



LUND UNIVERSITY  
Humanities and Theology

# Shut in or Exposed

Inhospitable Landscapes in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*  
and Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*

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ENGK01

Degree Essay in English Literature

Spring Semester 2013

Centre for Languages and Literature

Lund University

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## Introduction

Novels offer readers alternative worlds, times and places. The landscapes described in a novel may be fictional or realistic, familiar or unfamiliar to the reader, and they often have an important function in the story. An environment in a literary work may be inspired by reality, but, as Stephen Siddall states, the author cannot make a direct imitation of it. Instead, the author arranges the landscape, modifies it and presents it, often in order to fulfill a purpose (8-9). The purpose may be, for example, to “provide a setting for a myth”, “idealise a lost world”, “demonstrate the nature’s power or delicacy”, or “create shock or wonder” (Siddall 9). In the novels that I will examine in this essay, the setting is inspired by reality, but the landscapes are modified and presented in a way that makes them seem unfamiliar, inhospitable, and dangerous to the two protagonists.

Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1902) and Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* (1985) have much in common despite having been written in different times and set on different continents. Both stories take place in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and deal with the white man’s will to dominance over the Africans in The Congo (*Heart of Darkness*) and the Indians in Texas and Mexico (*Blood Meridian*). In both novels, there is a main character who has left his home and embarked on a journey, which involves traveling through wild landscapes and being constantly subjected to danger.

In *Heart of Darkness*, the main character Charles Marlow has left England for The Congo to work as a steamboat captain and visit one of the places that he has been curious about since he was a child. He arrives in a country colonized by Europeans, where the natives are used as slaves and hardly regarded as human beings. The landscape that surrounds the river where he works is a deep, wild, and impenetrable forest, which is completely silent and seems to become darker and more dangerous the further the trip goes on. Marlow, who has not experienced anything similar before, becomes more and more affected by the place and the situation he finds himself in.

*Blood Meridian* is a novel based on events that took place on the Texas-Mexico border in the 1850s during America’s westward expansion. The protagonist is a fourteen-year-old boy called “the kid”, who has left his home in Tennessee and embarked on an aimless journey southwestwards. The wild landscape that the kid encounters is, unlike the landscape in *Heart of darkness*, one of open spaces. The sound of howling wolves is carried, uninterrupted, across prairies and deserts. There is little

natural shelter from the extreme weather of scorching hot days, cold nights, torrential rain and snow.

In both novels, the characters' lives are threatened because their actions turn the inhabitants into enemies. But the landscape itself plays an important part, and in both novels it also constitutes a threat to the protagonists. In this essay, I will look at the setting of the novels and try to answer the following questions: How are the landscapes presented in order to seem unfamiliar, inhospitable and dangerous? In what way do they affect the characters? I will show how open and closed spaces, darkness and light, sounds and silence, and the landscapes' connection to death contribute to a feeling of being an unwanted guest in an uncontrollable landscape, and how this makes the two protagonists seem insignificant and unprotected. I have chosen these particular novels because they illustrate how a landscape can function in a novel as something living, almost as a character itself. In both novels, I will focus on the wild landscapes where the protagonists are apart from civilization and, consequently, most vulnerable. I have structured the text thematically in order to show how the different characteristics of the landscapes contribute to their inhospitality and how these characteristics affect the protagonists. First, however, I will provide a brief background to the novels and introduce the two protagonists.

### **Setting the Scene and Setting out**

*Heart of Darkness* was published in 1902, twelve years after its author, Joseph Conrad, visited the state of Belgian Congo, which was, as Tracy M. Caldwell reports, one of his childhood dreams (1). According to Caldwell, the novel was written as “an engagement with the horrible consequences of colonial activity” (1) and it is, as Claes E. Lindskog states, the most discussed and analyzed of Conrad's literary works (31). The brutalities Conrad witnessed during this journey shattered his childhood fantasies (Caldwell 1), and, according to Anne McClintock, helped him to “discover himself as a victim of an enormous betrayal” (40). *Heart of Darkness* may be considered as an attempt by Conrad to encourage his readers to reconsider their colonialist assumptions by offering the story of Marlow, the protagonist, who sets out on a similar journey that he once did (Caldwell 1).

Marlow has a serious plan for his journey before he leaves Europe. He is going to explore a distant continent and work as a steamboat captain on the Congo

River. Like Conrad himself, he has had a childhood dream of going to Africa, and in the beginning of the novel, he describes his fascination for maps to his sailor colleagues. Marlow made the decision to visit The Congo when he was a child, because it was a blank space on the map at that time: “a space of delightful mystery” (7). His expectations are high, and he has had many years to think of the adventure the journey to Africa would involve. According to McClintock, the blank space on a colonial map represents “a lure for penetration” and, optimistically, “the promise that such a penetration would yield the glories of exploration” (40). When Marlow is finally ready to go, the space on the map is no longer blank but filled with lakes and rivers. His longing for exploration remains, and he is especially interested in the Congo River, which, he remarks, “resembl[es] an immense snake uncoiled” (Conrad 7). It is this fascination that makes him apply for the job as a steamboat captain there.

*Blood Meridian* was published in 1985, about 130 years after the time period of its setting. While *Heart of Darkness* is supposed to have been written in order to comment on the European view of colonization, McCarthy’s purpose with *Blood Meridian* – as with his other western novels – is, as Megan Riley McGilchrist claims, to undermine the traditional western mythology (49). According to this myth, the western American landscape was a promised land, a virgin land in an empty frontier (11), deeply desired (16) and available to those white, heroic men who were “tough enough to endure its privations and ruthless enough to take what they wanted” (11). But, as shown in *Blood Meridian*, the land was not empty but already the home of other people, and the images that the myth caused, as McGilchrist states, were neither realistic nor suitable (11). *Blood Meridian* is a novel that challenges the myth by describing a landscape that is less than attractive: there are dry deserts, empty villages and traces of dead bodies on the ground.

What kinds of expectations the protagonist has before he leaves Tennessee for Texas is, however, difficult to say, but as McGilchrist suggests, he does not expect anything (208). He does not have a serious plan in the same way that Marlow had. Instead, it seems that he just has become bored and wants to get away. Unlike *Heart of Darkness*, the story is told in the third person’s perspective without revealing much of the kid’s feelings and thoughts. In the first chapter of the novel, he is described as “pale and thin”, “unwashed”, illiterate, and with “a taste for mindless violence” (3). His family circumstances are such that he has nothing to lose by leaving: his mother has died in childbirth, his sister lives somewhere else, and his father drinks and lies

(3). Marlow and the kid have thus very different reasons to set out on their journeys, but they share the will to change environment and, probably, some longing for discovering something new.

### **Open and Closed Spaces**

One of the biggest differences between the landscapes in the two novels is that one of them is mostly open while the other one is mostly closed. In the closed landscape of *Heart of Darkness*, the shut-in feeling is caused by the dense forest and how Marlow chooses to present it. Marlow shows its immensity by describing it as “colossal” (14), “impenetrable” (41), and with “millions of trees, massive, immense, running up high” (43). The trees and bushes are growing extremely close to each other, which makes the forest so dense that it becomes synonymous with a wall:

The great wall of vegetation, an exuberant and entangled mass of trunks, branches, leaves, boughs, festoons, motionless in the moonlight, was like a rioting invasion of a soundless life, a rolling wave of plants, piled up, ready to topple over the creek, to sweep every little man of us out of his very existence. (35)

Marlow not only describes the forest and its overgrowth, he also imagines that the vegetation is going to “sweep [him] out of his very existence”, which literally means to kill him. The density of the forest makes him feel like a potential victim of it, and he has to realize that he – the white, European man – has become insignificant in relation to the natural world. The description of its will to sweep him out can be interpreted as if Marlow has started to realize his own powerlessness.

While the closeness of the landscape in *Heart of Darkness* is caused by the immensity of vegetation, the openness of the landscape in *Blood Meridian* is mostly caused by the lack of it. When the kid, early in the novel, meets some army soldiers who recruit him to take part in their plundering raids, he leaves the place that, as McGilchrist points out, is “the only attractive manifestation of landscape that he has encountered” (210). It is a place of comfort and safety, located near a river where grass and willows are growing and the kid sleeps naked under a tree (McCarthy 29-30). In leaving it with the soldiers, who will encourage his violent behaviour, he will soon enter a less fertile landscape of plains with no plants other than small bushes and “patches of twisted grass” (44), a pumice desert with no shrub and weed “as far as the

eye [can] see” (47-48), and mountains where nothing can grow (65). The characters can see for miles in any direction, but when the landscape is mostly presented as a barren wasteland, there seems not to be much of value to see. Even in this novel, the protagonist becomes insignificant in relation to the place – he is not shut in but exposed – but unlike Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, he seems not to reflect much over it.

Marlow, on the other hand, feels uneasy in his insignificance. This feeling, created by his encounter with the wilderness and its “soundless life” (35), even seems to have started to grow in him at the very beginning of the trip. He remembers the African coast as “featureless” and “bordered by a dangerous surf, as if Nature herself had tried to ward off intruders” (15). The mangroves, which are growing near the water “seem[...] to writhe at [him] in the extremity of an impotent despair” (15). When McClintock notes that “the coast resists his questing eye as an enigma resists knowledge”, she suggests that penetrating this kind of landscape by the eye becomes impossible for Marlow because of its strangeness and density (41). The forest is closed to him, as well as knowledge of it, encouraging him to feel that he does not belong there at all. Consequently, Marlow becomes both shut in and shut out by the forest. When he is inside, it raises its great walls around him, and when he watches it, it does not really let him in. This makes him, as McClintock states, transfer “the threat of impenetrability” back to the landscape itself – interpreting the wilderness as if it were consciously malign and hostile (42). Frequently, he transforms the landscape into a living creature, who is guarding her country from colonizers, or in other words, unwanted guests like himself.

Marlow’s feeling of the forest being alive escalates throughout the story, especially when he has had the mandate to run the steamboat along the Congo River in order to take Mr. Kurtz – the ivory trader stationed further into the jungle – back to the central station and the company. Marlow explains that driving the boat along that river – the same river that he used to daydream about – “was like traveling back to the earliest beginning of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings” (41). Like the image of the threatening plants, the image of these tree kings turns Marlow into something insignificant and unprotected. The boat, which according to Kai Mikkonen is a “symbol of the conquest of nature” (303), Marlow compares to “a sluggish beetle crawling on the floor of a lofty portico” (Conrad 43). For Marlow, the boat is no longer a symbol of power. It contributes to his sense of

“[feeling] very small, very lost” (43), which indicates a new feeling of vulnerability for white, European men.

Marlow soon starts to compare the forest to a prison, which again reminds the reader of the closed space that the forest is portrayed as. He describes the reaches as if they had “opened before [him] and closed behind”, as if the jungle of its own free will had tried to “bar the way of return” (43). When he has finally reached the inner station where Kurtz is settled, the motionless woods are “heavy, like the closed door of a prison” (73). He is soon even attacked by the natives who have begun to recognize Kurtz as their new leader, and when the natives withdraw into the bushes, Marlow describes their retreat like this:

I noticed that the crowd of savages was vanishing without any perceptible movement of retreat, as if the forest that had ejected these beings so suddenly had drawn them in again as the breath is drawn in a long aspiration. (77)

Marlow imagines that the vegetation is rioting by being overgrown and dense, hiding enemies in itself, and “eject[ing]” them, as if the forest and the natives were so strongly connected that they plan their attacks together. As Lindskog writes, the closed areas in a forest “open[s] [...] the imagination” – where the view is blocked “there could be dangers behind every tree” (13). This is definitely the case in the jungle of The Congo, where the natives, as McClintock states, sometimes “literally merge with the landscape” (50). The dense forest constitutes a threat to Marlow, because of the natives’ possibility to easily hide in it and take careful aim with their bows at unwanted guests.

Another aspect of the forest as both a closed space and living creature is revealed in a comparison to a human being. Martine Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère discusses how the geography in *Heart of Darkness* is “reconfigur[ed] as anatomy” (185) drawing parallels between the forest and human body parts. The Congo River is both like a vein and a vagina, the streaming water is like blood, and Kurtz’s inner station is like a womb or a heart – a heart that seems to beat concurrently with the natives’ drum-playing behind the bushes (de la Rochère 187, 189). When Marlow arrives in The Congo, he anchors at “the mouth of the big river” (Conrad 16). Later, on his way to Kurtz’s station, he notices how a grassy hummock just under the surface of water looks like “a man’s backbone [...] running down the middle of his back under



the skin” (54). The most frequently mentioned body part, however, is the heart, which sometimes refers to the inner station and sometimes to some unspecified dark center of the forest (40, 43, 59, 88). Taken together, the wall and prison metaphors, as well as the body images, create a claustrophobic feeling of being stuck in a place and not knowing if you will ever be able to get out.

In *Blood Meridian*, the landscape is, as already mentioned, not closed but open. There are no trees to block the view and it is easy to see for miles. The feeling of openness, however, is created by the lack of vegetation as well as the many descriptions of the sky. Throughout the novel, there are descriptions of the kid and the scalp-hunters watching the night sky (16, 48-49, 65, 147, 149, 155, 160, 162, 207, 232, 288, 224, 316) and the sun rising and setting (16, 47, 91-92, 197, 221). The sky becomes an important part of the landscape and the descriptions of it are often vivid, like in this example:

Out there dark little archipelagos of cloud and the vast world of sand and shrub shearing upward into the shoreless void where those blue islands trembled and the earth grew uncertain, gravely canted and veering out through tinctures of rose and the dark beyond the dawn to the uttermost rebate of space. (52)

In this paragraph, the sky is like a sea with “archipelagos of cloud”, which can be seen as something living and beautiful, but it is also a “shoreless void” which reminds the watcher of the fact that there is nothing beyond but emptiness.

The emptiness of outer space echoes the emptiness of the desert and prairies: an openness or void in all directions. On one occasion, when the kid and a sick man named Sproule are thirsting in the mountains, the kid looks at his companion and observes that the void, which is greater than the “alien stones”, “seem[s] to swallow up [Sproule’s] soul” (69). When they move on, they do not know where to go, because the land that surrounds them is filled with an emptiness without conventional guidance: no roads, only wagon traces in the sand (71). McGilchrist describes the landscape in *Blood Meridian* as a “howling waste” which becomes a “hallucinatory void”, a landscape “beyond disaster” (210, 211). The enormous space the kid is moving through makes him seem extremely insignificant and helpless, no matter how violent he is. The lack of roads and the emptiness in every direction makes him seem lost in an inhospitable wasteland that has nothing to offer to its visitors.

Unlike the closed landscape in *Heart of Darkness* where natives can be hidden everywhere, the open landscape in *Blood Meridian* makes it almost impossible for the kid, as well as for his enemies, to hide. On one occasion when the kid and the soldiers are riding across the sandy prairie, they can see a herd of cattle many miles away, which turns out to belong to a group of Indians who are riding behind it. Because of the openness, both groups can see each other, but it is impossible for the soldiers to figure out how many people are actually coming towards them. The captain seems to think that it will be an easy fight, but he underestimates the power of the enemies, and the slaughter which is the result of their meeting takes the lives of many soldiers (53-57).

In the end of the novel, there is another occasion when the difficulty in hiding constitutes a threat to the kid. The scalp-hunting gang, who has been his company in a major part of the story, has disbanded, and the kid is trying to hide from another gang member, the judge, with whom he has a conflict. This scene is set in the desert where there is nothing to take shelter behind, except for the carcasses of some fallen mules on the ground. He cannot conceal his traces which, as a result of the lack of vegetation, are visible in the sand and the judge is able to track him (311-316).

The waste and empty landscape does not only reduce the kid to something insignificant, it also affects his way of acting. The place, with its lack of order, also contributes to him becoming more and more ruthless and disrespectful towards other people. As McGilchrist suggests, in this kind of landscape any behaviour is accepted, and when the scalp-hunters return to the settlements, they bring the uncivilized behaviour with them (210).

To sum up this section, in both novels the open and closed spaces makes the protagonists seem insignificant and unprotected. The dense forest in *Heart of Darkness* makes Marlow feel shut in and shut out, in contrast to the huge, open spaces in *Blood Meridian*, which makes the kid feel totally exposed. In the forest of *Heart of Darkness* it is possible to hide everywhere, which means that there is always the risk of being watched by enemies. In the desert of *Blood Meridian*, it is almost impossible to hide, which means that there is always the risk of being seen, followed, and found.

## Darkness, Light, and Temperature

The effects of light and darkness play an important role in contributing to the novels' atmospheres. In *Heart of Darkness*, the darkness seems to be constant, even while during daylight hours. In *Blood Meridian*, light and darkness alternate and weather changes, making the prairie and the desert seem to be a less constant place than the jungle of Congo.

As Conrad's title reveals, darkness is central in the novel. In *Heart of Darkness* the darkness is a consequence of the dense forest and its "great wall of vegetation" (35), which is so thick that it hardly lets any light in. "So dark-green as to be almost black" (14) is Marlow's first impression of the jungle, on his journey along the African coast. "We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness" (43), is how he remembers the trip along the Congo River, and the evening when Kurtz dies is "so beastly, beastly dark" (90).

The darkness in Marlow's environment, which is a result of the foliage blocking the sunlight, functions as a metaphor for the blank space on the map, the unknown place outside civilization. As Richard Adams explains:

'Darkness' [...] has distinctly negative overtones. In a whole host of world mythologies, it is associated with chaos and disorder, the condition to combat which light and life were created. The term 'the Dark Ages' was coined to identify a period of relative unenlightenment in the cultural and intellectual life of early medieval Europe. Because human beings do not naturally function well in the dark, it came to be thought of as the home and haven of all those things – intangible as well as tangible – of which people were unsure or fearful of suspicious. It suggested the unknown, the unknowable, the unintelligible, the ignorant, the sinister, the secret. (2)

Because darkness is associated with times and places which are less enlightened than Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is easy for Marlow to associate the dark jungle with a prehistoric period. He compares the forest to "the earliest beginnings of the world" (41) and a place where "the earth seem[s] unearthly" (44). The Africans are portrayed as "the prehistoric man" and Marlow and his crew are "wanderers on prehistoric earth", gliding past "like phantoms" (44). Even the mud is "primeval" (31). According to McClintock, Marlow perceives a "cultural loss" in the landscape, suggesting Africa is "primitive, infantile, and incomplete" (46). The jungle is thus not only

dark because the trees block the sun, but it also lacks, as Marlow claims, civilized order, marking it as a dark void in a double sense. At this time, the West regarded itself as “a bearer of light and civilization” (Tony C. Brown 17), and because Marlow is accustomed to that world, the dark jungle of Congo makes him feel that he is extremely far from home. Not only is the overgrown forest with its strange plants “unknown”, “unknowable”, and “secret” to him, but the darkness makes it seem even more alien.

The sun is mentioned a few times in *Heart of Darkness*, but not in a positive sense. It is a “fierce” (14), “blazing little ball” (49), causing the place to be as warm as “an overheated catacomb” (15). Here Marlow does not even consider light to be an effect of the sun since he describes the environment as a catacomb – a dark, unlit subsurface environment. The sun’s presence is easy to forget, because the repeated references to darkness are so overwhelming that even the days seem dark. Sometimes “the dusk [comes] gliding” into the jungle “long before the sun ha[s] set” (48), which indicates that the days are very short and the shadows of the vegetation take over.

In *Blood Meridian*, the sun is much more central than in *Heart of Darkness*. The days are light and the lack of vegetation ensures that the characters are constantly exposed to the burning heat that it causes. It is described in various, often negative, ways. It has “the color of steel” (17), which can be associated to hardness. It is “urine-colored” (49), which can be associated to disgust. It is red like blood (47), which can be associated to violence and injury. It is compared to “the head of a great, red phallus” when it is rising behind the mountains one morning (47). As Siddall writes, the sun is a common symbol for power and majesty (25), but the negative descriptions of it in *Blood Meridian* do not only show its power, but also emphasize its devastating effects on the people who are exposed to it.

The heat and the draught make it difficult to travel through the landscape. Wagon wheels break (47) and dry dust blows in the characters’ faces, in their mouths, and in their food (49). The horses become exhausted (49) and the characters are often without water. When the kid and the sick Sproule are walking around among stones and rocks, the place is described like this:

The road winding up among the hills and the castaways laboring upon switchbacks, blackening under the sun, their eyeballs inflamed and the painted spectra racing out at the corners. Climbing up through ocotillo and pricklypear where the rocks trem-

bled and sleared in the sun, rock and no water and the sandy trace and they kept watch for any green thing that might tell of water, but there was no water. (65)

On occasions like this one, the inhospitable land offers nothing to its visitors except thirst and inflamed eyes. On another occasion, the kid and another gang member are without water for twenty-four hours before they at last find a well to drink from (294). This repetition suggests that as long as the characters continue their aimless traveling, they will time and again find themselves in circumstances without water or purpose, which supports the theory that in wild, uncivilized places characters do not develop. According to McGilchrist, McCarthy's western characters "seem never to grow, but simply continue in a self-destructive cycle of violence, repetition, and loss" (2). Their habit of finding themselves in situations without water illustrates how they never learn and never realize that they have nothing to gain from the wilderness.

The heat from the sun also makes the characters experience mirages. As Christopher White reports, desert landscapes often create visionary events, as a result of their high temperature. Featureless spaces like the void in *Blood Meridian* create "hallucinatory experiences" where "unbidden imagery" becomes visual (White 41). When the kid and Sproule have crested the mountain after their unsuccessful search for water, they see an enormous lake, trees, and a white, distant city right before them, a view that is gone when they wake up the next day (McCarthy 65-66). Some chapters later, the kid and the scalp-hunters have the vision of a cold sea appearing in the desert, and then are attacked by Indians. Neither the sea nor the attack actually seem to occur since the water disappears and the Indians and their horses are chimerical (115-116). As White argues, misperceptions are "as regular and natural as its counterpart" in the novel (37), creating surrealistic feelings of not knowing what is real or what is illusion.

In *Heart of Darkness*, most things that are light or white function allegorically as positive elements in opposition to the negative darkness of the place and the people who populate it. On one occasion, however, a white fog almost plays the same role as the darkness. That occurs some miles before Marlow reaches Kurtz's inner station, when the damp fog, "more blinding than the night", settles around the boat (49). Because he cannot see anything, Marlow has a strong feeling that the rest of the world has disappeared since the only thing that he can see is a small strip of water (49-50). This can, as Brown suggests, be interpreted as if Marlow, through the

fog and its blinding effect, has been finally cut off from enlightenment, civilization, and even knowledge (24). He has already begun to lose control by feeling insignificant in the huge forest, and in this moment he cannot even see the forest. Nor can he see the natives who have started to make noise somewhere near the boat (Conrad 49). Because the fog makes it impossible to escape, he believes his life is in greater danger.

In *Blood Meridian* the nights are dark, but there are often elements of moving light in the night sky. While the compact darkness in *Heart of Darkness* creates a sense of stillness, in *Blood Meridian* the darkness with its contrasting elements of light has the opposite effect of making the environment appear to be changing. As White suggests, injections of light “into or around an object” or descriptions of light “reflecting off of surfaces” can be used to “create the impression of motion” – something that McCarthy does throughout the novel (35). Because of the openness of the landscape, distant campfires are visible during the nights (18, 46, 127, 160, 231), which is a reminder of the fact that there are other people moving around in the landscape in the same way as the scalp-hunters. The characters can see thunderstorms miles away (18, 20, 127, 160, 184, 196), and they are riding through areas that are naturally electric:

That night they rode through a region electric and wild where strange shapes of soft blue fire ran over the metal of the horses' trappings and the wagonwheels rolled in hoops of fire and little shapes of pale blue light came to perch in the ears of the horses and in the beams of the men. (49)

The moving light – fires, thunderstorms, and electricity – conveys the feeling of motion and also of danger. The light of the campfires means that there are other people around, who can attack or become victims of the scalp-hunters. The thunderstorms suggest tempest and electricity suggests violence of a deadly force. Sometimes darkness seems to be alive, in particular when it is described as “suck[ing] away” the light from the thunderstorms and, on the second occasion, the mountain chain that is visible in it (20, 49). By using a verb like “suck” here, the darkness is described as active, as if it had the will to swallow the light. The images of moving light and the darkness which sucks it up make the landscape seem as an uncontrollable, living being, and parallels can be drawn to *Heart of Darkness*. An important distinction oc-

curs, however, as a result of the different narrative styles. The first person narrative of *Heart of Darkness* allows the reader to perceive the psychological effects of the jungle on Marlow's mind, while the third person narrative of *Blood Meridian* allows the reader to perceive the lightning as a part of the environment.

As I mentioned in the beginning of this section, the weather is changing in *Blood Meridian*, which also can create feelings of motion. Although the burning heat seems to be the most common form of weather in the novel, there are also rain, raindrops as big as grapeshot (50), thunderstorms, and snow. In one chapter, the kid has lost the rest of the scalp-hunters after an attack and is wandering in the mountains for some days. The snow, the cold, and the vegetation of conifer and evergreens he encounters contrast with the scorching hot desert and the electric areas. Because he can eat snow, he has no problem with finding water at this time, but instead of being thirsty and burnt, his hands and feet become frozen and numb, and he does not find any food (223-226). This suggests that even though environmental changes occur, the wilderness in *Blood Meridian* is an inhospitable place where the risk of both dehydration and freezing to death exists.

There are also more colours in *Blood Meridian* than in *Heart of Darkness*. The morning and the evening sky can be rose, red, pink, and crimson (52, 160, 197, 224), whereas in *Heart of Darkness*, colours other than white and black are seldom mentioned. This is a bit odd considering the fact that the rain-forest consists of trees and plants of many colours. A possible reason for this colourlessness, however, is that Marlow does not understand the forest at all. The darkness represents its mysteries and secrets, its "hidden evil" (40), and its lack of civilization. If Marlow had felt more welcome, he would probably have been able to see all the colours of the plants, but his ignorance and alienation make him unable to do so. In *Blood Meridian*, the richly coloured sky is often described as if it were beautiful, but because the rest of the landscape is so harsh, that beauty cannot change the fact that it is a disastrous and horrible place.

In summary, the darkness in *Heart of Darkness* makes Marlow feel lost and beyond civilization, and, together with the colourlessness, it turns the forest into a very gloomy and negative place. The light from the sun in *Blood Meridian* does not affect the kid as much as the heat and draught that it causes, which makes him run the risk of dying from dehydration. The snow and the cold means another risk: the risk of freezing to death. The moving lights of fires, electricity and thunderstorms

make the whole landscape seem moving and uncontrollable. The compact darkness and the constantly warm weather in *Heart of Darkness* make the landscape seem as if it were not changing at all, while the different weathers and the images of both light and dark places in *Blood Meridian* make the landscape appear to be a more changing place.

### **Sounds, Silence, Life, and Death**

When discussing literary landscapes, it is easy to focus on what is seen and forget that what is heard also plays an important role in descriptions of setting. In these two novels, sounds and silence play different roles. While Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* emphasizes how quiet the jungle is, the narrator in *Blood Meridian* shows the reader that the place is loudly populated by wild animals.

The silence in *Heart of Darkness* is another reminder of Marlow's feeling of traveling in the middle of nowhere, and it contributes to the creepy, mysterious atmosphere that he experiences. Marlow describes the jungle as a place where "the silence of the land [goes] home into one's very heart" (30) and where the "stillness of life [...] not in the least resemble[s] a peace" (42). The further Marlow travels along the river, the quieter is the place – "not the faintest sound of any kind [can] be heard" (48). The sounds that he does hear sometimes are the distant drum playing (23, 43) and loud clamour from the natives (44, 49, 57, 76, 87), which alerts him to the presence of others and emphasizes his status as an intruder who can be punished anytime.

The silence, or "the refusal of the landscape to speak" is, according to McClintock, what appalls Marlow the most (48). He becomes shut out and feels that "the mysterious stillness" is watching him and its "inner truth is hidden" (Conrad 42). He comments on the "stillness on the face of the immensity" and wonders how he will be able to "handle that dumb thing" (31). At the inner station, the woods are "unmoved, like a mask". The "face" of the forest is mentioned repeatedly in the novel (40, 55, 73, 76), and as Mikkonen notes, this face, which sometimes is masked, "can never be fully looked back upon" (303). The silence makes Marlow feel deaf (Conrad 49) and the fog makes him feel blind, which creates the impression that the forest is a place where senses disappear.

The different descriptions of the forest sometimes create contradictory impressions. Although the jungle is described as something living and rioting, it is still



completely silent and motionless, as if it were both dead and alive. These contradictions make the forest become even more unknowable, and thus frightening. It is not only rioting, it is rioting soundlessly as well, which seems unnatural and emphasizes Marlow's feeling of not being able to understand it.

In *Blood Meridian*, the landscape is not quiet because sounds from animals can be heard throughout the novel. There are cattle groaning (21, 235), prairie wolves yammering and howling (16, 46, 59, 112, 124, 198, 272, 309), flies snarling (46, 61), birds crying and twittering (53, 91, 110, 124, 143, 156, 256), and vipers rattling (65). There are animals who do not make any sound but are present: wolves (47, 112, 240), wild pigs (45), wild horses (49), lizards (65, 227), different kinds of birds (21, 45, 62, 64, 65, 67, 120, 143, 155, 197, 208, 225, 266, 319), bats (111, 172) deer (112, 208, 223), bears (207), poison spiders (226-227), snakes (227, 305), and wild rams (319). The animals are seldom harmful to the characters, except for one morning when a bat attacks Sproule and tries to suck his blood like a vampire (69). The sounds and the presence of animals in *Blood Meridian* are reminders of the fact that the characters are never alone, but either watched or ignored by other living creatures.

There is a presence of animals in *Heart of Darkness*, but not to the same extent. From the boat, Marlow sees hippos and alligators who sun themselves on the sandbanks, but they do not constitute a threat to him (41). In the jungle, the feeling of being watched is not created by animals, but by the rioting vegetation and the people who may be hidden in it.

There are not only living animals in *Blood Meridian*. The characters often encounter traces of dead animals in the wasteland, as well as traces of dead people. In the wilderness and in the ruined and empty villages, they see bones on the ground (48, 60, 156, 185), dead mules (48, 60, 64, 260, 303, 313, 314), dead sheep (61, 303), dead pigs (61, 240), dead horses (61, 64, 260), dead cattle (260) and carcasses that cannot even be defined (228). They find people who have been murdered (60, 61, 63, 93, 232, 260), among them seven or eight babies who have been killed and hung up in a bush, bald and eyeless (60-61). There are places where "death seem[s] the most prevalent feature of the landscape" (50). Several soldiers fall ill and die (46-47), and when Sproule shows his injured arm to the kid, the wound is full of worms, which makes the arm seem rotten and dying (70). These images suggest to the reader that

the landscape is generally inhospitable for human beings and domesticated animals, while wild animals, who live there naturally, seem to survive in it.

The landscape of *Blood Meridian* is not only associated with death through traces of dead creatures strewn throughout it, but also by being compared to hell. David Holmberg calls it a “postapocalyptic [...] unreality” (142) and a “primitive, hyperbolic hell” (150) with its “brutal deserts, blinding snow, ghost towns, and bleached skeletons” (149). This comparison is also made by the narrator, who describes the empty desert as a “purgatorial waste” (67). According to a soldier, the pumice desert looks like “the high road to hell” (48), and during a heavy snowstorm, a scalp-hunter asks the kid if he agrees with the fact that this is “hell”, but the kid chooses not to answer the question (222). Like the traces of dead people and animals, the associations with hell stress the fact that this landscape is an inhospitable place, where human beings have nothing to gain.

In *Heart of Darkness*, death is not so strongly connected to the landscape as in *Blood Meridian*, but rather a result of slavery and violence. Although Marlow imagines that the forest is alive and rioting, there does not seem to be any risk of being killed or physically injured by it. In both novels, the main danger for the protagonists is to be killed by other people, but in *Blood Meridian* there is still the risk of thirsting to death, and there are soldiers who fall ill and die without any explanation. In *Heart of Darkness* there is, however, another threat: the risk of becoming crazy if one stays in the jungle too long. When Marlow meets Kurtz at the inner station, he witnesses how Kurtz has become insane as a result of his isolation from civilization while in the wilderness. As Mikkonen argues, the forest may disintegrate “the modern mind”, but still, it suggests “a maddening escape from the bounds of rational thought” (304). Kurtz’s rationality seems to have totally disappeared and his worldview has, as Lindskog explains, become “reduced to a state of complete selfishness”, a state that Marlow is “able to pull back into a state of illusion”, making it possible for him to remain rational (65). Kurtz, on the other hand, has made himself into the leader of a tribe, abandoned his company, kept the ivory to himself, killed several people, and put their heads on posts outside his house (Conrad 74). His isolation has made him behave as if he were the king of the land, but at the same time, the wilderness has, according to Marlow, “taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion” and “whispered to him things about himself that he did not know” (74). When Marlow talks to him, he is trying to break “the heavy, mute spell of the wil-

derness” and his conclusion is that Kurtz’s soul must have gone mad. Kurtz dies some days after his separation with the inner station (90), probably because of the illnesses he has recently had and because he is too far from civilization to get any treatment or help.

To sum up this section, there is a big difference between the novels when it comes to sounds and silence. In *Heart of Darkness*, the forest is completely silent and dumb, which makes Marlow feel both shut out and deaf. In *Blood Meridian*, the landscape is not silent, because it is populated by wild animals who can be heard night and day. There are also traces of dead animals and people, and the landscape is sometimes compared to hell, which makes it obvious that it is not meant for human beings. In *Heart of Darkness*, the forest is not connected to death as much as the landscape in *Blood Meridian*, but there is still the risk of becoming mad, by staying too long in the wilderness.

## **Conclusion**

In both novels, the landscapes are presented as unfamiliar, inhospitable, and dangerous, and the protagonists are negatively affected by them. In *Heart of Darkness*, the dense forest makes Marlow feel both shut in and shut out. He feels shut in because great walls of vegetation rise around him, and shut out because he lacks knowledge of the place. He becomes insignificant in relation to the forest and starts to compare it to a living creature. Its density makes it easy to hide, which offers cover to the natives and increases the danger to Marlow. It also creates a claustrophobic feeling. In *Blood Meridian*, the kid becomes insignificant as well, but in relation to the huge open spaces he moves through. The lack of vegetation makes it impossible to hide or take shelter, which makes the kid, as well as the other characters, appear very exposed. The empty deserts, prairies, and huge sky depict the landscape as an enormous space full of emptiness, where no civilized order is to be found.

In *Heart of Darkness*, the compact darkness makes Marlow associate the place with prehistoric times. Like the lawless desert in *Blood Meridian*, the dark forest is presented as a place beyond civilization, where there is no order at all, and where Europeans like Marlow definitely do not belong. The darkness and the thick fog makes him feel blind, and the risk of being shot at increases. The days are sunny, but the sun is only described as something negative, and the darkness is so overpowering

that the place seems to be dark night and day. In *Blood Meridian*, the sun is more central, but the heat and draught that it causes makes its light into something mostly negative. The kid is often without water and he even experiences mirages. The nights are dark, but there are often elements of moving light in the darkness – campfires, thunderstorms, and electricity – which make the place seem moving, dangerous, and uncontrollable. The weather is also changing, but never makes a hospitable environment. When it is at its there is the risk of dying from thirst and when it is coldest, there is the risk of freezing to death.

In the jungle in *Heart of Darkness*, there is complete quiet: a silence that makes Marlow feel shut out, deaf, and observed. He is appalled by the forest's refusal to speak, and he thinks that there is an "inner truth" hidden in the silence and unknown. In *Blood Meridian*, the landscape is seldom quiet, because wild animals can be heard night and day. The presence of living wild animals and the traces of dead domesticated animals and people on the ground make it apparent that this is not a place for human beings. In *Heart of Darkness*, death is not as connected to the landscape as in *Blood Meridian*, but there is still the risk of being shot at and the risk of becoming mad by staying too long in the forest.

In both novels, it is clear that the unfamiliar landscapes are places where the protagonists do not belong, which makes their journeys end in misery. Both Marlow and the kid are unwanted guests in foreign lands, and it becomes more and more obvious that they have nothing to gain from the wilderness.

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