

# The Echoes of Buddhism, Mythology, the New Testament, and *Inferno* in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

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**Abstract:** *The present article aims to explore the thematic role and semantic load of allusions Joseph Conrad has adeptly and advertently employed in his celebrated novella, Heart of Darkness. The present narratological research takes it upon itself to first discover and stratify the dominant allusions and their meanings and then to conceptually relate them to one another and ultimately to the overall theme of the story. The central questions of the study, consequently, are: what are the most salient and most frequently used allusions in the narrative and to what end has the writer utilised them? The present research shows that there are four main groups of allusions in Heart of Darkness: those made to Buddhism (which imply passage from ignorance to wisdom), to Greco-Roman mythology (which liken Congo River to Styx and Congo to Hades/Underworld), to the New Testament (which denote hypocrisy and temptation), and to Dante's Inferno (which unreservedly equates Congo with a Dantesque hell).*

**Keywords:** Allusion, *Heart of Darkness*, Buddhism, Mythology, The New Testament, *Inferno*

## 1. Introduction

Joseph Conrad was born Jozef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski on December 3, 1857, to in a then Ukrainian province of Poland. Conrad's youth is marked by hardship and loss; his father was incarcerated for political reasons when he was three and he lost his mother when he was eight and his father four years later (in Strape 2010: 5). He was drawn into literature, politics, and languages through his father who was a translator. After the death of his father, he was placed under the care of his maternal uncle, who unlike his father was a conservative and anti-revolutionary thinker. He also began to develop, under the tutelage of his uncle, anti-Christian beliefs. In 1874, he left Poland for France to become a sailor; in the subsequent years, he gambled, smuggled, and unsuccessfully committed suicide. Four years later, he joined the British Merchant Service, which reminded him of his homeland in that notions and values like nationalism, traditionalism, solidarity, and fidelity were highly respected among his peers. In 1886, Conrad chose to be a British subject; later in the same year, he passed the exam for Ordinary Master of British Merchant Marine (Nadjar: xix).

He started his voyages to the Belgian Congo in 1890; the visits and seafaring experiences nourished his imaginative powers and provided him with an excellent opportunity to pen brilliant novels and short stories, many of which are set in exotic seas or lands. His three-year service at a Belgian trading company as the skipper of a steamer, for instance, inspired his *Heart of Darkness*. The flip side, however, was his deteriorating mental and physical health. While he was in Congo, he suffered a physical and mental breakdown which he never managed to fully shake off (Karl 2002: 308). Distraught and disillusioned, he returned to London in 1894 to permanently give up his career as a seaman, partly because of his poor health and his nervous breakdown, and partly because of his fascination with writing and literature. Among Conrad's friends and correspondents were a number of the leading literary men of the time: Ford

Madox Ford, Henry James, Edward Garnett, John Galsworthy, Stephen Crane, and H. G. Wells. However, the best years of his writing life were a struggle – he was beset by poverty, illness, the crippling disease of his wife, and his inability to escape from doubts about his creative potentials. He died in 1924 in Kent in 1924.

Conrad wrote 13 novels, two volumes of memoirs, and 28 short stories, all in excellent English, though English was not his mother tongue. His literary career can be divided into three major phases. The first one is acclimatisation to the mainstream literary and cultural ambience. Although he was a novice, his first two novels – *Almayer's Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands* – received favourable reviews. The choice of settings in the Far East in these novels established his reputation for exotic fiction, which paralleled the likes of Robert Louis Stevenson and Rudyard Kipling (in Strape 2010:11). The second phase of his career, which is probably his best both in terms of quality and quantity, began in 1897. With novels such as *The Nigger of Narcissus*, *Lord Jim*, *Typhoon*, *Youth*, *Heart of Darkness*, and *The End of the Tether*, he continued his struggle to find his English identity and relate to his audience. In his final phase, which started in 1904, Conrad shows a penchant for political activism. Tyranny and corruption are sustained motifs in novels like *Nostramo*, *The Secret Agent*, and *Under Western Eyes*. Conrad also wrote autobiographical sketches which were subsequently collected and published as *The Mirror of the Sea* (1906) and *A Personal Record* (1912). *Chance*, published in 1913, finally established Conrad as a literary genius; his other later novels include: *Victory* (1915), *The Shadow-Line* (1917), *The Arrow of Gold* (1919), *The Rescue* (1920), *The Rover* (1923), and *Suspense* (published posthumously in 1925).

Shifting time and episode sequences, multiple perspectives, implication, mental/psychological explorations (both of the protagonist's and other characters') are among Conrad's stylistic preferences. Marlow, who appears in several of Conrad's works, namely, *Youth*, *Lord Jim*, *Heart of*

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*Darkness*, and *Chance* is arguably an autobiographical character. Conrad typically portrays the natural settings of his narratives in a lengthy and highly evocative prose which also sheds lights on inner feelings of his characters. That is why his stories are described as Impressionistic; his narrative both gives a clear sense of the physicality of the environment and hints about the effect of the exterior setting on the mind of the observer. According to Harold Bloom, Conrad lets us feel that "we are only a flux of sensations gazing outwards upon a flux of impressions" (2007: 3).

Conrad's use of the technique of the narrative frame (story within story narration) can be traced back to such medieval texts as Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Another remarkable feature in Conrad's narrative style is the abundance of figures of speech which give his prose texts a poetic quality. Another characteristic feature of Conrad's stories is the ubiquity of a gloomy atmosphere and gloomy people. The implication is that his outlook human nature is generally bleak; this can be ascribed to his harsh childhood experiences, poor physical and mental health, and the traumatising experiences he had as a seaman. In Sullivan's words, all of his novels are filled with dark irony, so that even if they end well, his method of storytelling makes the tale seem disturbing. In Conrad's narratives, "no one can escape his fate and the evil that is inevitably part of it" (2008: 173).

Conrad's characteristic themes include the individual's bent for isolation and solitude, personal codes of morality, moral ambiguities and dilemmas, and loyalty to a certain idea or ideal. In his novels, Europeans are characteristically cut off from their cultural and social roots and are inescapably brought into conflict with nature as well as with the forces of good and evil within themselves. In addition to being praised for his stories of life at sea and his insights into human psychology, Conrad is also noted for his depictions of imperialism and racial issues. As a skipper, he witnessed all the violence, brutality, and cruelty leveled against the miserable aborigines in African and in other exotic lands. He could see, to his horrors, how the natives – already crippled by hunger, disease, and poverty, were colonised and forced into subjugation by massively superior military power. Kurtz, the antagonist in *Heart of Darkness*, brilliantly epitomises the kind of leadership that was responsible for widespread corruption and despotism in Congo under the king of Belgium, King Leopold II who is remembered today for the founding and exploitation of the Congo Free State as a private venture. Colonisers like Kurtz were, in Ian Watt's words, "highly gifted" degenerates and "charismatic yet depraved" geniuses who volunteered to assume pivotal roles in European imperialism and thereby to taint European civilisation in process (in Kimbrough 2009: 46). To quote Mark Lushington, "We may summarize the proposition of *Heart of Darkness*: all imperialism has tendencies to barbarism. Belgian imperialism has failed to resist them (2008: 46). Ross C. Murfin, too, has contended that Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* offers an "analysis of the deterioration of the white man's morale, when he is let loose from European restraint, and to make trade profits out of the subject races" (2006: 99).

*Heart of Darkness*, like many of Conrad's other tales, is replete with literary devices and figures of speech, each meticulously hand-picked and artistically applied for a certain thematic or aesthetic purpose. The literary technique selected for discussion in the present narratological reading of the novel is allusion. Conrad constantly and consistently refers to a number of significant historical facts as well as canonical texts in religion and literature to give variety and depth to his narrative. The present research deals with four major and persistent allusions, namely allusions to Buddha, Virgil's *Aeneid*, the *New Testament*, and Dante's *Inferno* from his *Divine Comedy*. The central question of the paper is: which elements of aforementioned figure and texts are used in the plotline of *Heart of Darkness* and how the allusions and references can be linked to overall themes the story. In other words, it strives to explore and explicate the nature and the role of Conrad's dominant allusions and justify their applications. In the following pages, first a synopsis of the story is provided and then each of the four clusters of allusions is separately analysed and expounded.

Reading *Heart of Darkness*, as Regina Loureiro holds, is "like being in a dream. From beginning to end, Conrad envelops us in a mist, a haze of "brooding gloom" that falls into an all-encompassing darkness. The tale begins as light fades just as our dreams do" (1992: 1). It is above all else the story of a journey; having said that, the journey is more internal as external. In other words, it is a journey into oneself for self-exploration rather than into the wild for land exploration. An anonymous narrator, aboard the *Nellie* anchored in the Thames, begins the story. Marlow then takes over to tell his fellow travellers about his experiences as the captain of a steamboat in an ivory trading company in Congo. Through one of his aunts, who had connections in the Administration Department of a seafaring and exploration company that also traded in ivory, he had managed to find as job as a skipper of river boat to replace the previous skipper who was killed by the natives. In the Company's Outer Station, at long last, he meets the chief accountant, who tells him about Mr. Kurtz, a first-class agent and the head of an important trading post. He then travels on foot to the Central Station, witnessing en route upsetting and horrifying things about the natives. The General Manager sends him immediately to the inner post as the up-river stations desperately needed reinforcement and words had it that Mr. Kurtz had taken ill. His steamboat stalls and the repair takes several months. Near the Inner Station, they are enveloped by a thick fog and later attacked by the natives who are scared off by the repeated whistles of the boat. In Kurtz's station, surrounded by rows of posts topped by severed heads, Marlow realises how deeply respected and loved both by other managers and by the natives. One night, Marlow finally meets Kurtz who was very weak and was crawling back to his station house. Soon after, Kurtz dies and Marlow returns to Europe. Back home, he feels disgusted with the so-called European civilisation. Many people visit Marlow to retrieve the papers Kurtz had entrusted with him. Marlow meets Kurtz's fiancée who presses him to tell her Kurtz's last words on his deathbed. He lies to her by telling her that his last words were her name (while in truth they were "The horror! The horror!").

## 2. Discussion

*Heart of Darkness* is a highly allusive story; ironic and significance elements and aspects of European history and oriental and occidental canonical texts keep reappearing throughout the text. Each of these deliberately selected allusions is interwoven with the fabric of the narrative structure and is given a particular semantic function. In the pages to come, four dominant and sustained clusters of allusions, namely allusions to Buddha, Greco-Roman Mythology, the *New Testament*, and Dante's *Inferno*, are studied and their correlation with the unifying themes of the novella is justified. Less frequent or significant allusions, which are not treated, or only contingently treated, in the course of mainstream discussion include succinct references to: Plato, King Arthur ("round table"), Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (European colonisers and agents are dubbed as "pilgrims"), Astrea (Greek goddess of justice in Kurtz's painting), Goeth's *Faust* ("Mephistopheles," with whom Faust and Kurtz trade their soul), *Sleeping Beauty* ("an enchanted princess sleeping in a fabulous castle"), Jupiter ("the thunderbolts of that pitiful Jupiter"), and the myth of Eldorado ("Eldorado Exploring Expedition").

### 2.1 Buddhism

One of the well-known archetypes is that of journey. Having said that, not simply any journey is archetypal; it is a cyclic journey which is necessarily accompanied by anagnorisis (or discovery), epiphany (or initiation), self-realisation, and personality change. In other words, the protagonist, like Buddha, returns to the starting point of the journey as a sagacious, enlightened, and wise person. Buddha is implicitly and tersely mentioned (by the anonymous narrator who focalises on Charlie Marlow) at the very outset of the story: "Marlow sat cross-legged right aft, leaning against the mizzen-mast. 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" (Conrad 2007: 3). The image of meditating Buddha ("the idol") becomes quite explicit a few pages down the text: "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" (9). Later on, Marlow confesses to his meditations; as an example, he says: "I had plenty of time for meditation" (62). As a parallel to Marlow's cyclic journey (he returns to London, where he set off for Africa and where he narrates his anecdote to the passengers on the boat), the story ends with the image of meditating Buddha with which it had started: "Marlow ceased, and sat apart, indistinct and silent, in the pose of a meditating Buddha" (162).

Marlow starts his journey as a naïve and inexperienced youth but gradually comes to gain insight into his true self. He went to Africa merely out of personal interest, knowing absolutely nothing – but coming to learn – about the hypocrisy of imperialism, the horrors of colonialism, the devil within, or the darkness of human nature. Back, in the starting point of his journey, however, he is an initiated and deeply transformed man. There are two reasons that prove his transformation; first, he has become a misanthrope and

an alien in his own homeland: "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" (148). Having seen the ugly side of the so-called European civilisation, he cannot bear to see those people who either benefited from colonialism or were accomplices. Second, upon being asked about Kurtz's last words, he cannot bring himself to tell her the truth and disillusion her. Out of sympathy and moral responsibility, he lets her hang on to the image she had of Kurtz and live with blissful ignorance: "The last word he pronounced was – your name" (161).

A relevant image here is that of Ouroboros, the snake biting its tail, thereby forming a circle. The archetype which connotes cyclicity, cyclic passage, and introspection is time and again likened to the river Congo. Examples include: "a mighty big river ... resembling an immense snake uncoiled" (12), "The snake had charmed me" (Ibid.), and "the river was there – fascinating – deadly – like a snake" (17).

### 2.2 Greco-Roman Mythology

Another set of recurrent and interrelated allusions in *Heart of Darkness* revolves around a number of Greco-Roman myths. The first significant mythical figures are the Greek Moirae sisters, also known as the sisters of fate (Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos) whose task was to 'spin,' 'measure,' and 'cut' the lives of mortals. In the company headquarters, Marlow meets two of them: "Two women, one fat and the other slim, sat on straw-bottomed chairs, knitting black wool" (16). Marlow feels uncomfortable in their presence: "It was just as though I had been let into some conspiracy – I don't know – something not quite right; and I was glad to get out. In the outer room the two women knitted black wool feverishly" (17) or "She glanced at me above the glasses. The swift and indifferent placidity of that look troubled me" (18). The wool they knit is black, which refers both to Africa and the ominous fate of people like Marlow. What awaited them in Congo was nothing but certain death: "She seemed to know all about them and about me, too. An eerie feeling came over me. She seemed uncanny and fateful" or "Not many of those she looked at ever saw her again – not half, by a long way" (Ibid.). Later, the company's doctor repeats the same thing: "'And when they come back, too?' I asked. 'Oh, I never see them,' he remarked" (20) or "Adieu ... Adieu ... 'DU CALME, DU CALME. ADIEU'," (21), meaning 'good bye ... good bye ... calm down. Good bye.' The women's "wart," "spectacles," and "cat" all intensify his restiveness. Conrad makes the allusion more explicit when he writes: "Often far away there I thought of these two, guarding the door of Darkness, knitting black wool" (Ibid.).

The women "guarding of the door of Darkness" are reminiscent of Cerberus – the monstrous, three-headed, snake-tailed dog that guarded the gate of the underworld or Hades, preventing the dead from returning to the world of the living. In the passage, the phrase "AVE! ... MORITURI TE SALUTANT" (Ibid.) is a well-known Latin salutation which means 'Hail! ... Those who are about to die salute you.' It was addressed to Roman Caesars by gladiators who



were about to fight one another to death in the arena. All these clues suggest that in the company, Marlow is, metaphorically speaking, standing at the threshold of Hades. The borderline between Hades and earth is demarcated in Greco-Roman mythology by the river Styx (by analogy, the serpentine river Congo in *Heart of Darkness*). Styx, or the river of hate, was said to wind around Hades nine times and to run into four other rivers, namely, "Acheron – the river of woe, Cocytus – the river of lamentation, Phlegethon – the river of fire, and Lethe – the river of forgetfulness" (Dawson 1997: 1). Woe, lamentation, fire, and forgetfulness are sustained motifs throughout Marlow's voyage on Congo. By implication, Conrad is here comparing Marlow to a few mortals and deities who in Greco-Roman myths are known to have entered and then returned from Underworld. Greco-Roman mythological characters who experienced catabasis (descent into Underworld) include: Adonis, Dionysus, Hermes, Persephone, Orpheus, Pshyche, Odysseus, Pirithous, Sisyphus, Theseus, Heracles, and Aeneas. Marlow's description of his surrounding landscape brings to the mind the accounts given by the survivors of catabasis: "Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest ... The long stretches of the waterway ran on, deserted, into the gloom of overshadowed distances" (67). The mysterious and ancient ferryman who carried the dead across Styx was Charon, whose cruelty, impassivity, residence in heart of darkness, and love for wealth (the dead were supposed to give him a coin as the fair) liken him to Kurtz.

### 2.3. The New Testament

Conrad's allusions to the *New Testament*, though rather infrequent, play a significant thematic role. The recurring Biblical phrases are "whited sepulcher" and "sepulchral city" which appear three times: "In a very few hours I arrived in a city that always makes me think of a whited sepulchre. Prejudice no doubt. I had no difficulty in finding the Company's offices" (15), "He alluded constantly to Europe, to the people I was supposed to know there – putting leading questions as to my acquaintances in the sepulchral city" (48), and "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" (148). The phrase is taken from Mathew 23:27-28: "Woe to your teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean." What Jesus scathingly reproaches is hypocrisy and corruption; in the context of *Heart of Darkness*, the Biblical allusion suggests that under the white veneer of European civilisation, there is only the filth of savagery and wickedness. A "sepulchral city" refers to a metropolis like Brussels or London which has thriven only at the cost of the impoverishment and penury of colonised states. In his *Notes on Life & Letters*, Conrad attributes the wealth of colonisers to "to the moral corruption and mental darkness of slavery, to the mere brute force of numbers" (2008:47). In Marlow's words,

Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame, they all had gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire. What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth! ... The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires. (5)

Conrad is quite cynical and sarcastic here; the Imperialists either resort to sheer violence and "sword" or pretend to be the "messengers" of Christianity and the agents of salvation, bearing the holy "spark," or if needs be, launching the pincer movement of militarism and Christianity, which always means guaranteed victory. This is, as Conrad argues, how empires are formed. It follows that in terms of humanity and morality, it is the Europeans who are black, not Africans who are suppressed and held back by sheer force. Elaborating on the notion of imperialism in his *Kipling and Conrad*, John A. McClure writes that at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, "the artists and intellectuals of the age increasingly came to believe that imperial rule, if inevitable in the short run, was an inglorious enterprise that deformed both those who ruled and those who submitted" (2001:153). This rebuffs Chinua Achebe's famous and controversial claim regarding Conrad's contribution to racism in Africa: "The point of my observations should be quite clear by now, namely that Joseph Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist" (1977: 789). Negating Achebe's observation, Edward Said has commented that even though Conrad cannot successfully keep at bay the linguistic and political cultures which look down at Africa as "the other," as the savage, or as an opportunity for all kinds of exploitation, he does not write as "the other" (1993: 26). As Michelle Rizzo has put it, "Although Marlow becomes extremely judgmental of the moral breakdown of Kurtz and attributes it to the influence of the barbarous African jungle, Achebe's argument that Marlow is racist is rather tenuous" (2003: 2).

Ironically, the words black and white, as two central motifs of the narrative, are repeated 45 and 46 times respectively. It should be added that white is the colour of ivory, which is the sole reason for Belgians' presence in black Congo, not the hypocritically claimed holy mission of converting the natives into Christianity. In Brady's view, as the plot unfolds, Marlow gradually comes to see whiteness "as a symbol of all those who suffer self-deception as well as a symbol of all those who practice self-deception" (1998: 25). As Deyan Guo explains, "Under the pretext of civilizing the primitive continent of darkness, Belgian companies send their agents to trade with innocent and credulous natives for their precious ivory. In return, they give the natives cheap European stuff as calico, cotton prints, beads and so on" (2011:763). In the same vein, Cedric Watts argues that in the context of the story

The customary associations of white and black, of light and dark, are variously exploited and subverted. The city is 'sepulchral'; London is associated with brooding gloom; and the very title of the tale refers not only to the heart of 'darkest Africa' but also to Kurtz's corruption, to benighted London, and to innumerable kinds of darkness and

obscurity, physical, moral, and ontological. (inSrape 2010: 47)

Another significant yet tacit allusion to the *New Testament* is the Biblical episode of Christ's temptation in the wilderness and his triumph over it. In *Heart of Darkness*, the word "wilderness" appears for no less than 23 times and Kurtz is, one way or another, described in demonic and satanic terms: "A black figure stood up, strode on long black legs, waving long black arms, across the glow. It had horns – antelope horns, I think – on its head. Some sorcerer, some witch-man, no doubt: it looked fiendlike enough" (136) or "I had to beat that Shadow – this wandering and tormented thing. 'You will be lost,' I said – 'utterly lost.'" (137). This implies that Marlow is analogous to Jesus Christ in the sense that they both meet the devil in wilderness (Judean desert and Congo), defy temptation (Jesus refuses to serve Satan and Marlow refuses to replace Kurtz), and return to where they started their spiritual/metaphorical and literal journey as enlightened people (Jesus to Galilee and Marlow to Brussels). What Marlow resists, in Laura Kesselring's words, is thirst for power and domination or a "passion and savagery ... common to all humanity" (1997: 23). As Jason Cootey has asserted, "The key feature of the book is Marlow's struggle to fathom Kurtz's savage depravity while he questions his own haunting identification with [him]" (2006: 113). The pathways of the African jungle and the streets of Brussels, doubts, fear, temptation, mystery, and commercial and colonial enterprise, are, as Walter F. Wright has remarked, mere symbols for "the larger darkness, which is in the heart of man" (2006: 160). That is why for Marlow, seeing Kurtz is in effect seeing his own true nature. It is because Marlow's strong sense of identification with Kurtz that he confesses that "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" (148). The image of Kurtz "as a reprehensibly sensitive guardian of Imperial greatness" (Conrad 2009: 42), as an abnormally rapacious and greedy agent (Zhao 2008: 149), and as an anti-Christ figure (Goldman 2005: 41) is also reflected in Kurtz's last words – "The horror! The horror!" – which bear a distorted and ironic rewriting of Christ's last words on the cross – "God! God!"

#### 2.4. Dante's *Inferno*

Perhaps the most sustained and persistent set of allusions in *Heart of Darkness* is the one made to Dante Alighieri's *Inferno*. In addition to drawing parallels between colonised Congo and Hades/Underworld, Conrad also keeps comparing his fictional world with the Dante's hell. As Allen Kromer has put it, images of inferno and images of the devil abound in the story (2010: 13). The message is quite strong and clear: all the agents, the pilgrims, officers, managers, workers, etc. who contribute to the colonisation of Congo are the inhabitants of inferno, which is described by Dante as: "realm ... of those who have rejected spiritual values by yielding to bestial appetites or violence, or by perverting their human intellect to fraud or malice against their fellowmen" (2010: 14). In *Heart of Darkness*, the character who best fits into Dante's account on "those who have rejected spiritual values" is Kurtz, who resides and rules in

the depth of darkness and who is analogous to Judas – in Dante's *Inferno*, the dweller in the lowest (ninth) circle of hell.

Images and echoes of fire, endless solitude, gloom, death, labyrinths and paths, suffering, and episodes and details reminiscent of, and associated with, *Inferno* keep recurring over and over again. First and foremost, there are copious repetitions of the words like flame, fire, burning, ablaze, or smoke. Examples include: "Flames glided in the river, small green flames, red flames, white flames, pursuing, overtaking, joining, crossing each other" (10), "a puff of smoke came out of the cliff" (28), "One evening a grass shed full of calico, cotton prints, beads, and I don't know what else, burst into a blaze so suddenly that you would have thought the earth had opened to let an avenging fire consume all that trash" (45), "On the hill a big fire burned, illuminating fitfully a crooked corner of the station-house" (133), "the fires loomed between the trees" (136). Examples for other infernal elements are: "a solitude, a solitude, nobody, not a hut" (37), "utter solitude ... by the way of silence – utter silence" (101), "his loneliness, the essential desolation of his futile wanderings" (113), "a mournful gloom" (2), "the brooding gloom" (3), "Only the gloom" (4), "stricken to death by the touch of that gloom brooding over a crowd of men" (Ibid.), "Death – death skulking in the air, in the water, in the bush" (8), "the merry dance of death and trade goes on in ... an overheated catacomb" (25), "streams of death" (Ibid.), "the grove of death" (36), "You couldn't imagine a more deadly place for a shipwreck" (86), "Paths, paths, everywhere; a stamped-in network of paths spreading over the empty land, through the long grass, through burnt grass ... up and down stony hills ablaze with heat" (37), "I had stepped into the gloomy circle of some *Inferno*" (37), "an infernal mess" (144), "the infernal stream, the stream of darkness" (160), "This man suffered too much" (117), and "Her face had a tragic and fierce aspect of wild sorrow and of dumb pain" (127).

Furthermore, Marlow's sympathetic lie to Kurtz's fiancée concerning Kurtz's last words recalls Dante's sympathy to the doomed residents of *Inferno*. In Circle 6 (the circle of Heretics and the world of the burning dead), Canto 10, upon being asked by Guido Cavalcanti's father whether his son was still alive, Dante, who knows that the answer is positive, refrains from giving him a straight answer. The father assumes that his son – Dante's best friend – was dead; he falls on his back and sinks into his tomb. Dante feels sorry for giving him the wrong impression by his silence and begs Farinata to tell the truth to his dejected neighbour.

#### 3. Conclusion

As observed, the central concern of the present study has been the role and nature of four dominant and interrelated sets of allusions in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The article started with a general thrust of the writer's career as a seaman and a man of letters and after supplying a brief synopsis of the narrative, it classified and analysed the major clusters of the embedded allusions, namely, the ones made to Buddha, Greco-Roman mythology, the *New Testament*, and *Inferno*. The research reveals that references to Buddha are aligned with the notion and archetype of cyclic spiritual

journey and the protagonist's anagnorisis and enlightenment. The allusion testifies to the dynamic nature of Marlow's personality. Echoes of Hades/Underworld and the river Styx in the story suggest that Conrad is consistently and deliberately likening the setting of his novella to that of the world of the dead in Greek and Roman myths. The Biblical phrases "Whited sepulcher," too, connotes death, though with different implications. It pivots around such notions as hypocrisy, deception, and corruption. Also, Marlow's encounter with Kurtz is comparable to Christ's temptation in wilderness. The analogy between the world of the dead and the setting of the story is repeated, only more forcefully and explicitly, through Conrad's abundant references to episodes, images, and details associated with Dante's *Inferno* (e.g. words such as fire, flame, solitude, paths, and gloom). In conclusion, Conrad's allusions to Buddhism connote self-realisation and transformation, to Greco-Roman myths and to *Inferno* lay emphasis on similarities between hell and Congo under the Belgian monarch, King Leopold II, and to the *New Testament* hint at hypocrisy and corruption as well as temptation.

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