears (or imagines he hears) the screams of men allegedly having their throats cut for their loyalty (or disloyalty) to the King, the boys encourage the perception/delusion but with contradictory views. Then the beggar returns and blames the boys for what he claims is Clarence's delusion:

“Are you out of your mind?” said the beggar. “What's all this about vassals having their throats cut?”

“Do you suppose I didn't hear their screams?”

“The screams?” said the beggar.

He suddenly turned on the two boys.

“What have you been telling the white man?” he asked sternly.

The two boys hung their heads.

“There was no need for them to tell me anything,” said Clarence. “I've got ears.”

But the beggar took no notice of his interruption.

“If I catch you two making up stories again,” he said to the two boys, “I'll tan the hide off your backsides with my stick!”....

“And you mean to say you've swallowed it all?” the beggar asked Clarence.

(Camara, 36-37)

At this point one might believe that all this was some sort of induced hallucination

engineered by the boys. However, additional doubt is cast on the matter when the beggar suddenly exhibits unexplained anxiety at being in the vicinity of the palace after dark. In numerous scenes throughout the novel Clarence is tricked, lied to and deluded, and though he often suspects his companions of deception, he fails to notice the most egregious stratagem—which requires the collaboration of the whole village.

Both protagonists—Marlow and Clarence—encounter Africa through lenses obscured by ignorance, racial prejudice and sensory confusion. Marlow is there as an employee of a French trading company. Though he is telling the story after the fact, his tale is murky to say the least, and his mission is foreshadowed with symbols of mortal danger, exemplified by imagery suggestive of the ancient Greek Fates and similar references. He acknowledges that he received his appointment due to the murder of a previous boat captain, whom Marlow is being hired to replace. Although it is clear that Marlow himself harbors racist attitudes toward the Africans, he also does not share his aunt's naïve and condescending comments about the "civilizing mission" of the colonialists. Right from the start, Marlow realizes that the real objective of colonization is profit. It is also interesting to note that the first pages of the novel draw a revealing analogy between the early years of Britain as a Roman colony and the current situation with European colonialist ventures abroad. Referring to England he says: "And this also...has been one of the dark places of the earth." (Conrad, 138) Although this does not absolve Marlow of racism, it is significant that the darkness he alludes to in Africa is not purely, or even primarily, racial in nature, and he (and even more clearly, Conrad) leaves no doubt that this is one of the excuses Europeans used, even if at times unconsciously, to rationalize their exploitative conduct toward non-European cultures around the world. Presented as sitting in the pose of the Buddha, he proclaims:

They were no colonists; their administration was merely a squeeze, and nothing more, I suspect. They were conquerors and for that you only want brute force—nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others...The conquest of the earth, which mostly means taking it away from those who have a slightly different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. (Conrad, 140-141)

Once Marlow gets to Africa, he seems lost in an incomprehensible world. Africa is inhabited by dark, enigmatic men of whom he has neither understanding nor previous experience, and many of the scenes are set in the darkness of night, or on the blinding whiteness of the fog-shrouded Congo, so that the reader is bombarded by shadowy, ghostlike figures, and sounds, above all, of the natives shouting, screaming, and speaking in a language that to Marlow sounds like unintelligible babble, perhaps sub-human. He makes frequent references to primeval states, pre-civilized humans, as in this obviously uninformed

remark: "They still belonged to the beginnings of time—had no inherited experience to teach them as it were." (Conrad, 193) Even when Marlow presents for his audience what would seem to be indications of moral restraint, he remains baffled, as if the behavior of the natives could not possibly be interpreted as it would probably be if applied to Europeans. He is filled with wonder as to why the self-proclaimed cannibals on the boat, in their extreme condition of hunger, do not turn on the greatly outnumbered white crew members, kill, and eat them:

Yes; I looked at them as you would on any human being, with a curiosity of their impulses, motives, capacities, weaknesses, when brought to the test of an inexorable physical necessity. Restraint! What possible restraint? Was it superstition, disgust, patience, fear—or some kind of primitive honor?...Restraint! I would just as soon have expected restraint from a hyena prowling amongst corpses of a battlefield. But there was the fact facing me—the fact dazzling, to be seen, like foam on the depths of the sea, like a ripple on an unfathomable enigma, a mystery greater... (Conrad, 195)

Although he claims to look upon the natives as any other human being, his other comments belie this. Marlow is so disabled by his prejudices that he cannot see that when the "savages" actually behave in a "civilized" manner, and that hunger or even cannibalism does not inevitably lead to murder, he is baffled. As he puts it, he expects the natives to behave like hyenas, but some sort of "primitive honour" may be preventing them from doing so. Even the possibility of this is beyond him. Yet by the end of the novel, Marlow's own honor will have been greatly tested, and despite his prejudices, he shows he is capable of compassion and admiration for Africans, as we see in the scene of his shock and grief over the death of his helmsman, a native for whom he feels responsibility and comradeship. Marlow's attitudes toward the natives are complex, evolving and often contradictory. Above all, despite his prejudices and naïve collaboration in the colonial enterprise, he begins with doubts about both, and ends with a feeling of abhorrence over what he has seen and done.

In *The Radiance of the King*, Clarence's ability to interpret what he encounters in Africa is even more flawed than Marlow's, partly because he is alone and without a support system, with the exception of the few Africans who agree to assist him. His only thought is that because he is white, all he needs to do is to meet the King, who will employ him in some unknown capacity. He has no work skills, no experience in Africa, no knowledge of local languages etc. In short, his certainty that meeting the King alone will ensure his employment is evidently absurd, and Camara is clearly parodying white ignorance and racial arrogance. When Clarence meets the old beggar and two wisecracking boys, the roles of white master and black servant are reversed, since the beggar holds both the knowledge and the power. So Clarence begins his journey with one mission in mind—to meet the King whom he is sure will confirm his sense of superiority. When he fails to meet the King, he becomes determined to follow the road to the south, where he is told the King is likely to

appear next—no one knows exactly when or where. In this mode, Clarence embarks on his journey south, led by the beggar—who exemplifies the archetypal tricksters of world literature, and who as well seems to be a kind of seer, endowed with mild psychic ability to read minds and predict events. He is a trickster, as well as a rogue, and accompanied by the clownish boys, all three of whom, nonetheless, treat Clarence with a kind of scornful affection.

After these preliminaries, the two novels gradually reveal the spiritual and ethical nature of their protagonists' quests. Marlow seems the more complex character, beginning as he did with an ambiguous attitude toward the colonial enterprise he was hired to abet, his racism restrained by a growing degree of queasiness over the evils of slavery and human misery, and by his quite open criticism of the hypocrisy of the European colonial pretense that their true objective was one of "civilizing" and "saving" the colonized people from themselves. At the same time, the story is told through Marlow's very limited experience in Africa. Given the narrowness of his mission, and the circumstances in which he finds himself, Marlow's jaundiced views toward the natives are understandable, which is not to say, defensible. He is beset on all sides by whites who are portrayed as venal and untrustworthy, and Africans who are desperate and hostile, who attack him mostly from the jungle in the blackness of night or under the cover of a thick fog. For example, in the following passage, one can see the early, confused attempts by Marlow to comprehend his early encounters with Africa and Africans:

The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster—but there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly, and men were— No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. 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. Ugly! (Conrad, 186)

The great Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe, comments that the author of such sentiments [not just the character Marlow, but Conrad himself] was a "thoroughgoing racist."<sup>5</sup> (176) Yet in 1902, when this novel was first published, such stereotypes were the norm, and what was more controversial then was not the racism but the questioning of it, as Marlow himself does in this passage, however tentatively; for one thing, he not only acknowledges his imagined kinship with the natives but describes it as "thrilling." Although Achebe equates Marlow's words and attitudes with Conrad's, this is highly debatable, since Marlow is clearly not presented as a morally admirable figure in the novel. Marlow remains flawed, though not without a degree of redemption in his awareness of his own moral failings and in the huge failings of Kurtz, whom he once imagined as a potential savior. All this notwithstanding, in light of Achebe's bitter attacks on Conrad's racism, one must at

least distinguish the views of the character Marlow from Conrad's. Not only does Marlow evolve, but it is clear that his confused admiration for Kurtz becomes in time, a complex blend of derision, condemnation and disgust—yet still retaining a strong measure of loyalty to his memory. Conrad leaves no doubt that this has condemned him to a lifelong feeling of guilt and shame.

In the passage quoted earlier and elsewhere, Marlow acknowledges that the enterprise he is engaged in is based on greed and racism. His preliminary attempt to justify the evil as “the idea,” that is, some ideal behind the crass motives of conquest and plunder, is later rejected as a delusion that leads to the same evil result. This occurs before Marlow has actually experienced the reality of the results of the conquest, and although he makes a feeble attempt to distance the “colonist” from the “conquerors,” one feels that he senses with horror that they are actually the same thing. There is an early hint, however, of the dark side of this *idea* when Marlow comments on the report he had written for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs. What clouds Marlow's judgment is Kurtz's astonishing eloquence, though he realizes in retrospect the truly ominous contradictions in Kurtz's manifesto:

He began with the argument that we whites, from the point of development we had arrived at, ‘must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings—we approach them with the might as of a deity,’ and so on, and so on, ‘by the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded’...It was very simple, and at the very end to that moving appeal to every altruistic sentiment it blazed at you, luminous and terrifying, like a flash of lightning in a serene sky: ‘Exterminate all the brutes!’ (Conrad, 208)

One must acknowledge readily the appalling gap in moral judgment and political naiveté Marlow reveals here, when he did not instantly realize that the writer of such a tract might be capable of monstrous acts. At the time of his reading of the report, Marlow was still a novice in his experience of Africa, and his entire exposure to Africans has been a matter of months, rather than years. His knowledge of Kurtz is based almost entirely on the legend surrounding his eloquence and other gifts but it does not take Marlow much longer to understand the abyss of Kurtz's madness. Marlow's quest is to find the creative force behind “the idea,” perhaps in a desperate hope to exonerate his complicity in the evil he sensed from the beginning could not be separated from the European colonialist exploitation of Africa.

Marlow's quest for enlightenment leads to a realization that the darkness he alludes to in Africa is even darker in the hearts and souls of their European colonial masters, especially in Kurtz, but also in his own soul. At first Kurtz is a figure of mystery and awe. He becomes an obsession to Marlow, and we hear that his most powerful gift resides in his eloquence, in his use of language. This is especially alluring since Marlow himself is

surrounded by native peoples who speak languages he finds incomprehensible, and by the fact that those few white men who speak a language he understands, are shallow, venal and scarcely worth speaking to. Achebe assails Conrad for presenting Africans as virtually void of intelligent speech, but as Nigerian scholar, Olusegun Adekoya (195) points out, Marlow has no knowledge of African languages and Africans could scarcely be expected to speak English. Furthermore, it is likely that Marlow, under siege and fighting for his life on a riverboat surrounded by jungle and hostile natives, is suffering from a major case of culture shock. It is feasible that he might be attracted to a man whose eloquence had become legendary. When it appears that he would never find Kurtz alive, he seems mostly distraught by the thought that he would never *talk* to him, or hear him talk:

For the moment that was the dominant thought. There was a sense of extreme disappointment, as though I had found out I had been striving after something altogether without a substance. I couldn't have been more disgusted if I had traveled all this way for the sole purpose of talking with Mr. Kurtz. Talking with...I flung one shoe overboard, and became aware that that was exactly what I had been looking forward to—a talk with Kurtz...I didn't say to myself, 'Now I will never see him,' or 'now I will never shake him by the hand,' but, 'Now I will never hear him.' The man presented himself as a voice....The point was in his being a gifted creature, and 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 most contemptible, the pulsating stream of light, or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness. (Conrad, 203-204)

So the nature of Marlow's quest is inextricably caught up with language and truth, and their manifestation forms the context of an early passage in which the (unseen) narrator openly presents Marlow as the atypical narrator to whom "the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of those misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine." (Conrad, 138) The image of Marlow as the would-be-enlightened storyteller in the pose of the Buddha has already been alluded to, but it is instructive that this scene appears very early in the narrative, and the events he is reporting took place many years prior to the telling of the story. The quest and the moral test of its narrator was a colossal failure but through his realization of this failure and through what it has taught him about the true evil of colonial racism and the general darkness of human nature, he merits some degree of exoneration.

When Marlow finally reaches Kurtz he has already sensed the devastating reversal of his hopes. Not incidentally, the first person he meets is a Russian, one of Kurtz's devotees who has remained blindly loyal to him, despite the appalling truth of Kurtz's monstrous subjugation, torture, terrorizing and murder of the locals. One of the first blurred images

Marlow gets from afar of Kurtz's camp turn out to be heads stuck on spears surrounding his abode. It is now quite clear that Kurtz has gone mad, and that his initial "civilizing mission" has made a mockery of the so-called liberal mythology that the colonizing mission was for the good of the colonized. Even with the best of intentions, Marlow makes it clear that the evil of colonial domination corrupts everything around it and is the source of the true heart of darkness. Before he even arrives at Kurtz's house, Marlow has reached the horrifying realization of Kurtz's depravity and of its colonial roots: "He had taken a high seat among the devils of the land—I mean literally...All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz." (Conrad, 207) Marlow is also aware of his complicity in Kurtz's malevolence when he does what he says he hates most: lies for him, out of compassion for his fiancée, perhaps, but more strikingly, out of his own cowardice. When he tells the fiancée the lie that Kurtz's last words were her name, he momentarily fears the heavens would fall for such a lie, but quickly corrects himself:

The heavens do not fall for such a trifle. Would they have fallen, I wonder, if I had rendered Kurtz that justice which was his due? Hadn't he said he wanted only justice? But I couldn't...It would have been too dark—too dark altogether.... (Conrad, 252)

He keeps the truth of Kurtz's depravity to himself, and in doing so, helps preserve the colonialist mythology. Peter Nazareth elaborates:

Marlow lacked the courage to open the eyes of Kurtz's fiancée to what he was really doing in Africa and how he really died: he let her retain her romantic vision about the great civilizing mission. But *the story* has a different conclusion. (219-220)

Kurtz himself acknowledges the truth at the very end of his life:

Anything approaching the change that came over his features I have never seen before, and hope never to see again...I saw on that ivory face the expression of somber pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror, of an intense and hopeless despair. Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision—he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath— "The horror! The horror!" (Conrad, 239)

One of the most intriguing and complicating aspects of *Heart of Darkness* is its convoluted sequencing of events. Marlow's beginning speech comes long after the end of the actual events. He is presented to the reader as one much wiser than he was during his sojourn in Africa and just after, when he tells the lie that both haunts and transforms him. Perhaps it is only through his shame in telling his lie that Marlow comes to acknowledge the reality of colonial evil and his own complicity in it. As Marlow has already said, he hated a lie because it is tainted with mortality, and nothing could be truer than his

falsehood about Kurtz, whose deathbed words (the horror! the horror!) are his own acknowledgement of the evil he perpetrated in the name of colonial “altruism.” Achebe is right that the character Marlow was a racist who cannot be totally redeemed, but he fails to acknowledge that Conrad shows the world that not only Kurtz, but also Marlow must suffer terribly for their moral failures. This may be why Conrad places several of his the most severe criticisms of colonialism near the beginning of the novel, so that the reader can evaluate with this in mind what happens later. Above all, Conrad does not sanitize the spiritual corruption that inevitably follows exploitation and racism—and he makes it clear that this corruption contaminated to their cores the social fabric of colonialist societies. It is vital to remember that Conrad was writing half a century prior to the time when leading European intellectuals had come to similar conclusions about the effects of colonialism, such as the following comment by Jean-Paul Sartre on the Algerian armed struggle for independence from France:

We, the people of mainland France, have only one lesson to draw from these facts: colonialism is in the process of destroying itself. But it still fouls the atmosphere...Not only in Algeria but wherever it exists...The only thing we can and ought to attempt... is to fight alongside them to deliver both the Algerian and the French from colonial tyranny. (54)

*The Radiance of the King*, on the other hand, depicts a very different Africa from Conrad’s—not only in the place and time of the writing, but in its setting. Camara’s Africa is not a place of darkness but a complex world of ordinary people with good points and bad, striving to live everyday life, but still longing to transcend its banality. This transcendent world is represented by the resplendent presence of the King, whom everyone in Aziana not merely reveres but whose very existence gives meaning and hope to their lives. As indicated earlier, Clarence began his quest out of physical necessity because he sensed in the King the means of physical survival. He continues his journey with the help of the beggar and the boys, who lead him, as if he were blind, through the labyrinths of the African jungle to Aziana in the south, where the King is thought most likely to appear next. During his trek south, Clarence is overwhelmed with the thick perfume of the forest, which puts him into a kind of languorous and forgetful trance. This emphasis on scent—particularly human scent—is a motif that appears from the very first scene when Clarence first attempts to meet the King. He is overcome then by the odor of the men in the crowd and starts to fall into a stupor. When he finally arrives in Aziana, the flowers that are placed in his room each night have the same effects of that odor he had encountered in the jungle, yet in this case its purpose is clearly twofold: they enhance his sexual potency and they induce amnesia regarding his amorous activities, so that all he feels is a vague sense of bewildered unease (that with greater awareness later leads to self-loathing). In fact, Clarence increasingly

becomes consciously disgusted with his own odor, which no amount of bathing seems to alleviate.

Clarence is provided with Akissi, a beautiful, sensuous woman, whom he regards as his common-law wife. Yet even in his drugged state, he becomes more and more suspicious that the women who come and go from his house every morning are different women, as indeed they are. This amusing bit of farce parodies the stereotype that white people can't tell black people apart. It has been long apparent to the reader that Clarence has been sold to the Naba, the village headman, for the purpose of servicing his harem. This is another reversal of the white stereotypes regarding black people—in this case the presumed sexual potency of black males, often contemptuously thought of as an example of “primitive” bestiality. Much of the parody in the final half of the novel revolves around Clarence's incredible myopia regarding such a glaringly obvious deception. This generates at least two levels of humor: the physical level of burlesque slapstick, and the intellectual level of multi-faceted philosophical and social satire. As all this is happening, even in his ignorance, Clarence's self-image as a white man of superior race has completely eroded. He has reached a state in which his very naiveté prompts him to forget that he is still an outsider, racially and culturally, to the people of Aziana:

“If I filed my teeth like the people of Aziana, no one could see any difference between me and them.” There was, of course, the difference in pigmentation of the skin. But what difference did that make? “It's the soul that matters,” he kept telling himself. “And in that respect I am exactly as they are.” And was it not better that way? Was it not far better than being Clarence? (Camara, 165)

What is most significant in the shifting interplay among the various levels of representation in the novel is Clarence's quest to discover his humanity through his journey to the King. Intricately interwoven in the telling of the plot are the many religious and ethical issues that the novel addresses, directly and indirectly. Although these elements are also the objects of parody and social critique, they also pose very serious questions concerning the philosophical and political assumptions of human societies, particularly those that tend to distinguish Western, liberal democratic societies and non-Western, “traditional,” tribal societies found in Africa and other less developed parts of the world. Camara does not offer solutions but lets these issues emerge through his characters with the same (usually gentle) irony.

The citizens of Aziana are not portrayed as more morally upright than Clarence, but certainly they are more astute, worldlier and more sophisticated in their understanding of the social “reality” in which they are living. This is only natural, as Clarence is clearly playing the role of the fool, the pawn and indeed, the slave. However, the people are not cruel to Clarence. Aside from the fact that he is being exploited without his knowledge, he

is treated with a kind of condescending indulgence, even affection—the way a class clown or village fool is indulged as long as he tolerates being the butt of every joke. Indeed, at times, Clarence has considerable influence in the village because of the importance of his function, and because, oddly, he seems to be regarded as both slave and guest. One such telling incident is the scene depicting the Master of Ceremonies being whipped for leaking to Clarence clues regarding the truth of his situation. Clarence cannot endure the cruelty and insists that it be halted immediately. Although this pleases no one, his wishes are respected and the beating stops.

“That man is suffering,” said Clarence.

“Well, you couldn’t very well say he was dancing for joy,” said Naoga.

“Noaga, I should never thought it of you,” said Clarence. “I tell you that this man is suffering, and that you ought to have pity on him. And you laugh, you have the nerve to laugh.” (Camara, 182)

Noaga merely responds that the Master of Ceremonies had been smiling broadly when he dealt him (Noaga) a blow that resulted in a large welt on his head. Then, a page later, when Clarence’s request is granted, there is this comment on justice:

“The naba, at your request, has decided to interrupt the display,” Samba Baloum told Clarence. But believe me, the people of Aziana won’t like it. You’ve offended their sense of justice.”

“Ha!” Clarence scornfully replied. (Camara, 186)

This scene echoes one alluded to earlier when Clarence is appalled by the screams of pain, which—he was encouraged by the boys to believe—are those of the King’s vassals having their throats cut. On the one hand, Clarence is portrayed in both scenes as being more compassionate than the natives but on the other hand, the reader is pressed to consider the nature of justice itself. The passage, as so many others, probes human social values on several levels at once. What seems obvious to the many readers who have been educated in so-called democratic, humanistic cultures, is that torture is not an acceptable form of punishment for the crime committed (not to mention the real or imagined cutting of throats from the earlier scene referred to). To put an even sharper point on the contrast, however, Camara portrays the beating scene as one of great amusement to the onlookers, so that the issue is not merely one of the rightness of punishment (justice), but the appropriateness of the villagers’ sadistic delight in the event. The other side of the issue, though, is one that is still debated in both modern Western and non-Western societies today: how *should* society punish its offenders? Is torture ever justified? What about capital punishment? Camara’s presentation of this and other issues is complex because the reader must grasp that the novel’s parody extends also to Aziana’s social practices in its blithe exercise of cruelty, and

more specifically, I would say, to Islamic justice more broadly. There are many signs that Camara includes Islam as one of his satiric targets, for example, in the figure of the Naba, who is never heard speaking but is only seen wagging his beard. (Beards are considered in many Islamic cultures to be a virtual requisite for righteous men.)

Now the time has come to draw a finer line around the ethical and spiritual aspects of these two works and bring to a conclusion the obvious differences—but deeper level similarities—both works exhibit. As *The Radiance of the King* reaches its denouement, Clarence finally becomes aware of the truth of his real work in Aziana and is overwhelmed with guilt and shame for what he regards as his bestial behavior. His self-worth is reduced to nothing, but his greatest pain is that he could never be worthy even to enter the presence of the King:

The king...what would the king say when he came? ...Would it be merely out of pity that he would cast his eye upon Clarence? But could one cast his eye upon a beast, even if merely out of pity? The king would turn away from this unclean beast, he would turn away in horror and disgust...One day the king would come; but it would be as if he had not come at all. (Camara, 213)

Though Camara never mentions religion explicitly, his novel subtly fuses Christian and Islamic customs and beliefs. The villagers, who seem to regard sexuality and procreation as nothing more than perfectly natural, do not share the disgust Clarence feels for himself when he learns the truth. The obvious exception is the contemptuous comments of the Master of Ceremonies, who is clearly motivated by jealousy, if not racism, toward Clarence's prodigious performance as the Naba's procreative proxy. There are the usual vulgar jokes, expressions of envy, teasing and so forth, that one might expect in this situation but no one seems to dislike Clarence or think less of him because of it. And after all, the flowers placed in his room had drugged him and rendered him unable to resist, or even remember, what he had done. Despite these extenuating circumstances, Clarence's self-contempt seems more of a Christian reference than an Islamic one. In contrast to many sects of Christianity, Islam neither denies nor condemns sexuality itself; rather, it seeks to control it rigidly within the strictures of religious and civil law.<sup>6</sup>

Be this what it may, Clarence is crushed by the thought that he would never be worthy of the King. Yet in the midst of this despair the impossible happens:

But at that very moment the king turned his head, turned it imperceptively, and his glance fell upon Clarence. That look...was neither cold nor hostile. That look... did it not seem to call to him? ... He went forward and he had no garment upon his nakedness. But the thought did not enter his head that he ought first of all to put his *bobou* on; the king was looking at him, and nothing, nothing had any more meaning beside that look. (Camara, 277-278)

One of the great mysteries throughout the novel is the full symbolic significance of the King, not only for Clarence but also for the rest of the society. The image and role of the King is a strange blend of human kingliness, and the idealization of God, as spirit beyond the body. In this novel the figure of the King is oddly merged with the idealized image of the Christ figure and a concept of love as transcending the physical. This evokes both Christian and Islamic mysticism, particularly that of Gnostic Christianity and Islamic Sufism.<sup>7</sup> It all comes down to the concept of God as love and forgiveness not confined by the limitations of the physical, the rational, and the strictures of traditional religious dogma. The final glorious ending of *The Radiance of the King* symbolizes redemption and apotheosis for Clarence's quest, which he finds in the embrace of the King:

"Yes, no one is as base as I, as naked as I," he thought. "And you, lord, you are willing to rest your eyes upon me!" Or was it because of his very nakedness? ... "Because of your very nakedness!" the look seemed to say. "That terrifying void that is within you and which opens to receive me; your hunger which calls to my hunger; your very baseness which did not exist until I gave it leave; and the great shame you feel..." ....It was this love that enveloped him.

"Did you not know that I was waiting for you?" asked the king.

And Clarence placed his lips upon the faint and yet tremendous beating of that heart. Then the king slowly closed his arms around him, and enveloped him forever. (Camara, 278-279)

The final lyrical passage of the novel transcends the individual and social dimensions that have motivated it to this point. Left behind are the secular preoccupations of racism, cultural and social values, and especially, conventional responses to traditional religious questions. Clarence's quest has not merely ended but his life itself has seemingly dissolved into the love of the King. But there is more. The King absorbs into himself the baseness that Clarence could not shed. As Christ is believed to have died on the cross for the sins of humanity, the King takes on the most unsavory attributes of the beloved, so Clarence and he might be mystically united.

There is much more to be said about both of these works but the quest structure of these novels provides many hidden resemblances within vastly different exteriors. If they are opposite sides of the same coin, it is because they share several fundamental aspects of postcolonial experience. Published in 1902, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* was written far ahead of its time, exposing—much against the grain of its time—the inherent evil of colonialism, for both the colonized people and the colonizers. More than fifty years later, near the time when many African and other colonized peoples had freed themselves from colonial rule or were about to do so, *The Radiance of the King* was envisioning the possibility of life beyond colonial rule that could fundamentally transform the binary mentality of postcolonial angst: the world need not forever be divided into the ex-colonizers and the ex-colonized. In different

ways, both of these novels transcend the dichotomized worlds of the colonial system: Marlow in his Buddha persona as the spiritually tortured, but reformed, racist-colonialist, and Clarence, as the naïve racist emancipated from his cultural biases and deeply ingrained self-hatred, whose redemption was possible only through the love of the King. This could almost be taken directly from the New Testament where it is written that a person can find salvation through the love and intercession of Christ (see Romans 6:23 for one of many examples). Marlow's darkness remained, although he did find a measure of light in his troubled soul. Clarence's darkness was transformed into a love that lies beyond darkness, in a world that came to life in Camara Laye's dazzling imagination, unfettered by the hatred and bitterness of humanity's inhumanity to man.

#### Notes

1. French Guinean names are written with family names first and given names last. Therefore, "Camara," and not "Laye," will be used here.
2. Some clarification here may be helpful. The setting of *The Radiance of the King* does not occur in an actual African country, nor does it pretend to reflect a realistic or historically accurate picture of Africa in the mid-twentieth century. This idealized Africa suits the unique blend of realistic and surrealistic elements in the novel's style and exposition of plot, sometimes (controversially) linked to the "magical realism" of novels like García Márquez's *Cien Años de Soledad*.
3. There is not time to elaborate the point with details, but movements like "Negritude," originated in the 1930s by francophone writers and intellectuals of African descent (led by the "three fathers," the future Senegalese President Léopold Sédar Senghor, Martinican poet Aimé Césaire, and the Guianan Léon Damas), were designed to assert pride in the literary and cultural achievements of those of African descent. Although the movement galvanized colonized people in Africa and in the so-called "Black Diaspora," critics claimed it also perpetuated the colonialists' agenda by allowing the discourse to be conducted on European colonial terms.
4. Of course, the concept of "universal values" has been a controversial attack point for those opposing what they feel are European colonialist imposition of their own values, and therefore, they justify as "universal," those values they claim all of humanity naturally aspire to, including democratic government, individual freedom, *laissez-faire* capitalism, and of course, Christianity. While recognizing that "universal values" have been used in the exercise of exploitation, it does not follow that there may not be such values. At any rate, Camara (and to a lesser extent Conrad) aspires to transcend those dichotomies that set the parameters of postcolonial discourse by addressing the possibility of "universal" human values.
5. The argument for Conrad's racism presented by Achebe is persuasive in his clever use of quotations from the novel and in his rhetorical brilliance but it is convincingly countered in essays by Peter Nazareth, Olusegun Adekoya and many others. While there are valid points made on each side, this writer objects primarily to Achebe's premise that Marlow, the character, and Conrad, his creator, are indistinguishable. Not only is Marlow portrayed as a man who underwent a profound transformation during his experience in Africa and is, at the very least, opposed to the colonial enterprise based largely on racist attitudes, but also because Conrad clearly stands apart from

- Marlow, who clearly is made to suffer dearly for his actions.
6. Note the contrasting views of the afterlife between Christianity and Islam. Christianity typically envisions “heaven” as a place where disembodied human souls, angels and other spirits spend eternity worshipping the Supreme Deity. In contrast, Islam envisions “Mohammed’s paradise,” where males have theoretically unlimited access to desirable females. “As for the righteous, they shall surely triumph. Theirs shall be gardens and vineyards, and high-bosomed virgins for companions: a truly overflowing cup.” (Koran 78:31) Christianity’s heaven is considerably more ascetic.
  7. The final resolution to this novel is highly suggestive of Islamic Sufism, which places its highest value on ecstatic union with the Divine. It eschews formalism and dogma, and like Gnostic Christianity, it shares a belief that the only valid spiritual experience is one of direct communication with an individual and the Godhead. It is very fitting that the final enigmatic and glorious passage of the novel merges the traditions of mystic Christianity and mystic Islam.

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