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RÉPUBLIQUE ALGERIENNE DÉMOCRATIQUE ET POPULAIRE  
MINISTÈRE DE L'ENSEIGNEMENT SUPERIEUR ET DE LA  
RECHERCHE SCIENTIFIQUE

UNIVERSITY OF ALGIERS 2  
FACULTY OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

**THE MORALITY OF FICTION: A STUDY OF NOVELS  
FROM ENGLISH, AMERICAN AND AFRICAN  
LITERATURE**

THESIS SUBMITTED IN FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTORATE

SUBMITTED BY:

MS. ADJOUT ASMA

SUPERVISED BY:

PROF. M'HAMED BENSEMMANE

2018

*الجمهورية الجزائرية الديمقراطية الشعبية*

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I hereby declare that the substance of this thesis is entirely the result of my investigation and that due reference or acknowledgement is made, whenever necessary, to the work of the other researchers.

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Date: 21/03/2018

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## Abstract

This thesis is an investigation into the morality of fiction, which consists in the exploration of the complex connection between art and ethics. The purpose is to consider the presence of moral discourse in creative writing and the importance of taking it into consideration in literary criticism. Ethical criticism, with its focus on the ethical dimension of literary texts, has come to be considered as reductive and irrelevant in a modern context that rejects overt theorizing and conventional ethics. Hence, the aim of this study is to re-adapt the claims of ethical criticism to a growing complex modernity following the tenets of John Krapp's responsible ethical criticism. Indeed, the latter developed a new approach to ethical criticism through avoiding an oversimplified and monological treatment of texts, and establishing a balance between the ethical and the aesthetic dimensions. This work thus provides a study of six novels from English, American and African literatures, ensuring thus a diversity of socio-historical contexts to provide our claims for morality in literature with a broader relevance. This diversity is also important to ensure relativity in time and place, and to demonstrate that the ethical claims expressed in the works are not timeless and are subject to change. The works chosen for this purpose are masterpieces in the history of literature, namely: Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Bessie Head's *Maru* and Ngugi Wa Thiongo's *A Grain of Wheat*. These novels are set in socio-historical backgrounds characterized by change and development: the American Renaissance and the search for a national identity; the fin-de-siècle period and the rejection of conventions in Europe; post-colonialism and the struggle for cultural independence in Africa. The complex contexts of the works in question offer thus morally challenging situations for the protagonists; indeed, they are engaged in moral debates that put into question conventional morality and calls for the adoption of more personal and practical ethics. The ethical claims of the authors are deduced from the study of the elaborate aesthetic structures used in the texts, such as symbolism, allegory, irony, impressionistic descriptions and interior monologue, and are not pre-determined, or subjectively imposed; the ethical and the aesthetic are two important aspects that are taken into consideration in responsible ethical criticism. Despite the progress achieved in different spheres, morality cannot be simply put aside and replaced by some modern theories that favour exaggerated subjectivity and unbounded freedom; morality is an inherent aspect of human nature, and the individual is in a constant need for

ethical codes of behaviour that help surmount moral challenges and restore inner peace. Literature provides an important ethical ground where the individual identifies with the protagonists and puts into practice his/her ethical judgement, and the literary critic is invited to bring to light this moral dimension- a most necessary practice in a modern world marred by unethical behaviours. This is what our study attempts to focus upon in the works under consideration.

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# *INTRODUCTION*



The present work is a study of literary works chosen from English, American, and African literatures. As the title indicates, the aim is to analyze the morality of fiction through demonstrating the presence of moral discourse in the texts, and hence reestablish its importance in literary criticism, for it is considered by many critics to be reductive and often irrelevant. We will explore the deep and complex connection between Art, as represented by literature, and Morality, through the study of novels where moral discourse is either clear or ambiguous. The comparative perspective allows us to highlight the effect that certain socio-historical circumstances can have on the attitudes of authors towards morality in their writing, and on the complex relationship between art and morality.

Literature and literary criticism have displayed throughout time shifting points of interest, as they are largely shaped by socio-historical circumstances. For instance, ancient Greek literature widely dealt with the feats and legends of heroic, even semi-divine individuals- individuals who are elevated above common people by special personal traits to perform deeds of social or universal importance. This reflects the important role the story teller had as a teacher and educator as well as a cultural guardian. Literature then, which was mostly expressed in oral form, had a clear moral and social functionality. In a sharp contrast, modern literature presents common people that we may meet in our everyday lives, often in conflict with either their inner selves or with society; didacticism and social functionality are completely outdated. Literary criticism has followed, if we may say, the same trend, as T.S. Eliot reflects: "Our criticism from age to age will reflect the things that the age demands"<sup>1</sup>. Since modernity, as we shall see, is marked by a strong rejection of any form of authority, moral, social or even literary, writers had no choice but to withdraw into subjectivity, and critics encouraged the reading of texts in a solipsistic manner.

Literary criticism is thus subject to change in accordance with socio-historical circumstances. Consequently, critics speak of a marked difficulty to draw a definite topography of criticism, and to clearly define the task of the literary critic. In the time of Plato, the critic was simply expected to reveal the moral or ethical discourse of the text; in other words, to deduce moral messages and hence teach the principles of good conduct. Plato himself said, in the words of John Krapp: "a fictional text can be a receptacle of

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<sup>1</sup> Qt. In: Moody, A. David. Ed. *The Cambridge Companion to T.S. Eliot*. U. K.: Cambridge University Press, 1994. P43

morally instructive significance”<sup>2</sup>. The works of the great writers and thinkers of Classical antiquity have strongly influenced attitudes towards literature throughout time. The notion of ‘purpose of literature’ is displayed in the function given to poetry in ancient Greek society. Indeed, while the aim of poetry was “to give pleasure”, and “to preserve the memory of great deeds from oblivion, [...] poetry was also regarded as the source of ethical wisdom and practical guidance for living”<sup>3</sup>. The moral and didactic purposes of poetry can be summarized in the words of Aeschylus in Aristophanes’ *Frogs*: “Children have a master to teach them, grown-ups have poets”<sup>4</sup>; the literary critic then had no other choice but to deal with this moral dimension of literature, as Penelope Murray puts it:

For Greek criticism is not primarily concerned with ‘literary’ or aesthetic matters, but rather with philosophical questions relating to the moral authority and ethical value of literature. The mainstream of ancient literary criticism takes it for granted that poetry, and literature in general, is a form of communication, and that literature and morality are intimately connected<sup>5</sup>.

The main concern for the Greek critic was not with the literary work as a work of art, but only with what it could express as far as morality is concerned; the concern with the content thus takes precedence over form. Moreover, this intimate connection between art and morality was dwelt upon by Plato, who is considered “the first thinker to formulate major questions about the function and role of art in society”<sup>6</sup>. Plato even assumed a radical position through his concept of censorship of poetry; he stated that poetry raises the emotional side of the individual and is susceptible of causing “psychological damages, for it appeals to an inferior element in the soul”<sup>7</sup>. Plato thus stresses the dangerous role poetry can have on the individual, for it makes him/her weaker through awakening his/her emotionality. Furthermore, what Plato does here is to stress the moral dimension of poetry, and the role the literary critic can have in the exploration of that dimension, and hence he brings to light the fact that the moral discourse of literature should be an important concern for critics.

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<sup>2</sup> Krapp, John. *An Aesthetics of Morality : Pedagogic voice and Moral Dialogue in Mann, Camus, Conrad, and Dostoevsky*. U. S.: University of South California Press, 1965. P1.

<sup>3</sup> Murray, Penelope, and T. S. Dorsch. Trans. *Classical Literary Criticism*. U. K.: Penguin Books, 1965. pX.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. pXXIV.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Ethical criticism, which is, broadly speaking, the criticism that takes the moral discourse of texts as a primary concern, knew another golden period around the First World War. Robert Eaglestone, in his book *Ethical Criticism: Reading After Levinas*, attempts to reestablish the claims of ethical criticism in a modern, disenchanted world. He argues that “an explicit concern for ethics has been at the heart of literary criticism since its inception in a modern and modernist form at around the time of the First World War”<sup>8</sup>. In other words, modern literary criticism expresses an interest in morality, despite a marked reticence of writers and literary critics. Eaglestone argues that modern literary criticism developed in response to the Western need for interpreting texts “after the onset of modernity and ‘the death of God’”<sup>9</sup>; what he suggests is that, after the rejection of religion and morality, there was an important shift of concern away from biblical or philosophical works towards literary works, for they represented an important alternative ground for ethical debate. The concern for ethics, the investigation of the moral tenets which guide the lives of humans, became once more central in literary criticism.

The beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the appearance of a more modern, industrialized and materialistic society, and a consequent loss of spirituality. The belief underlying this new, or renewed concern for ethics in literary criticism, was that “literature and criticism had a humanist ethical mission to repair a fractured modern world”<sup>10</sup>. In the face of a modern world characterized by a loss of values and faith, literature and criticism had the task of “re-enchanting” the world, bringing to the front the importance of moral values to heighten our sense of humanity, and create a better society, which has grown too superficial and materialistic.

However, ethical literary criticism went through a crisis, as it was increasingly challenged by postmodernism<sup>11</sup>. Postmodernists expressed a distrust of the ideals expressed in ethical criticism, as they deplored an acute loss of contact with the reality; indeed, there emerged “a strong tendency in the second half of the twentieth century for ethics to be applied to literature and philosophy negatively, through the attribution of moral

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<sup>8</sup> Eaglestone, Robert. *Ethical Criticism: Reading After Levinas*. UK: Edinburgh University Press, 1997. P1

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p10.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p16

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p19.

blindness and failure”<sup>12</sup>. Ethical criticism is considered to be blind, restrictive and irrelevant, while modern life has grown to be too complex, involving new moral problems to which conventional ethics failed to provide solutions. Dominic Rainsford and Tim Woods speak of the “increasing complexity of modern life” which “has led to new moral problems”<sup>13</sup>, to which conventional ethics, on which ethical criticism is based, failed to respond. This created a gap between moral theory and practice, and offered a serious challenge to ethical criticism which came to be considered out of date.

Moreover, Eagleton argues that the challenge to ethical criticism is crystallized in what is reductively called ‘literary theory’: “In the discourse of criticism, this challenge appears in a distinction drawn between ‘criticism’ and ‘theory’”<sup>14</sup>. Theory is accused by modernists of lacking ethics, of being ‘amoral’. Theory offers different approaches to literature and thus different interpretations, with claims to be more accurate, more concrete, scientific, and thus more lawful to the text, in contrast to ethical criticism which has grown to be too abstract and idealistic. The question posed now is whether this crisis in criticism infers that it is no more possible to read moral discourse in a literary text, and whether writers address ethical issues despite the distrust of postmodernist literary critics.

The defenders of ethical criticism are convinced that “literature reveals humanity and that it is ethically good”<sup>15</sup>; literature is the creation of the human mind, and thus is characterized by “a universality based on ‘our humanness, our being-as-man’”<sup>16</sup>. Because “great books tell us how to live”, ethics and literary criticism have a logical connection. Whether literature aims to teach morality or not, we cannot deny the fact that it has a deep human grounding, and that morality is an intrinsic part of humanity. John Gardner, on his part, reestablishes the importance of ethical criticism, and criticizes postmodern criticism’s ignorance of it:

The first great evasion [ of moral criticism ] ...though it was not originally intended as an evasion-was the New Criticism, which studied works of art as if they existed independent of the universe, outside time and culture, as self-sufficient organisms. That school of course served as an invaluable corrective to the almost universal nineteenth-century evasion, which avoided talking about the work by talking, instead, about the man who created it...A number of equally ingenious evasions rose in furious reaction-

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<sup>12</sup> Rainsford, Dominic and Tim Woods. Ed. *Critical Ethics: Text, Theory and Responsibility*. Great Britain: Macmillan Press, 1999. P4

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p2

<sup>14</sup> Eagleton, Robert. Op. Cit. p19

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. P21

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

Marxist criticism, generic, various forms of historical criticism, the present food of structuralist criticism, destructionist criticism, and safest, easiest approach of all, "hermeneutics"[...]. None of these really qualifies as criticism.<sup>17</sup>

According to Gardner, true criticism is the one which detects and praises true art, which 'clarifies life, establishes models of human action, casts nets towards the future, carefully judges our right and wrong directions, celebrates and mourns'<sup>18</sup>. Gardner's view about Art and Morality is clearly set, since he infers that the purpose of art and its criticism should be moral and not otherwise, a view which takes us back hundreds years ago towards Plato. Gardner's position regarding the moral purpose of art and criticism has been regarded as radical by some critics; indeed, we can see this radicalism in his complete dismissal of certain schools of literary criticism as being not exercising criticism at all. We prefer to take a less radical position through considering the fact that the moral dimension of any literary work can be regarded as only one aspect among many, while it is still an important and undeniable part of it.

Henry James, more specifically, deals with the novel, and tackles the question of its moral purpose. In "The Art of Fiction", he states that the only purpose that the novel can have is that of perfection. However, according to him, 'that the novel should have 'a conscious moral purpose' is possible to sympathize with, but difficult to assert as a rule for writing'<sup>19</sup>. Indeed, it would be hard to demonstrate whether or not a novelist writes with a conscious intention to tackle moral issues and express a moral. However, this doesn't conceal moral discourse. According to James, 'the air of reality is the supreme virtue of the novel. [...] The merit on which the moral purpose depends'<sup>20</sup>. In creating 'an air of reality', in picturing man's life, the novelist bestows, consciously or not, on his work a moral dimension, since morality is an undeniable part of it.

Robert Eaglestone cites the main principles that should underlie ethical criticism: the first one is disinterestedness, which is the objective reading and judgment of the text; the second one is practical criticism, the near scientific and empirical reading of the text; the third one is the treatment of a literary work as an aesthetic object isolated from the world,

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<sup>17</sup> Qt. In: Krapp, John. Op.Cit. P6.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> James, Henry. "The Art of Fiction". Longman Magazine. September, 1884.

< <http://www.mantex.co.uk/ou/aa810/james-05.htm>>

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

but not from other literary texts. This calls for individual intuition as the key feature in ‘determining the value of both the individual and the text itself’<sup>21</sup>; the fourth one is the adoption of a commonsense approach to language: language is unproblematic, since ‘the meaning of words, if ambiguous, are transparent and can be determined’<sup>22</sup>; the fifth one is the adoption of a canon of great works, such as Leavis’ ‘great tradition’<sup>23</sup>; the last one concerns the ‘civilizing mission of the university’<sup>24</sup>, which consists in teaching humanistic values. Evidently, these points have been subject to criticism, and led ethical criticism to be regarded as a reductionist and irrelevant approach to literature.

R. Eaglestone himself provides an objection to each claim that underlies ethical criticism: First, he asserts that while humanists, or ethical critics, accuse ‘theory’ of being ‘corrupting, political, and manipulative’, and stipulate that their approach is objective, they are in fact self-deceived, since they implicitly aim to teach humanist values, and humanism is in itself value-laden<sup>25</sup>. In addition, this assumption of objectivity is contradicted by the belief in the ‘civilizing mission of the university’: For the humanists, ‘the ethical purpose of a liberal education is to liberate, which can only mean to make one capable of conceiving a society as free, classless and urbane’<sup>26</sup>. Then, he argues that ‘practical criticism’ is limiting and contradictory; criticism cannot be a ‘pure’ act of interpretation outside any influence or position’<sup>27</sup>. In addition, this claim is based on the belief in the importance of the individual intuitive response to the text, which in its turn contradicts the claim for objectivity: A response to an artwork cannot be both personal and objective. To the simplified approach to language, Eaglestone responds that language is problematic and involves a complex process. Finally, Eaglestone qualifies the humanists’ adoption of a canon as reductive and Eurocentric. To summarize, regarding these contradictions, we agree with Eaglestone when he declares that ethical criticism is a reductionist, and oversimplified approach to literature, and thus cannot be sustained. However, it is still possible to find alternative solutions to the problems above mentioned.

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<sup>21</sup> Eaglestone, Robert. Op. Cit. P17

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. p18

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p24

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p29

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p25

In *An Aesthetics of Morality*, John Krapp offers these alternative solutions through introducing the notion of 'responsible ethical criticism':

What I understand to be responsible ethical criticism is not exclusively thematic in scope and agenda; neither is it monologic. Responsible ethical criticism is not an eternal paean to an ideal, whatever that ideal might be. [...] Correlatively, responsible ethical criticism is intrigued as much by *how* the ethical component of a literary document signifies, both as a self-contained aesthetic object and as a pedagogic instrument- as by *what* it signifies. It neither subordinates the aesthetic to the moral, nor the moral to the aesthetic; instead, it keeps both categories intact in its choice of forms and methods necessary for textual practice.<sup>28</sup>

J. Krapp provides a re-definition of ethical criticism in which the latter is not an attempt to teach an ideal, or moral code. In fact, the key feature of responsible ethical criticism is the attempt to keep a rightful balance between the aesthetic and the moral: the 'how' and the 'what'. The aim is not simply to find a moral at the end of a story, but to highlight the way this moral, if there is one, is expressed throughout the text, as he explains: 'Responsible ethical criticism does not pretend to find a moral to a story: it can, however, fairly discover a moral that does not betray the story's aesthetic modality'<sup>29</sup>. Form and content are taken into consideration in equal importance.

The main charges against ethical criticism, as being reductionist and contradictory, are thus eschewed by J. Krapp who asserts that the task of the critic is to highlight the moral codes found in the text- a task which does not 'depend on acceptance of any moral code, or on any particular view of the status of moral judgments'<sup>30</sup>. In fact, this requires a certain degree of objectivity, since the critic should not look for specific or pre-determined moral standards, but should let the text display them. In the words of J. Krapp, for ethical criticism to be persuasive, it must remain in 'dialogue' with 'the aesthetic structures' of the text:

The tension between these aesthetic structures and the text's ideological components solidifies a production of textual meaning. Attention to these aesthetic structures may profitably contribute to a nonmonologic, nonthematic ethical criticism by demonstrating how to read literature for insight, not into the kinds of ethical claims a text might convey, but into the way ethical claims may be expressed and validated.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Krapp, John. Op. Cit. p2-3

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p3

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

Thus, the aesthetics of the text are as important as the ethical claims it expresses; ethical criticism must concentrate on how these ethical claims are expressed in order to avoid being reductionist and oversimplifying. In addition, J. Krapp adds that the critic must reach the conclusion that ‘the moral standards found in the text are legitimate at a specific historical juncture’, because otherwise, he explains, ‘it would be dogmatic and reductive, claiming to affirm ultimate unchangeable truth outside historical time’<sup>32</sup>. The ethical critic must thus take the socio-historical factors of the text into consideration in order to keep a certain historical relativity, and to avoid the dogmatic and reductionist presentation of the ethical claims of the text as timeless and unchangeable. As for the humanists’ concern with the canon, Krapp indirectly responds to it through asserting the importance of engagement with several texts in order to make the claims of the approach more plausible and persuasive.

The purpose of this work is not to reestablish ethical criticism as the main branch of literary criticism, and to dismiss the other literary approaches. We do not intend to affirm, as social novelists do, such as Disraeli, Dickens and Kingsley, that the purpose of art is to act as a moral tool, to help solve social problems. Our aim is to affirm that moral discourse is an undeniable part of a literary text, and consequently, that one of the tasks of a literary critic is to decipher it through a close study of the aesthetic structures. We will thus reestablish the claims of ethical criticism as intrinsic parts of literary criticism through taking into consideration the balance between the aesthetic and the moral. For this purpose, we have chosen writers from different social and historical backgrounds to insure diversity, and to highlight the role that certain socio-historical circumstances can play in forging the attitudes of writers towards morality, and the kind of moral discourse that appears in the novels.

The present study encompasses English, American and African literatures. The authors we are concerned with are Nathaniel Hawthorne and Mark Twain, Oscar Wilde and Joseph Conrad, Bessie Head and Ngugi Wa Thiong’o. Hence, this work is organized into three parts that treat the three literatures apart, and each part includes two chapters that present the study of the works in question. Part one is devoted to American literature, and involves the discussion of two major American works, namely, Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet*

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

*Letter* (1850) and Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). Part two is devoted to English literature, where two masterpieces are analyzed: Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899). The last part deals with African literature, and presents the study of two important works, namely, Head's *Maru* (1971) and Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat* (1967). Our intent is to demonstrate that these authors address in their work issues that turn around the human condition, and how the latter is shaped by questions of morality. In fact, we may find differences and similarities between the works chosen as far as the ethical claims, and the aesthetic structures used to express them, are concerned.

The works chosen, which are considered landmarks in the history of literature, are selected for their important situations at specific junctures in their respective socio-historical contexts- contexts characterized, as we shall see, by development and change in different spheres, namely, science, technology, politics, that ushered the questioning of conventional morality and the role of art in society. Indeed, the importance of these complex works lies in the different approaches they offer around the relationship between art and morality in general, and the social functionality of art in particular. The titles chosen for each part reflect, directly or indirectly, these changes, and hint at the stance the authors adopted in response to them, together with the aesthetic forms they chose in order to do so.

The first part is entitled Moral Ambiguity, as it is seen in both *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The expression "moral ambiguity" points to the difficulty to make out the moral messages of the works in question. The socio-historical background of the novels is in itself productive of tension and ambiguity, for it is characterized by the search for a true American identity, as a definite break with the still dominating European influences. The two novels chosen, albeit different in style and tone, are considered by critics to have achieved true "Americanness", for they express the confusion that a cultural identity crisis can cause, through putting into question the moral and social conventions inherited from Europe. Moral ambiguity thus becomes an act of cultural self-assertion, a proof of difference and hence of cultural independence. Yet, the question is whether the authors are wholly in control of this ambiguity in their works; do they aim for it from the beginning of their narrative, or is it a direct inescapable expression

of the moral confusion that characterizes their social background? In other words, is it intentional or not?

Nathaniel Hawthorne stands out as an important figure in what came to be called 'American Naissance', which refers to the break from the dominating English literature and the birth of a true American art. In his work, Hawthorne provides insights into human nature, and depicts the individual's inner reality. Susan Manning argues that 'the twelve years spent in isolation in a room under the eaves of a house in Salem produced some of his most haunting tales of human possibility, both good and ill'<sup>33</sup>. *The Scarlet Letter* is considered Hawthorne's masterpiece, and 'America's first undoubtedly great novel'<sup>34</sup>. The characters presented in this fiction are depicted in terms of their relation to sin and its consequences on their inner being. In fact, the novel raised ambivalent reactions on the part of critics and readers who felt uneasy with the choice of subject as well as its treatment by the author; such attitude is expressed in the words of a critic who declared:

Mr. Hawthorne, according to the popular standard of morals in this age and this community, can hardly be said to pervert God's gifts, or to exert an immoral influence. Yet his work is far from being unobjectionable. The story is told with great naturalness, ease, grace, many delicacy, but it is a story that should not have been told. It is a story of crime, of an adulteress and her accomplice, a meek and gifted and highly popular Puritan minister in our early colonial days [...]. [Such crimes] are not fit subjects for popular literature, and moral health is not promoted by leading the imagination to dwell on them.<sup>35</sup>

This critic expresses his concern about popular moral health, which, he thinks, is threatened in view of the easy and explicit treatment of a crime that should be tabooed. The Sin is indeed the primary subject of the novel, as it is manifested in the richly embroidered letter A, on the breast of Dimmesdale, in the elf-child, and even in the lights illuminating the sky. However, when the story opens, the 'crime' is already committed. As George Woodberry puts it, starting at this point, Hawthorne devotes the fiction to the depiction of the soul of the individual in relation to sin, focusing on its consequences on the human soul, through probing the inner torments of all characters<sup>36</sup>. Moreover, the absence of the committing of

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<sup>33</sup> Ford, Boris. Ed. *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature: American Literature*. U. K. : Penguin Books, 1988. p100

<sup>34</sup> Ruland, Richard and Malcolm Bradbury. Ed. *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: a History of American Literature*. U. S. : Penguin Books, 1991. P144

<sup>35</sup> Kesterson, David B. Ed. *Critical Essays on Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter*. Boston, Massachusetts: G. K. Hall & Co, 1988. P36

<sup>36</sup> Woodberry, George. *Nathaniel Hawthorne*. U. S.: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1902.

the sin in the narrative is in itself a complication, which ushers an open and endless debate on its cause and nature. S. Manning affirms:

Because the event (the act of adultery) is not present in the narrative, the chain of meaning can never be completed. Was the adultery of Hester and Dimmesdale 'an evil deed' which 'invests itself with the character of doom', or did it, as Hester says, have 'a consecration of its own'?<sup>37</sup>

This complexity of interpretation is one of the major problematics of the novel, which offers a glimpse of the attitude of Hawthorne regarding moral issues. Hawthorne suggests the complexity of moral judgment in contrast to his ancestors' simplified position towards this issue; indeed, 'Puritanism, and the legacy of provincialism as left to America, tended to resolve complex moral positions into an extreme either of righteousness (justification) or of reprobation'<sup>38</sup>. In fact, *The Scarlet Letter* is allegorical as much as it is obscure; Hawthorne himself insisted on the fact that this novel is 'an obscure book': 'His aim was to penetrate and articulate the deepest levels of human psychology, those levels where conscience, guilt and awareness of sin restlessly function'<sup>39</sup>. Puritanism interested Hawthorne not only as a historical subject and source of his origins, but mainly because 'it raised the essential moral issues of his writing, indeed of his existence as a writer'<sup>40</sup>. Therefore, as a reaction to the Puritans' attitudes towards moral matters, Hawthorne is careful not to display any definite moral stance, and is more concerned with investigating rather than giving final judgments; it is up to the reader to find it out.

It is not surprising that Hawthorne was considered by most of his contemporaries as an amoral allegorist<sup>41</sup>. Even certain modern critics still consider him as such. Russel Kirk asserts that Hawthorne's 'burning interest was morality', and that 'he wrote moral allegories like no one did since Bunyan'<sup>42</sup>. However, as we shall see, the ambivalence and the inconclusiveness of his work conceals such a simplistic interpretation. The instability of Hawthorne's allegorical implications offers more open possibilities of interpretation, and allows the reader to explore the different factors at stake in the moral action, and to make out meaning. Hawthorne is not a seeker of truth, but a seeker of

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<sup>37</sup> Ford, Boris. Ed. Op. Cit. p107

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. p98

<sup>39</sup> Ruland, Richard and Malcolm Bradbury. Ed. Op. Cit. p146-147

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. p147

<sup>41</sup> Ford, Boris. Ed. Op. Cit. p151

<sup>42</sup> Kirk, Russel. *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot*. U. S.: Regnery Publishing Inc, 1953. P254.

“contradictions”<sup>43</sup>. As S. Manning puts it, ‘it is Hawthorne’s great achievement that this indefiniteness does not render the book morally void; its ethical stance is taken (as, to an extent, all ‘modern’ morality must be) in the presence of uncertainty’<sup>44</sup>. It is this uncertainty that we shall dwell on in the first chapter, through first exploring certain biographical and literary factors that fashioned Hawthorne as a writer who is steeped in ambiguity; then we devote the rest of the chapter to the analysis of the scarlet letter as a symbol, and the different interpretations it is open to. As we shall see, the ambiguity that characterizes the novel is due to the difficulty to assign a definite meaning to its central symbol.

William Dean Howells pointed to the ‘ethical intelligence’<sup>45</sup> of Mark Twain's writing, suggesting that questions of ethics are central in his literary production. Moreover, similarly to Hawthorne, there were a lot of contradictions in Mark Twain as a man as well as an artist. In the following passage, the critic Gladys Garmen Bellamy dwells on these contradictions as follows:

Mark Twain seethed with contradictions. A Puritan-Presbyterian by early training, he was temperamentally inclined to "free thinking". [...] His background and experience placed him squarely in the midst of the conflict between realism and romanticism which filled the later years of the nineteenth century: the adventures contingent upon settling the West invited a romantic coloring, but the vicissitudes of frontier life enforced a realistic point of view.<sup>46</sup>

Broadly speaking, this critic attempts to account for the different contradictions in Mark Twain through first referring to a contrast between his temperament of a free thinker and his conventional education that calls for the respect of religious precepts and codes of conduct; the contrast then is to be found in the background, which is divided between the romantic Western spirit, and the Eastern coastal realistic one. In fact, Twain faced a huge period of change in America in the aftermath of the Civil War: ‘The land spread of the nation and the cityscapes, the conflict of moral faiths and material processes, nostalgic reminiscence and radical changes’<sup>47</sup>. Consequently, Mark Twain is characterized by conflicting sympathies between his admiration for American expansionism and his nostalgia

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<sup>43</sup> Ruland, Richard and Malcolm Bradbury. Ed. Op. Cit. p149

<sup>44</sup> Ford, Boris. Ed. P110

<sup>45</sup> Qt. In: Fulton, Joe B. *Mark Twain's Ethical Realism: The Aesthetics of race, class, and gender*. U.S.: University of Missouri Press Columbia and London: 1997. P1

<sup>46</sup> Bellamy, Gladys Garmen. *Mark Twain As A Literary Artist*. U.S.: Norman, The University of Oklahoma Press: 1950. P55

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. p194

for the past. In the following quotation, William Dean Howells explains the way Twain reflects his age and its changes:

The inventions, the appliances, the improvements of the modern world invaded the hoary old of his rivers and forests and prairies, and while he was still a pioneer, a hunter, a trapper, he found himself confronted with the financier, the scholar, the gentleman....They set him to thinking, and, as he never was afraid of anything, he thought over the whole field and demanded explanations of all his prepossessions- of equality, of humanity, of representative government, and revealed religion. When they had not their answers ready, without accepting the conventions of the modern world as solutions or in any manner final, he laughed again...Such, or somewhat like this, was the genesis and evolution of Mark Twain.<sup>48</sup>

Twain's work reflects this oscillation and ambivalence, and thus offers open possibilities of interpretation. According to the conventional reading of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the author is said to express an unambiguous support for individual freedom and the rejection of social and moral conventions, which are mostly mentioned in the novel to be laughed at.

Moreover, there is a contrast in the critical response to Twain's work between those who consider him as a moralist and those who view him simply as a humourist. For example, Michael J. Kiskis asserts that 'issues of morality are deeply embedded in Twain's domestic fiction, especially the question of how to teach morality'<sup>49</sup>. In contrast to the conventional reading of Twain as a supporter of freedom, Kiskis places him in the tradition of domesticity, and explores the freedom gained by belonging<sup>50</sup>. Leland Krauth, on his part, regards him as 'a Victorian sage'- a public figure who puts on display 'an interest of a general or speculative kind in what the world is like, where man stands in it, and how he should live'<sup>51</sup>. So, according to these critics, Mark Twain was something of a moralist who took interest in human nature and moral action. Yet, what made his ambiguity concerning moral issues is his humour. As Richards Ruland and Malcolm Brudburg argue, "His great gift was his humor, which was not simply a comic tactic but a vernacular clarity and moral skepticism which he could deploy against respectable Eastern pretension and moral convention"<sup>52</sup>. While presenting a clear moral discourse and giving the impression of giving

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid. P 202-203

<sup>49</sup> Trombley, Laura E. Skandera and Michael J. Kiskis. Ed. *Constructing Mark Twain: New Directions in Scholarship*. U. S.: University of Missouri Press, 2001. P16.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, p109.

<sup>51</sup> Krauth, Leland in: Messent, Peter. and Louis J. Budd. Ed. *A Companion to Mark Twain*. U.S.: Blackwell, 2005. p27

<sup>52</sup> Ruland, Richard and Malcolm Bradbury. Ed. Op. Cit. p196

moral lessons, Twain has the gift to distance himself from the limiting position of a moral teacher through his use of humour, and consequently makes his work more complex and more interesting. In this novel, Twain unexpectedly makes Huck, the independent hero, run away, while commitment to the community is the only morally sound answer. The disintegration of human bonds, the escape from the community life and Huck's return to irresponsibility, prevent us from considering the novel as 'a moral tale'. The ending of the novel is considered by many readers as 'a weakening of the story's moral intensity'<sup>53</sup>, while some critics such as Kiskis see that 'Mark Twain's moral lesson is not that Huck gains a sense of his own humanity by transcending the constraints and stereotypes placed on him and on Jim by the authority of school and church and home, but that Huck fails. [...] Huck's failure is our lesson'<sup>54</sup>. It is the complexity and the resulting ambiguity of interpretation which make the novel "ethically" interesting, since it does not conceal the moral dimension of the novel, but rather reinforces it through raising questions that can be answered only by the reader, as is the case with Hawthorne.

In order to cover the different aspects of this ambiguity, we shall first explore the dualism found in Twain himself and in his literary outcome; then, we shall discuss the inner debates Huck Finn undergoes throughout the novel, which offer interesting questioning on conventional morality, the influence of the environment on the individual, and what we may call individual, or subjective morality. This is followed by an analysis of an important issue that was an undeniable part of American history: the question of racism; as we shall see, the portrayal of Jim in the novel does not express the author's stance towards this issue, which remains ambiguous until the end. Finally, we try to account for the ending of the novel, for it is considered one of the most controversial one in the history of modern literature.

The second part of the thesis is entitled Aestheticism and Decadence in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Heart of Darkness*. With these two novels, we reach the peak of the modernist movement, with their articulation of the rejection of moral, religious and social conventions. The Aesthetic movement is epitomized in the French motto "l'art pour l'art", which claims for the self-containment of art, and the rejection of any kind of moral or

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid. p199

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. p20.

social functionality. Writers are more and more drawn inwards, away from moral and social responsibility, called on to write for the sake of beauty, or any other purpose they choose. Decadence is a notion we cannot dissociate from the movement of Aestheticism, since it concerns the decadence of conventional moral values and principles, and hence the consequent decadence of individuals, exemplified in the terrible fate experienced by both protagonists of the novels in question. Moreover, we shall take into consideration the different attitudes the writers adopt towards this movement, and the extent to which they espouse or reject it, or even both. Some fundamental questions about art and morality shall be tackled, such as: Is a complete rejection of the functionality of art possible? Can a pure aestheticism be maintained? Are the writers completely in control of the moral claims expressed, or not, in the text?

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* displays a very subtle, intriguing moral issue; it presents a handsome young man who scarcely looks as if he could commit any wrong, and yet, who finds himself helplessly entrapped in sin, and ruins numerous lives. Wilde skillfully builds a contrast between a youth, who appears straight on the outside, while he proves to be corrupt on the inside, as his secret sins are made apparent on the portrait which becomes more and more unsightly. The novel is considered by many critics as challenging, because its subtle and troubling narrative makes it hard to identify it as moral or immoral. Indeed, many critics have presented it as a moral fable, while others find this interpretation misleading. In fact, according to the latter view, it is a non-conventional moral tale, since the sins do not have consequence on the body, and the protagonist escapes punishment for his crimes. In his preface to the novel, Wilde asserts that 'All art is useless', and that 'there is no moral or immoral book'. According to him, art should have no specific purpose, and should absolutely be freed from any social or moral responsibility, and hence be allowed to express its beauty.

The stance that Oscar Wilde holds towards art summarizes the main tenets of the new artistic movement that emerged in the Fin-de-Siècle period under the banner of 'Aestheticism'. The latter emerged as a reaction against Realism in its rejection of objectivity, and the necessary detachment of the artist from all that constitute the outside reality: morality, society, or politics; with the emergence of new sciences that shed light on the unfathomable complexities of the human soul, such as psychoanalysis, the only reality that matters for the artist is the inner reality. Art, thus, should have no responsibility

towards that outside world, and should be the pure product of his inner being, unaffected by moral conventions and social norms. As we shall see, Oscar Wilde behaves as the true aesthete in his daily life, through the fashionable social life he led in London, and especially in his non-fiction essays, where he overtly defends aesthetic principles; yet, in his fiction works, and especially in this novel we are concerned with, we can discern a certain doubt regarding those principles.

The case of Oscar Wilde is interesting to study, since it represents an instance of the complex and ambiguous relationship between art and morality. In order to investigate this, we shall first start with some introductory remarks on some biographical elements about Oscar Wilde, as well as on his non-fiction works; these are worth considering at the start, since they are to be verified and tested when we move to the textual analysis. The latter in fact turns around the investigation of the veracity of the different concepts advanced by the aesthetes as they are expressed in the novel through Lord Henry Wotton. The first point to be studied is one of the most important theories that Lord Henry presents to Dorian, namely, the 'new hedonism'; we shall investigate throughout the narrative whether a free indulgence of the senses would lead to true happiness, as the aesthetes firmly believe. The second theory to be tested, central to the Aesthetic movement, is the 'moral aesthetic'; this theory is an attempt on the part of the aesthetes to break away from conventional morality, as they believe that we shall develop our sense of beauty, and take it, instead of conscience, as our only guide in our moral life. The last point to be considered is again a theory that Lord Henry Wotton advances, and which Wilde himself professes in his essays: Degeneration. Lord Henry calls Dorian for a return, a degeneration, into the repressed, instinctual drives for the realization of true self-fulfillment and happiness. We shall investigate the different ways that these fundamental principles of the Aesthetic movement are put to test by an author who claims to be a decadent aesthete himself.

Joseph Conrad's work, as W. W. Robson puts it, 'implies his own high moral standards, and he assumed that his readers understood them'<sup>55</sup>. Indeed, throughout his work, Conrad promotes moral standards imbued with the late Victorian spirit such as, courage, self-sacrifice, devotion to duty,...Yet, Conrad writes at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and is considered among the forerunners of modernism, a fact which forcibly brings about

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<sup>55</sup> Robson, W. W. *Modern English Literature*. U. K.: Oxford University Press, 1970. P36.

some kind of contradiction. Indeed, we can discern in Conrad a split between allegiance to romantic, chivalric moral standards inherent in Victorian morality, and doubt about their reliability and place in the modern age. Moreover, similarly to other writers of the Fin-de-Siècle, Conrad is seduced by the detachment and freedom provided by the movement of Aestheticism. However, contrary to them, he manifests a certain resistance to it, which is expressed in his fiction as well as his non-fiction writing. Hence, contrary to Oscar Wilde, Conrad does not wholly embrace the tenets of the Aesthetic movement, but tries to resist them, and this brings about a certain tension in his work between faith and doubt, worthy to be taken into consideration.

*Heart of Darkness* is considered to be Conrad's most influential work. Its main theme is the criticism of the British Empire which has turned against any moral or religious convention. Joyce Carol Oates, in his introduction to *Heart of darkness* and *The Secret Sharer*, presents it as:

[A] work of the imagination that has transcended its late-Victorian era to acquire the stature, with the passing of time, of one of the great visionary self-examinations of Western Civilization. [...] Its theme is nothing less than the acknowledgment of a tragic darkness- the ethic of the 'brute'- in the heart of the late-nineteenth-century-capitalist Europe<sup>56</sup>.

Indeed, Conrad attacks the immorality that the white missionaries displayed in the heart of Africa. He builds a contrast in the character of Kurtz between the good appearance he displays as 'an emissary of pity, and science, and progress', and his inner reality which is evil, tyrannizing African natives, and surrounding his jungle sanctuary with decapitated heads of native 'enemies'<sup>57</sup>. *Heart of Darkness* is a study into the human soul, an exploration of its mysteries and capacity for evil. Here again, as in many modernist works, it is difficult to trace a clear moral purpose, and similarly to the other authors chosen in this study, Conrad himself is subject to doubt and contradiction.

In "A Personal Record", Conrad expresses his doubt about the ethical aim of creation as follows:

The ethical view of the universe involves us at last in so many cruel and absurd contradictions, where the last vestiges of faith, hope, charity, and even of reason itself, seem ready to perish, that I have come to suspect that the aim of creation cannot be

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<sup>56</sup> Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness and The Secret Sharer: With A New Introduction by Joyce Carol Oates*. U. S.: Penguin Group Inc, 1902. P1.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. p2.

ethical at all. I would fondly believe that its object is purely spectacular...Those visions, delicious or poignant, are a moral end in themselves<sup>58</sup>.

We trace in Conrad a certain disillusionment with the world, which he came to see as full of cruelty and contradiction; a modern world where faith and moral principles cannot hold for long. It is a painful recognition of the un-ethical aim of creation, coming from someone who cherishes traditional morality and values. Hence, we find expressed in Conrad's work an attempt to cling to those lost values, together with an awareness of the impossibility to do so; this makes his work fascinating, as we witness the efforts of a believer to hold on to his faith in a world that forces him to abandon it. John Krapp argues that, despite the fact that Conrad affirms that the aim of creation is not ethical, still it can produce 'visions' that are 'moral', and he attempts to apply it to his literary production as follows:

[T]hough the conscious aim of creation may not be moral, the inadvertent consequences of creation may nevertheless take the shape of a particular moral effect generated by a reader called upon to evaluate the textual spectacle itself<sup>59</sup>.

In other words, even if Conrad assumes he is skeptical about morality as such, the text itself provides the reader with possibilities of moral interpretation. The pessimism that Conrad overtly expresses is countered in his work with the undeniable presence of moral discourse, hidden behind contradiction and ambiguity, which suggests that Conrad did not simply lose faith, but continued to 'wrestle' with the challenges of the modern world to keep it. As J. Krapp puts it, '[t]here is simply too much at stake in the reception of the literary work for the work to be produced irresponsibly'<sup>60</sup>.

We try to bring to light this tension in Conrad between faith and disillusionment through exploring the ways he adopts, and rejects at the same time, Aestheticism as represented by the movement of Impressionism and degeneration; then, we try to account for the different elements that Conrad uses in the novel that prevents us from considering him, as well as his work, as merely pessimistic. As we shall see, Conrad's novel offers another interesting example of the intricate relationship between art and morality, and the impossibility to cut them apart.

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<sup>58</sup> Qt in : Krapp, John. Op. Cit. p101.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

The third part of the study is dedicated to the analysis of art and morality in two important modern African works: Bessie Head's *Maru* and Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat*. It is entitled *The Committed Writer*, for it presents an exploration of the concept of commitment which, whereas it is regarded with skepticism, and is even rejected in Western literature, is considered central and fundamental to African literature. Literature in the postcolonial African context recovers fully its moral and social functionality, as the writer attempts to redeem the past, devastated by colonialism, and help create a better future for his society. Our interest here is to investigate whether this moral and social dimension of literature makes it limited or reductive, as thought by Western writers; are these literary works mere social documents, in the sense that the ethical claims they express are limited within the socio-historical background they are produced in? Does this commitment of the writers make of them moral teachers who impart, didactically, moral directions to be observed? Moreover, does it make of their works aesthetically simple and uninteresting? The two writers chosen for this purpose are different in many aspects: gender, background, style and even critical reception; these differences are interesting as they throw light on different angles of the issues we are concerned with here.

Bessie Head is a South African woman writer; she had a very particular background which made her suffer from oppression as a coloured and as a woman; she escaped these persecutions and lived as an exile in Botswana, where she wrote the majority of her works. She lived with a consciousness dominated by feelings of solitude, rejection, and alienation, and found escape only in writing; as Shivalik Katoch Pathania comments:

For these marginalized women, it becomes essential to break with their cultural repression, and to do so they must begin writing and start searching for an exit from this suffocating, discriminating world.<sup>61</sup>

Writing for Head became a kind of cure, as it gave her the opportunity to express herself on different matters, and to escape the daily discrimination she was exposed to. Her work is very particular, if we compare it with the works of other contemporary writers; it was particular to the extent that it was rejected by the majority of African critics and readers, because they failed to identify with it, for it did not appeal particularly to an African

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<sup>61</sup> Pathania, Shivalik Katoch. *The Works of Bessie Head*. Jaipur, India: Book Enclave, 2009. P23

audience; besides, did not overtly express this notion of commitment, so fundamental in the postcolonial African context. So, this made of Head a unique figure in the African context.

In fact, the main factors behind this uniqueness is her status of an outcast, an exile, that engendered, besides loneliness and alienation, a strong sense of freedom. She did not feel some sense of belonging and duty to any social group, and this offered her the opportunity to think on broader, human perspectives; she herself comments on this point saying: “a combination such as I of two nations finally establishes the human race”<sup>62</sup>, and it is in humanity in its broader terms that Head found refuge, away from oppression and discrimination. There are other factors that contributed to her universalist perspective, such as the Eastern and Western influences; on one hand, the Eastern concepts of spirituality and reincarnation heightened her interest in the human soul, instead of race or social group. On the other hand, Western writers also impacted on her writing; D.H. Lawrence, for example, affected her with his ability to transcend social belonging and race, whereas Bertolt Brecht had a very different impact, as he appealed to her sense of practicality and concern with one’s immediate social environment. We can already see some kind of contradictory aspirations in Head between her interest in large, universal perspective and the need to belong to a social milieu; and this is what engendered her very particular sense of commitment.

The focus of our analysis in this chapter is Head’s unique understanding of commitment in *Maru*. The latter is a very interesting novel that presents the life of a coloured woman within a patriarchal, racist society; it expresses the different ways Head manages to bring together and reconcile her seemingly opposite concerns with the immediate and the universal, the practical and the ideal, the worldly and the spiritual. We shall investigate the different cases that reflect Head’s opposed interests, and which express her very particular views on literature and the role it can play in the moral and social lives of individuals. We shall first look closer into important biographical elements and literary influences that shaped her writing; then we shall begin our study of the novel through first exploring the concept of “the soul”, and Head’s particular understanding of it in her attempt to merge the universal with the immediate. Then, we will analyze Head’s views on art and the role it can perform as far as the individual as well as the society are concerned. Our final

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<sup>62</sup> Eilersen, Gillian Stead. *Bessie Head : Thunder Behind Her Ears. Her life and Writing*. Heinemann, 1995. P103

point is devoted to the analysis of the ending of the novel, which elicited from critics and readers different reactions. The ending is ambiguous and complex, and shall throw more light on Head's specific notion of commitment.

The Kenyan writer Ngugi Wa' Thiongo differs in each and every way from Bessie Head: in gender, in background, and in writing style. More particularly, he differs from Head in the position he adopts towards this notion of commitment we are concerned with, for he is considered one of its strongest supporters, and he expresses himself clearly on the subject in his non-fiction writing. Indeed, Ngugi makes it plain that he rejects the Western "l'art pour l'art" attitude, and clearly declares that the writer has a duty towards his society which he cannot deny. Contrary to Head, he stresses the fact that literature must be "worldly", and must be concerned with the daily life of the individual within society, and that the writer must first and foremost recognize and serve his duty towards the society he belongs to. He thus expresses a clear social orientedness which contrasts with Head's broader human perspective.

Indeed, in his book of essays entitled *Moving the Center and Decolonizing the Mind*, Ngugi denounces colonialism and the devastating effects it has on societies, which continue to linger even after independence. In these essays, he calls for the rehabilitation of Kenyan past history, which he considers an essential step towards the revival of African cultural identity. He also writes to expose the denigrating representation of Kenyan history and people in Western literature, which he considers a dangerous and subtle colonial weapon. He thus calls the African writer to commit himself to the cause of his people, and help them move on towards a better future, as he declares:

It seems to me that the African writer now, the one who opts for becoming an integral part of the African revolution, has no choice but that of aligning himself with the people: their economic, political and cultural struggle for survival.<sup>63</sup>

The African writer becomes, in the vision of Ngugi, "l'Homme Engagé", who uses his art for the sake of his people's advancement. Ngugi thus clearly calls for the social orientedness of literature, which he considers necessary in a postcolonial context where society needs guidance amidst confusion and chaos. However, in his fiction, these are not his only points of interest, as his perspective gets broader.

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<sup>63</sup> Ngugi Wa Thiongo. *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedom*. James Currey, EAEP, Heinemann: 1993. P74-75

*A Grain of Wheat* is a novel that recounts the lives of some individuals in the days preceding Uhuru- the celebration of independence. It does so through a deep psychological rendering of the experiences of characters vis-à-vis the revolution against the colonial powers. We trace in this novel certain important influences, such as Frantz Fanon and his psychological study of the colonial experience, as well as Joseph Conrad and his interest in the moral action of the protagonists. Hence, the novel offers an interesting rendering of the colonial experience, based on the individual, subjective experiences of the characters. We shall first go through an exploration of the different positions Ngugi takes towards the role of art, as well as the different influences that shaped his writing. Then, we devote our study to the analysis- more precisely, the psychological analysis of the characters who experienced, each in his/her own particular way, the trauma of colonialism. We shall explore the extent to which the “social orientedness” that Ngugi so vehemently defends in his non-fiction writing is expressed in *A Grain of Wheat*, and investigate whether it makes of the work in question simplistic and uninteresting as far as ethics and aesthetics are concerned.

Our intention is to offer a study that treats on an equal footing both content and form, and attempt to investigate whether fiction has a morality, and whether writers intend or not to express it in their works, through exploring the different attitudes they adopt towards the moral and social functionality of art. As we shall see, the socio-historical background plays an important role in shaping these attitudes.

Part One:  
Moral Ambiguity in  
Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*  
and  
Mark Twain's  
*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

Preamble:

In the movement called “American Naissance”, American authors of the middle nineteenth century are said to have found their own “style” and “voice”. They found the means to express a true American identity as different from the European one; hence, the word “naissance” expresses this notion of “new birth” and emergence. In his book entitled *Equivocal Endings in Classical American Novels*, Joyce A. Rowe focuses his study on American novels, and explains that the endings of these latter show, among other aspects, this difference:

These endings are equivocal in a special thematic sense, as they simultaneously promote and deny a visionary ambition already defeated in the body of the work. Neither tragic, comic nor ironic, they are, rather, deliberately evasive, eluding those truths of experience, of both self and world, which the preceding narrative has been at pain to establish.<sup>64</sup>

The point that J. A. Rowe advances is that these new and true American novels are the ones that set the difference between American and European literature, and ushered a true cultural independence from the mother continent; and they achieved this through one common aspect which is equivocality or ambiguity. He argues that that they set “a visionary ambition” throughout the narrative that is simply denied at the end; the truths of experience that were presented as absolute are at the end put again into question, leaving the reader with no clue whether to consider such endings tragic, comic or ironic. *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* are considered among important classical American novels- among the ones that expressed a true “Americanness”. Furthermore, these two novels have puzzled critics and readers alike for their evasiveness and ambiguity, especially when it comes to the different moral debates their narratives offer. This is the main point of our investigation in this part, as we try to identify the different moral ambiguities the novels present, and the effects they have on the reader.

The term “ambiguity” is defined as ‘a lack of clarity in a situation or in a verbal expression; in language use it is generally regarded as an error or flaw’<sup>65</sup>. We understand from this definition that, in general speech, ambiguity is equated with error, as it violates the fundamental basis of communication, which is clarity. However, this definition is not the

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<sup>64</sup> Rowe, Joyce A. *Equivocal Endings in Classical American Novels: The Scarlet Letter; The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn; The Ambassadors; The Great Gatsby*. Cambridge University Press: U.S., 1988. P1-8

<sup>65</sup> Quinn, Edward. *A Dictionary of Literary and Thematic Terms*. Facts on File, 2006. P20

dominant one anymore since the publication of William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, which has had an important impact on the development of New Criticism and subsequent literary theory<sup>66</sup>. W. Empson explores different types of ambiguity to be found in poetry; he states that:

An ambiguity, in ordinary speech, means something very pronounced, and as a rule witty and deceitful. I propose to use the word in an extended sense, and shall think relevant to my subject any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language.<sup>67</sup>

From this short quotation, we can infer the interest of Empson, which does not merely lie in the explanation of the different ambiguities of the poetic language- his concern is with the mental process it involves, as he attempts to account for the different 'reactions' raised by 'the same piece of language', and how this process, he adds later, can 'enhance the experience of poetry'<sup>68</sup>, that is to say, the mental appreciation of poetry. Our concern lies with moral ambiguity- ambiguity in the moral purport of the literary work. As we shall see, the two novels under study offer alternative, often opposite ethical claims, knowing that the moral ambiguity of these two works has long been debated among critics who have often taxed them with un-clarity and contradiction. Our interest lies in the analysis of the way the novels call for the moral involvement of the readers, instead of the attempt to elucidate the contradiction and impose definite, clear-cut interpretations. W. Empson argues that when the meanings of the ambiguity are opposites, 'the total effect is to show a fundamental division in the writer's mind'<sup>69</sup>. Indeed, as we shall see, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Mark Twain are constantly presented as having split personalities, and the ambiguities of their works is but an expression of this division. Moreover, we will not just stop at this division, as we shall demonstrate that moral ambiguity is an invitation to active moral participation. As we have seen in the introduction, the ethical critic John Gardner puts forward the concept of "true art", "which clarifies life, establishes models of human action, casts nets towards the future, carefully judges our right and wrong directions, celebrates and mourns"<sup>70</sup>. True art, according to him, is thus moral art; a moral literary work is

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Empson, William. *Seven Types of Ambiguity: A Study of its Effects in English Verse*. Chatto and Windus: London, 1977. p1

<sup>68</sup> Quinn, Edward. Op. Cit. p21

<sup>69</sup> Empson, William. Op. Cit. p192

<sup>70</sup> Krapp, John. Op. Cit. P6

characterized by clarity as it is supposed to present the reader with good examples in order to reach moral understanding. On the other hand, there are critics and writers who reject these moral characteristics which they consider restrictive. Peter Lamarque, for example, in drawing the differences between philosophy and literature, argues:

[T]o read philosophy is to read for truth. In contrast, to read and value a work from a literary point of view seems quite different [...]. Literary works that are too obviously didactic, that too obviously are trying to impart a message, are seldom viewed highly.<sup>71</sup>

Following this trend of thought, complexity, ambiguity and inconclusiveness are thus favoured over moral didacticism and clarity. Indeed, certain literary works are characterized by moral ambiguity, in the sense that they do not present a clear moral message. Does this moral ambiguity cancel the moral dimension of the work, or, in other words, does it make of it an immoral one? Or, on the contrary, does this moral ambiguity open up different possibilities of interpretation, and contribute thus in widening our moral understanding? In an interesting book entitled *The Moral Laboratory*, Jemeljan Hakemulder considers moral ambiguity an important feature of literature. According to him, reading literature presents us with a diversity of moral situations and viewpoints, and enables thus “an expansion and deepening of one’s moral awareness”<sup>72</sup>. Furthermore, he argues that the moral ambiguity of literature makes it impossible for readers to make a “univocal moral judgment”<sup>73</sup>, and thus, “in being free from the pressures to make moral decisions, this creates a sanctuary for ethical reflection”<sup>74</sup>. Moral ambiguity, thus, stimulates ethical reflection in the reader; i.e.: it develops in the reader the ability to think, to question, and thus to participate actively in making sense of the literary text’s moral dimension.

Graig Taylor, in an article discussing the moral ambiguity of literature, points to these works which engender in the reader conflicting responses, and stresses their importance in making us get “a richer sense of the ways how literature can contribute to moral understanding”<sup>75</sup>.

He adds:

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<sup>71</sup> Qt. in: Taylor, Graig. “Literature, Moral Reflection and Ambiguity”. *The Royal Institute of Philosophy*, Cambridge Journals, 2011. P90.

<sup>72</sup> Hakemulder, Jemeljan. *The Moral Laboratory: experiments examining the effects of reading on social perception and moral self-concept*. Utrecht: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2000. P23-24.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. p24.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Taylor, Graig. “Literature, Moral Reflection and Ambiguity”. *The Royal Institute of Philosophy*. Cambridge Journals, 2011. P75.

[I]t is through our responses to a [morally ambiguous literary work], through our conflicting responses to such a work, that we can gain a sense of what serious moral reflection really requires of us, of the kind of unflinching scrutiny it requires, scrutiny not most fundamentally of others but of ourselves. A failure to subject ourselves to this kind of scrutiny is itself a kind of evasion of serious moral reflection and judgment.<sup>76</sup>

Following this argument, we infer that reading such ambiguous works makes us enter the process of self-scrutiny or self-questioning—an essential process in ethical reflection which contributes to the betterment of our moral sense.

Moral ambiguity, thus, involves the reader in making sense of the moral inconclusiveness of the literary work in question. The reader is no more the passive receptacle of moral values, which the overtly didactic literary works make of him; instead, he is transformed to an active participant in bringing his own moral reflection and judgment. In this part, we will attempt to trace the moral ambiguity of N. Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and M. Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and demonstrate that, far from shattering their moral dimension, it offers ground for interesting moral discussion. Before we start our discussion of the two works, we will take a look at the most important socio-historical factors that contributed in fashioning these works in particular, and American literature in general. As we have mentioned earlier, the moral ambiguity of these works can be partly explained by the very special socio-historical factors that fashioned them; indeed, they appeared in a period when Americans needed to assert their own cultural identity in the face of a dominant European mother country. This led to the emergence of the concept of 'Americanness', which has been at the heart of American literature since its inception—a logical consequence of the search of a true American identity, independent of the European one—a search which has shaped the American national history. This sense of identity had to be forged in relation with a conception of America as a 'new world'—a process which has fascinated and at the same time appalled American authors, as it entailed positive as well as negative implications; in fact, there were two contrasted conceptions of America: a positive, romantic one, which speculates that 'the late discovery of America was a providential blessing', and that 'America enshrined a principle of boundlessness, of new

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid. p89.

starts and new hopes for the human race'<sup>77</sup>. It represented thus a chance for 'a rebirth into innocence, simplicity, brotherhood'<sup>78</sup>. This belief was ingrained in the hearts of the inhabitants of the thirteen British colonies, and was epitomized in the Declaration of Independence and the American Constitution. On the other hand, there was the opposite, far more pessimistic approach to the significance of the new world based on the belief that America 'was not regeneratively but degeneratively primitive'<sup>79</sup>. The American climate is believed to have negatively affected animal and human life, which came to be considered as backward. This degeneracy argument was to be abandoned through the coming scientific explorations of the continent which dismissed it as unreasonably superstitious; yet, it survived in other, more insidious forms, 'as a conviction that there was something meager, even tainted, in the American atmosphere'<sup>80</sup>. This belief was an impediment for Americans to forge a 'new' cultural identity, because it heightened a sense of doubt and confusion about the traditional and founding vision of America as the New Jerusalem- the 'promised land'.

These two contrasted views of America survived in the American imagination through a series of contrasts: progress vs degeneration, innocence vs evil, light vs darkness; and these contrasts came to be expressed in the literary products of the time. The novel genre, more particularly, epitomizes this American dualism. In *The American Novel and its Tradition*, Richard Chase highlights the uniqueness of the American novel, and attributes it to its tendency to 'rest in contradictions and among extreme ranges of experience'<sup>81</sup>. The split that haunts the American consciousness, divided between past and present, tradition and progress, is responsible for, as Henry James puts it, 'the sickness' of the American novel. This kind of split engenders 'great confusion in philosophy, morality, and politics and a basic instability in literary and cultural values'<sup>82</sup>- an instability which is expressed in morally challenging literary works. The American novel is, as we shall see, an exploration of the

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<sup>77</sup>Marcus, Cunliffe. Ed. *The Penguin History of Literature: American Literature since 1900*. England: Penguin Books, 1973. P2

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. p3

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Chase, Richard. *The American Novel and its Tradition*. New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1957. P1

<sup>82</sup> Ibid. p8

anomalies and dilemmas'<sup>83</sup> that characterize the untrodden territories of life of the fascinating new world.

*The Scarlet Letter* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* are considered classics of American Literature; among other novels, critics consider that the two works achieved true 'Americanness', in the sense that both, in their unique ways, expressed the essence of the American identity. R. Chase raises an important point when he refers to the fact that the two novels were considered 'sports' and 'eccentric' according to Mr. Leavis's "great tradition", because '[n]ot one of them has any close kinship with the massive, temperate, moralistic rendering of life and thought we associate with' the latter<sup>84</sup>. Indeed, the works we are concerned with in particular are characterized by a deep, disturbing moral ambiguity- an expression of this split in the American cultural history.

Furthermore, R. Chase identifies two streams of romance that underlie the American literary history. One stream covers such writers as John Esten Cooke, Lew Wallace, and others who, he argues, have not responded to 'the forms of imagination which the actualities of American life have inspired'<sup>85</sup>, and stayed prisoners within the confines of a European literary tradition. The other stream includes authors who 'have found that romance offers certain qualities of thought and imagination which the American fiction writer needs but which are outside the province of the novel proper'<sup>86</sup>. He places Hawthorne and Twain together with Melville, James, Faulkner and others in this stream which has adapted to the 'new' conditions and needs, epitomized in the urge to forge a true and original American identity. Moreover, he places Hawthorne as the pioneer in what came to be called the 'American romance': 'These are writers who each in his own way have followed Hawthorne both in thinking the imagination of romance necessary and in knowing that it must not 'swerve aside from the truth of the human heart'<sup>87</sup>. Romance thus allows a certain digression from the reality as it is, but must necessarily account for the truth of human nature. Thus, even though *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* differ in style and tone, they register in the same genre, romance, considered the best

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid. p5

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. p4

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. P20

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. p20

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

suited aesthetic form to deal with American contradictions, and to express a true American spirit.

Romance is a literary genre which is conventionally defined as “a type of narrative featuring adventures in exotic places, love stories, and/or the celebration of simple rustic life”<sup>88</sup>. We need to take the definition further, since writers, throughout time, have given this genre more complex interpretations; for example, in *Don Quixote* (1605,1615), “Cervantes moves the traditional romance into a new dimension by suggesting a connection between the ideals of romance”: chivalry, strange coincidences, and improbable events, “and the brute reality”<sup>89</sup>. More than a simple connection, this suggests a conflict between imagination and the practical reality. Since Hawthorne is considered the pioneer of the American romance, we shall take into consideration his own definition of the genre. In his famous preface to *The House of Seven Gables*, Hawthorne declares:

When a writer calls his work a Romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume had he professed to be writing a Novel. The latter form of composition is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience. The former--while, as a work of art, it must rigidly subject itself to laws, and while it sins unpardonably so far as it may swerve aside from the truth of the human heart—has fairly a right to present that truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or creation.<sup>90</sup>

With these words, Hawthorne draws an important distinction between the novel, which deals with the real, “the probable”, and thus for him replicates realistic situations, and the romance, where the writer has the possibility to “claim” a certain autonomy or freedom, since the “truth” he deals with is of his own “choosing or creation”; in this way romance can claim to deal with what Richard H. Brodhead calls “experiential truth”<sup>91</sup>- not truth of actual events but "the truth of the human heart". Furthermore, we understand that romance is not limited to a simple replication of the reality around him, but is free to choose, and more importantly, to create. A few lines further, Hawthorne adds that romance refers to “a world

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<sup>88</sup> Quinn, Edward. Op. Cit. P368.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. p369.

<sup>90</sup> Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The House of Seven Gables*. 1851.

<[http://www.online-literature.com/hawthorne/seven\\_gables/](http://www.online-literature.com/hawthorne/seven_gables/)>

<sup>91</sup> Bloom, Harold. Ed. *Modern Critical Interpretations: Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter*. U.S.: Chelsea House Publisher, 1986. P57

suggestive of a reality within or beyond the “real world”<sup>92</sup>, where the writer feels free to “bring out or mellow the lights and deepen and enrich the shadows of the picture”<sup>93</sup>. With these words, Hawthorne explains that romance is not completely dissociated from the reality, but is still related to it; what the author insists on is the fact the writer of romance is free to deal with this reality he creates in the same way a painter can do on his canvas, playing on the intensity of lights and shadows. Hawthorne further dwells on this link between romance and reality when he adds that the former is woven in a moonlit space, “somewhere between the real world and the fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other”<sup>94</sup>. Hawthorne here blurs the boundaries between the “real” and the “imaginary”, and affirms that romance is situated somewhere between the two realms. He chooses to describe this space of “meeting” as a moonlit one, which suggests notions of darkness, un-clarity, and instability. This already hints at complexity and ambiguity of meaning- aspects which characterize in fact, his work as well as that of Mark Twain.

Hawthorne thus presents romance as a complex and challenging genre that cannot be contained through the imposition of simple and straightforward interpretations; his definition is a kind of warning to the reader- a call for reflection and open possibilities of interpretation. As one critic puts it, although Hawthorne’s prose “always holds to the possibility of a primary reality”<sup>95</sup>, he transforms this reality into romance “through an imaginative evocation of possibilities rather than an imposed interpretation”<sup>96</sup>. Romance, thus, as used by Hawthorne, goes beyond realism in its search for different perspectives to look at the reality. As the co-writers of *From Puritanism to Postmodernism* put it, ‘Hawthorne explores the form [...]for its complexity and contradiction’<sup>97</sup>; indeed, moral ambiguity is an important aspect of Hawthorne’s ‘American form of ‘romance’”<sup>98</sup>, where the writer self-consciously creates oppositions and contradictions, and leaves for the reader the

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<sup>92</sup> Quinn, Edward. Op. Cit. P369.

<sup>93</sup> Hawthorne, Nathaniel. Op. Cit.

<sup>94</sup> Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter (1850)*. Penguin Books, 1994. P31. (*All references to this novel are taken from the same source*)

<sup>95</sup> Ford, Boris. Ed. *American Literature*. Op. Cit. P104

<sup>96</sup> Ibid. p106.

<sup>97</sup> Ruland, Richard, and Malcolm Bradbury. Op. Cit. P149

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

'responsibility for the act of elucidation'<sup>99</sup>. As we shall see, what is common to the works under study is the duality and inner tension they express, and the lack of any attempt at resolution: The novels end in moral ambiguity.

Graig Taylor discerns different types of moral ambiguity that can be found in a literary text: ambiguity that is resolved within the work into a single meaning, and two alternate meanings that appear to conflict but turn out to indicate a single, more complex meaning. He explains that these types of ambiguity may be considered an artistic technique to convey a certain idea or conception. However, there is a type of ambiguity which he qualifies as "deeper" and "more troubling": "[the] kind of ambiguity that may occur when a writer [...] has put all the truth [he] can into a work, yet where particular characters and events portrayed remained unresolved for the writer himself"<sup>100</sup>. The latter is the most interesting type and the most relevant to our discussion of the novels. As we shall see, Hawthorne and Twain display a certain distance towards the characters and events they portray, in the sense that they do not show their own attitudes towards them. The questions left at the end are: do the authors approve or disapprove of the protagonists? What is the solution to the problematic moral situations presented? The authors provide no answer.

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<sup>99</sup> Ford, Boris. *American Literature*. Ed. Op. Cit. p106.

<sup>100</sup> Taylor, Graig. Op. Cit. p79.

## Chapter 1: The Scarlet Letter

### 1) Nathaniel Hawthorne: a dualistic writer

The famous American critic and writer D. H. Lawrence in his *Studies in Classic American Literature* brings an interesting account of Hawthorne; he discerns in the latter and his art a split, a dualism, and links it to the dualism found in all American art. He explains this point as follows:

All the time there is this split in the American art and art-consciousness. On the top it is as nice as pie, goody-goody and lovey-dovey. Like Hawthorne being such a blue-eyed darling [...]. You must look through the surface of American art, and see the inner diabolism of the symbolic meaning. Otherwise it is all mere childishness.<sup>101</sup>

Again, we have this recurring image of split between appearance and reality in the American consciousness- a split which Lawrence sees is typically represented in the figure of Nathaniel Hawthorne and his art. It is significant that Hawthorne is considered the father of the “American Naissance”, and that his work achieved a true independence from the hegemonic English literature; in fact, this clearly suggests that he achieved in his work true Americanness which is typified in its complexity and ambiguity.

Agostino Lombardo dwells on this notion of dualism through demonstrating the extreme discrepancy to be found in Hawthorne. Indeed, he argues that in appearance Hawthorne is a writer of serene conventional novels which will not take us ‘very far’<sup>102</sup>; this apparent trait is even sustained by Hawthorne’s biographical accounts, which present a tranquil, untroubled life. However, this is soon to be contradicted as A. Lombardo carries on:

But such a judgment touches only the surface of Hawthorne’s art and life. If we look deeper, if we really get inside the exquisite lines of his prose, and the orderly lines of his life, we realize that beneath the elegant, almost motionless surface there lies one of the most disturbed, tormented and problematical worlds possible to imagine. Hawthorne’s true light is not twilight but rather dark, tragic night. This calm, reserved, refined man is obsessed by the problems of evil, sin and death. He cannot look upon any aspect of reality, either human or natural, without burrowing in beneath it and eventually finding the germ which corrupts and destroys.<sup>103</sup>

This dualism which characterizes Hawthorne’s life and art is frequently presented as the contrast between surface and depth, light and darkness, optimism and pessimism. In his

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<sup>101</sup> Lawrence, D.H. *Studies in Classic American Literature*. U.S.: Penguin Books, 1923. P89

<sup>102</sup> Agostino Lombardo in: Kaul, A. N. Ed. *Hawthorne: A Collection of Critical Essays*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966. P170.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid. p172

famous essay, "*Hawthorne and his Mosses*", the foremost American author Herman Melville dwells on this dualism in Hawthorne between the 'pleasant writer' and the 'troubling one': [Despite] all the Indian summer sunlight on the hither side of Hawthorne's soul, the other side- like the dark half of the physical sphere- is shadowed in a blackness ten times black.<sup>104</sup>

For Melville, it is this duality, which so fascinates him, that makes the genius of Hawthorne, and earns him the status of a great national writer, and it is presented as an incontestable sign of profound and gifted intellect. Melville well articulates Hawthorne's dualism through the symbol of the 'physical sphere' he mentions: with one side turned to light, and the other hidden in darkness, representing this division between appearance and essence in Hawthorne. This worldview is articulated in his works which, behind a simple, serene and bright appearance, lay torment and darkness, hidden behind a heavy use of symbolism. Melville's unbounded admiration for Hawthorne and his literary achievements is a demonstration of the fact that a morally ambiguous mode of expression is the most challenging, and hence the most appealing. Indeed, far from providing the reader with straightforward moral messages, Hawthorne offers the readers a wide variety of interpretations as well as unsolved problematics. Yet, this does not prevent critics from discerning in Hawthorne 'a strong moral instinct'<sup>105</sup>, which leads him to dig into the soul of man and explore its capacity for goodness as well as evil.

Moreover, we can easily identify another kind of dualism in Hawthorne, which is reflected in his attitude towards art and his perception of the role of the artist in society. This is best articulated in his short story *The Artist of the Beautiful*, which is built upon the contrasts between materialism and idealism, reality and imagination, or, to sum up, the earthly and the spiritual. This dualism suggests a conflict between art and society: art standing for the spiritual, the imaginary and the ideal, whereas society standing for the earthly, the materialistic and the practical reality. Indeed, Hawthorne regards the artist as 'the moral sage' who is 'isolated' and 'in conflict with men'. The following passage shows this forced isolation of the artist which he must accept and assume plainly:

Thus it is that ideas, which grow up within the imagination and appear so lovely to it and of a value beyond whatever men call valuable, are exposed to be shattered and annihilated by contact with the practical. It is requisite for the ideal artist to possess a force of character that seems hardly compatible with its delicacy; he must keep his faith in himself while the incredulous world assails

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<sup>104</sup> Melville, Herman. *Hawthorne and His Mosses*. 1850 (Pdf)  
< [www.saylor.org/site/wp.../SAYLOR-ENGL405-3.2-MOSSES.pdf](http://www.saylor.org/site/wp.../SAYLOR-ENGL405-3.2-MOSSES.pdf) >

<sup>105</sup> Kaul. A. N. Ed. Op. Cit. P17

him with its utter disbelief; he must stand up against mankind and be his own sole disciple, both as respects his genius and the objects to which it is directed.<sup>106</sup>

This notion of dualism or conflict between the artist and society seems to be inevitable in Hawthorne's view. Mankind is always to have incredulity and 'utter disbelief' towards the artist- society is bound not to understand, and the artist is in perpetual struggle with it. This conflict is further suggested through the delicate machinery that the protagonist of the short story, the artist Owen Warland, attempts to make. As his name indicates, Warland is in constant struggle with society, as all his attempts are transformed into failures at each contact with the external world. The 'spiritualized machinery', or this 'mystery of beauty', is in the form of a delicate butterfly which seems to possess a life of its own. The characters, in their different reactions and attitudes, and who in fact represent earthly materialism and shallowness, stand in admiration for this marvellous work of art. Yet, even in their admiration, they are not capable of uttering the proper 'praise' which would properly recompense the artist. In other words, even if they can see the beauty of the work, they cannot appreciate its true value. We clearly see that the intention of Hawthorne in the story is to demonstrate the superiority of the artist, and his elevation above the earthly world. The narrator then provides a reflection on the purpose of the butterfly in particular, and thus of any work of art in general, through stating that it symbolizes 'a lofty moral by a material trifle- converting what was earthly to spiritual gold'<sup>107</sup>. Thus, the function of a work of art is moral, since it aims to spiritualize the crude material life, and consequently contribute to the moral betterment of mankind. Yet, the moral, the 'spiritual gold', is 'lofty', and thus not easily reached. A work of art is elevated above the level of practical, materialistic reality, and can be reached, we understand, although we do not see it in the story, by those who do the effort to transcend the earthly concerns and seek spirituality. It is a form of elitism, since the effect of art is achieved only on the privileged few- those who possess a certain spiritual awareness that would enable them to decipher the symbolic dimension. The ambiguity of this view lies in the fact that we do not see a possible reconciliation between the artist and society, and we are confronted with the difficulty of the artist to influence and change his society in moral terms. However, Hawthorne is intent on focusing on the difficulty, and not the impossibility of such a process, and indirectly

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<sup>106</sup> Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Artist of the Beautiful* (1846). Flites Editions, 2011. P15

<sup>107</sup> Hawthorne, Nathaniel. Op. Cit. p40

provides clues that would help us understand his work: to transcend the apparent, surface meaning, and reach out for deeper and higher dimensions through the decoding of the symbolic meaning. This decoding engages a mental process that leads to the moral involvement of the reader. As we shall see, the whole narrative of the novel we are concerned with turns around a symbol, the letter A, which offers myriads of interpretations and moral reflection.

Moreover, in “The Custom House sketch”, Hawthorne refers to another conflict, the one between the real and the imaginary; here, he speaks about his ancestors, and asserts that they wouldn’t be happy to have a grandson like himself:

Doubtless, however, either of these stern and black-browed Puritans would have thought it quite a sufficient retribution of his sins, that, after so long a lapse of years, the old trunk of the family tree, with so much venerable moss upon it, should have born, as its topmost bough an idler like myself.<sup>108</sup>

In the words of Claudia D. Johnson, “[the] voice of morality is heard in the narrator’s Puritan ancestors who so deride him for his artistic vocation that he seems to cower, guilt-ridden before them”<sup>109</sup>; his career as a writer, dipped in imagination, wouldn’t meet their ideals of a life of hard work and devotion to the service of mankind. Hawthorne appears to be a divided man between, as A. N. Kaul puts it, “his subjective imagination and the daylight world of community and actuality”<sup>110</sup>, as he expresses his need for a life of practical reality as opposed to the life imagination-of a writer. In the sketch, he portrays the different people he meets in the Custom House, and comments:

It contributes greatly towards a man’s moral and intellectual health, to be brought into habits of companionship with individuals unlike himself, who care little for his pursuits, and whose sphere and abilities he must go out of himself to appreciate. PP20-21

Hawthorne expresses here his delight in the company of men different from himself, with different concerns, and the importance, as far as moral health is concerned, to have differing considerations. He then expresses uneasiness with his former literary circle:

After my fellowship of toil and impracticable schemes with the dreamy brethren of Brook farm, [...] it was time, at length, that I should exercise other faculties of my nature, and nourish myself with food for which I had hitherto had little appetite. P22

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<sup>108</sup> Hawthorne, Nathaniel, *The Scarlet Letter*. Op. Cit.

<sup>109</sup> Johnson, Claudia D. *The Productive Tension of Hawthorne’s Art*. U.S.: The University of Alabama Press, 1981. P47

<sup>110</sup> Kaul. A. N. Ed. Op. Cit. p149.

There is here, on the part of Hawthorne, an expression of a deep inner struggle; his need for a practical reality is not only temporary, as he feels that his “moral health” is in danger in the isolated, imaginary world of literature, and he suspects that his withdrawal into imagination is “a social offence which produced a loss of reality and actuality in his nature”<sup>111</sup>. We notice here a deep inner crisis in Hawthorne, who is divided between the imaginary and the real- an aspect which rather regulates his vision of the superiority of art and the shallow materialistic society that we discussed earlier. He clearly argues that the individual needs to belong to the real world, and that a complete escape from it is dangerous for his moral health. Hawthorne does not belong to the ‘dreamy brethren of Brook Farm’; rather, we can say that he is somewhere in the ‘in-between’ zone that divides the romantic writer from the realistic one.

Another source of the dualism that characterizes Hawthorne’s work lies in his fusion of two art forms: allegory and symbolism. While the former equates with simplicity and clarity of meaning, the latter equates with complexity and the involvement of different interpretations. A. N. Kaul argues that in ‘an effort to apprehend and adequately reflect the new complexity of man’s life, [Hawthorne] molded the venerable [...] allegorical method into the modern technique of symbolism’<sup>112</sup>. Charles Feidelson elaborates this point as follows:

The truth is that symbolism at once fascinated and horrified him. [...] On the one hand, the symbol was valuable precisely because it transcended analytic thought; on the other hand, that very transcendence, with its suggestion of the unconventional, the novel, the disorderly, was potentially dangerous. [...] Allegory was the brake that Hawthorne applied to his sensibility. For allegory was analytic: allegory was safe because it preserved the conventional distinction between thought and things and because it depended on a conventional order whose point of arrangement was easily defined. The symbolistic and the allegorical patterns in Hawthorne’s books reach quite different conclusions; or, rather, the symbolism leads to an inconclusive luxuriance of meaning, while allegory imposes the pat moral and the simplified character.<sup>113</sup>

So, this aspect of Hawthorne as allegorist-symbolist replicates the dualism we have been mentioning between apparent simplicity and hidden complexity, or ‘the light and the dark’<sup>114</sup>. Allegory is a literary device in which abstract ideas, such as good and evil, are

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid. p149

<sup>112</sup> Kaul. A. N. Ed. Op. Cit. p3

<sup>113</sup> Charles Feidelson in: Ibid. p70

<sup>114</sup> Bell, Millicent. Ed. *New Essays on Hawthorne’s Major Tales*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993. P24

represented through objects, or, more frequently, personified through characters<sup>115</sup>. It represents a rather simple connection between the reality and modes of representing that reality. On the other hand, symbolism is more complex, as it suggests 'a connection between the ordinary sense of reality and a moral or spiritual order'<sup>116</sup>. Moreover, 'the connection between the subject and its referent is never explicit; it is left for the reader to discover'<sup>117</sup>. In other words, we are not told by the author of the proper significance of the symbol- a feature which opens up several possibilities of interpretation. We clearly see the contrast between allegory and symbolism that Charles Feidelson tackles in the previous passage: whereas allegory stands for simplicity in its representation of the reality, symbolism stands for complexity and indefinite meaning. Agustino Lombardo argues that 'whereas allegory constitutes more of a defence, an attempt to hold fast against the crushing blows of reality, than a weapon to attack and penetrate it, the symbol is actually that weapon'<sup>118</sup>. Allegory thus involves a simplistic attitude towards the reality, whereas the symbol reveals the complexity of reality, and the difficulty to assign meaning to experience. The fact that Hawthorne merges these two contradictory literary devices in his work reflects his complex attitude towards the reality and towards the process of interpretation. These irreconcilable literary devices go through *The Scarlet Letter* side by side, and create duplicity of meaning which seems impossible to elucidate.

We have attempted, so far, to account for the different facets of the "split" detected in Hawthorne and his art; his ambivalent position towards art and society, imagination and reality, and his fusion of two contradictory literary devices produce in his work a deep division between surface and essence, light and darkness; this division is responsible for the moral ambiguity of the work, for the latter raises important moral questions that remain unresolved within the narrative. It is this moral ambiguity that we are to explore in the following study of the novel, as we aim to show the ways it implicates the reader in a productive and fruitful ethical debate.

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<sup>115</sup> Quinn, Edward. Op. Cit. p19

<sup>116</sup> Ibid. p408

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Agustino Lombardo in: Kaul. A. N. Ed. Op. Cit. p188

## 2) *The Scarlet Letter*:

### a) The letter "A": The Symbolic Potential

In the sketch entitled "The Custom House", Hawthorne presents to the reader the events that led to the writing of the novel, and asserts the veracity of the tale:

It will be seen, likewise, that this Custom House Sketch has a certain propriety, of a kind always recognized in literature, as explaining how a large portion of the following pages came into my possession, and as offering proof of the authenticity of a narrative herein contained. P4

The author insists that his point of departure is a fact from the reality, and that through bringing to it some 'extra touches' as he says, he would bring to the reader a troubling tale about the complexity of the human heart. This can be related to the fear that Hawthorne expressed about his loss of reality in the imaginary world of literature- here is an attempt on his part to reconcile the two realms, and to demonstrate that romance is not completely dissociated from the reality.

The scarlet letter is first mentioned in the Custom House Sketch, where Hawthorne says he discovered it amongst old documents; the readers are told that the romance is going to turn around the capital letter A and, moreover, that they are invited to bring their own interpretation of it, as he is himself trying to do:

But the object that most drew my attention to the mysterious package was a certain affair of fine red cloth, much worn and faded. There were traces about it of gold embroidery, which, however, was greatly frayed and defaced, so that none, or very little, of the glitter was left. It had been wrought, as was easy to perceive, with wonderful skill of needlework; and the stitch (as I am assured by ladies conversant with such mysteries) gives evidence of a now forgotten art, not to be discovered even by the process of picking out the threads. This rag of scarlet cloth--for time, and wear, and a sacrilegious moth had reduced it to little other than a rag--on careful examination, assumed the shape of a letter. It was the capital letter A. By an accurate measurement, each limb proved to be precisely three inches and a quarter in length. It had been intended, there could be no doubt, as an ornamental article of dress; but how it was to be worn, or what rank, honour, and dignity, in by-past times, were signified by it, was a riddle which (so evanescent are the fashions of the world in these particulars) I saw little hope of solving. And yet it strangely interested me. My eyes fastened themselves upon the old scarlet letter, and would not be turned aside. Certainly there was some deep meaning in it most worthy of interpretation, and which, as it were, streamed forth from the mystic symbol, subtly communicating itself to my sensibilities, but evading the analysis of my mind. P27

At this point, Hawthorne does not know about the story of this mysterious letter: he is facing the symbol without having information about its use, or its meaning. He wonders first at the complexity of the stitch, and argues that it is part of a forgotten art. He then wonders at its function, and is sure that it was meant as an 'ornament' that hinted at 'rank, honour,

and dignity' in the past. Moreover, he states that it has incited in him a strange interest, and kept him in a state similar to hypnosis, as he could not get his eyes off it. He then became sure that there was an important meaning 'worthy of interpretation'; significantly, this meaning would not be reached through the analysis of the mind, but through the heart. Hawthorne thus focuses on the mental process he went through when he was contemplating the letter, rather than on the objective definition of the letter itself. The letter has a certain effect on him- an emotional appeal that he cannot avoid. In fact, he uses in this passage the well-established dichotomy in Romantic thinking between the mind which involves cold reason and logical thinking, and the heart which involves feelings, passion, and instinct, and calls out for the human warm nature. Hawthorne warns the readers that it is not through logical, objective thinking that its meaning would be reached, but through subjective, emotional involvement. Moreover, he hints at the complexity of the symbol, so that its meaning is not to be easily discovered. The whole novel turns around the changing perception of the letter A; in fact, throughout the narrative, we have the impression that each character brings the letter a different meaning; Charles Feidelson argues that each character 're-enacts the 'Custom House' scene in which Hawthorne contemplates the letter, so that the entire "romance" becomes a kind of exposition of the nature of symbolic perception'<sup>119</sup> – which is open for different, endless interpretations. The moral ambiguity of the work lies in the different meanings the symbol acquires in the minds of different characters and readers as well. Harold Bloom writes about the ambiguous unveiling of the scarlet letter through the different chapters, and argues that each one can take the title: 'The Revelation of the Scarlet Letter'<sup>120</sup> . We will presently explore these revelations through the perceptions of the Puritans and Hester Prynne; then we'll move on to analyze its manifestation- or rather, personification, in the character of Pearl, and the impact the letter had on the other characters. These revelations are, as we shall see, not easy to reconcile.

#### b) The Puritans: The Office of the Scarlet Letter

It is significant that we are given to witness a change in the perception of the scarlet letter at the very beginning of the novel, and in fact, in its very first appearance. It is already a hint on the part of Hawthorne to suggest that the symbol does not have a fixed and simple

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<sup>119</sup> Charles Feidelson in: Kaul. A. N. ed. Op. Cit. p67

<sup>120</sup> Bloom. Harold. Ed. Op. Cit. p27

meaning, but is subject to continual change. The novel opens with a presentation of the Puritan community waiting for the appearance of Hester and the scarlet A on her bosom at the prison door. In order to get a full appreciation of this opening, we start with a glimpse at the Puritan community and its main characteristics.

Earlier, in the "Custom House Sketch", Hawthorne describes his Puritan ancestor as "a grave, bearded, sable-cloaked and steeple-crowned progenitor, who came so early, with his bible and his sword, and trod the unworn street with such a stately port, and made so large a figure, as a man of war and peace" (P8). Hawthorne succeeds to portray here the specific characteristics of the puritans who came to America with a strong sense of mission, symbolized by the "bible" and the "sword". Indeed, they believed that they were the chosen people of God who, like the Jews who fled Egypt, escaped persecution from England to find peace in the new world; their self-appointed mission was to impose rigorously their moral laws in their newly formed colonies. They were characterized by "a spirit of moral and religious earnestness that informed their whole way of life"<sup>121</sup>. Puritanism is a religious reform movement mainly characterized by the notion of fall which divides the world into dramatic contrasts between "before" and "after", the "elect" and the "reprobate"<sup>122</sup>. In the novel, Hester Prynne is the sinner, the reprobate, who has committed an irreversible, unpardonable crime in the eyes of the Puritans. The Puritans' choice of punishment is significant, as it refers to their need to represent reality through definite objects- the A for them is a clear reference to the crime Hester committed: adultery. Yet, as we shall see, the narrative cancels any attempt at such simple reference.

At first, the community adopts a very hard and cold attitude towards Hester; standing in front of the prison door from which Hester is about to get out to face the public gaze, people waited with "the grin rigidity that petrified [their] bearded physiognomies"(P42). In the chapter entitled "The Market Place", the narrator describes the Puritan people, and focuses on their stern and cold-hearted attitudes. Hawthorne more particularly refers to the Puritan women of that time: "Morally, as well as materially, there was a coarser fibre in those wives and maidens of old English birth and breeding than in their fair descendents"(P43). Women, supposed to be more sensitive, kinder, and thus readier to

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<sup>121</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica: "Puritanism"  
<<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Puritanism>>

<sup>122</sup> Ford, Boris. Ed. Op. Cit. p4-5

display signs of sympathy with the culprit than men, are presented as the toughest judges of Hester- tougher than the Puritan ministers themselves:

'Goodwives', said a hard featured dame of fifty, 'I'll tell ye a piece of my mind. It would be greatly for the public behoof, if we women, being of mature age and church members in good repute, should have the handling of such malefactresses as this Hester Prynne. What think ye gossips? If the hussy stood up for judgment before us five, that are here in a knot together, would she come off with such a sentence as the worshipful magistrates have awarded? Marry, I trow not!'. PP43-44

These women are not satisfied with the punishment that the Puritan leaders adopted, as they assert that Hester deserves worse than public gaze and a badge of shame for her transgression. Another woman indignant with Hester's punishment declares that instead of the scarlet letter on her bosom, the magistrates should have put 'the brand of a hot iron on Hester Prynne's forehead'(p44). Another cries out, 'This woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die'(p44). There cannot be more severe attitudes towards Hester than these women's; as the narrator says, 'meagre, indeed, and cold, was the sympathy that a transgressor might look for from such bystanders at the scaffold'(p44). Hawthorne portrays here a strictly religious community that is anxious to hold fast to principles and codes of conduct as dictated by the Puritan doctrine. The function of this early portrayal of a severe and apparently cruel community is to heighten the distress of Hester, and the extremely difficult position she is about to assume.

To the surprise of the spectators, as well as of the reader, the scarlet letter appears with a very different look from the expected one: The letter is so beautifully embroidered that it doesn't produce the effect needed, as eyes were attracted by the way it decorated and 'illuminated upon her bosom'(p46). The unexpected effect outraged most of the 'unkindly visaged women':

'she hath good skill at her needle, that's certain,' remarked one of the female spectators; 'but did ever a woman, before this brazen hussy, contrive such a way of showing it! Why, gossips, what is it but to laugh in the faces of our godly magistrates, and make a pride out of what they, worthy gentlemen, meant for a punishment?'p46

Hester has outraged the Puritan community through the way she embroidered the letter with a beautiful gold thread, in a fashion that, the narrator says, 'was of a splendor- in accordance with the taste of the age, but greatly beyond what was allowed by the sumptuary regulations of the colony'(p45). Hester is able to bring to the letter a modified external aspect through her artistic skill, and shock the Puritan community. This change of

perception is significant, as it points out that the meaning of the letter is not stable, and is subject to transformation. Nina Baym discusses this point as follows:

But even that physical letter is not a unitary and stable object. By its first appearance it has already deviated from the meaning that the Puritans originally intended it to have. [...] when they required her to wear a red A, the Puritans assumed that it had one fixed meaning- “adultery”. Along with that meaning came a fixed judgment of good or evil. But their view of meaning is shown up as naïve at the outset of the story, for at the moment that the tale begins, that supposedly immutable meaning has already been undermined by Hester’s artistic and beautiful interpretation of the letter.<sup>123</sup>

Already, the narrator anticipates the fact that the scarlet letter will not ‘do its office’(p141), as it has solicited an unexpected perception from the community: people perceived a beautiful instead of an ugly symbol of sin. Through the change brought by Hester on the letter, Hawthorne thus attacks the simplistic Puritan belief in their representation of the reality, and points out that the symbol calls for multiple interpretations. Furthermore, Hawthorne suggests the powerful impact of art on the minds of the individuals, as it immediately affects their perception of reality; he is in fact paving the way for the modernists and their insistence on the fact that objectified reality does not exist, and that each individual has his own subjective interpretation of the world around him/her.

#### c) Hester: Charitable Acts Vs Charitable Feelings

The perception of the symbol within the novel will undergo further changes through the character of Hester Prynne. In the chapter entitled “Another View of Hester”, the narrator tells us how the Puritans came to regard the letter A on Hester’s bosom: After years of good work, submission to the community’s will, and un-reliance on people’s sympathy, Hester provided another meaning for the letter A:

She was self-ordained a Sister of Mercy; or, we may rather say, the world’s heavy hand had so ordained her, when neither the world nor she looked forward to this result. The letter was the symbol of her calling. Such helpfulness was found in her—so much power to do, and power to sympathize—that many people refused to interpret the scarlet “A” by its original signification. They said that it meant “Able” [...]P137

So strong and radical the change of perception of the letter underwent that the narrator goes as far as giving it a religious dimension, as the latter adds that ‘it had the effect of the cross on a nun’s bosom’ (p138). What used to refer to sin has become a symbol of goodness

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<sup>123</sup> Baym, Nina. *The Scarlet Letter: A Reading*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1986. P86

that people and even the Puritan ministers are forced to acknowledge. Indeed, even if the latter were slower than the common people to change their mind about Hester, [‘d]ay by day, nevertheless, their sour and rigid wrinkles were relaxing into something which, in due courses of years, might grow to be an expression of benevolence’(p138), and they even debated among themselves whether to remove the badge from Hester’s bosom or not. On her part, Hester seems to believe in the Puritan ideals which consist in attaining a state of grace and purity through doing good acts and caring little for herself and her daughter; indeed, her behavior is irreproachable, as it shows complete devotion to others, and a remarkable self-denial that makes the Puritans change their attitude towards her. Nina Baym explains that for the Puritan leaders, the “A” stands for a meaning that resides in the invisible, divine world; she argues that ‘a correct representation is possible because there is a fixed and given relation between the representation and the essence for which it stands’<sup>124</sup>. However, they came to realize that the “A” on Hester’s bosom does not refer to sin anymore, but, on the contrary, to her natural goodness. Hawthorne, thus, complicates the process of interpretation, and suggests that ‘all interpretations of the letter are not expressions of its truth but-just-interpretations’<sup>125</sup>. We infer that the letter, as well as the novel, can be read in ‘any number of ways’<sup>126</sup>. So, on one hand, the ambiguity surrounding the letter emanates from the fact that it evades attempts to give it a specific meaning; on the other hand, it is intensified by doubts and suspicions raised around Hester’s supposed state of purity. Indeed, we wonder whether this appearance of purity is in accordance with the inner world of Hester; in other words, has Hester truly reached an inner state of grace? Certain revelations concerning Hester make us regard with suspicion her newly gained status of a “nun”. In the eyes of the Puritan community, the scarlet letter did its office, since it kept Hester away from sin, and led her on the path of salvation and purification. However, we come to discover that the punishment had devastating effects on Hester’s appearance and character as well:

The effect of the symbol—or rather, of the position in respect to society that was indicated by it—on the mind of Hester Prynne herself, was powerful and peculiar. All the light and graceful foliage of her character had been withered up by this red-hot brand, and had long ago fallen away, leaving a bare and harsh outline, which might have been repulsive, had she possessed friends or companions to be repelled by it. Even the attractiveness of her person had undergone a similar change. It might be

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<sup>124</sup> Baym, Nina. Op. Cit. P85

<sup>125</sup> Ibid. p86

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

partly owing to the studied austerity of her dress, and partly to the lack of demonstration in her manners. It was a sad transformation, too, that her rich and luxuriant hair had either been cut off, or was so completely hidden by a cap, that not a shining lock of it ever once gushed into the sunshine. P138

The narrator seems to deplore this transformation, which he qualifies as a 'sad' one. To gain her place again in society, Hester had to pay a high price- the sacrifice of her true beautiful nature as well as her external beauty- a thing negatively presented by the narrator. This quotation depicts a notion of loss, of fading away, that obscures Hester's apparent conversion to the letter, and make us regard with suspicion what people around her believed- that she attained a state of grace, of harmony with herself and the outside world. This sense of loss is further heightened in the episode of the forest, in isolation from the Puritan community, when Hester throws away the scarlet letter; the narrator dwells on the effects of this gesture on Hester:

The stigma gone, Hester heaved a long, deep sigh, in which the burden of shame and anguish departed from her spirit. O exquisite relief! She had not known the weight, until she felt the freedom! By another impulse, she took off the formal cap that confined her hair; and down it fell upon her shoulders, dark and rich, with at once a shadow and a light in its abundance, and imparting the charm of softness to her features. There played around her mouth, and beamed out of her eyes, a radiant and tender smile, that seemed gushing from the very heart of womanhood. A crimson flush was glowing on her cheek, that had been long so pale. Her sex, her youth, and the whole richness of her beauty, came back from what men call the irrevocable past, and clustered themselves, with her maiden hope, and a happiness before unknown, within the magic circle of this hour. p172-173

When Hester throws away the badge of shame, she fully recovers all her beautiful feminine attributes. The description is so rich and telling that it suggests a kind of resurrection- a second birth for Hester. We come then to regard in a very negative light the Puritans' severity, with their austere, death-like asceticism. Mark Van Doren dwells on this point, explaining that Hawthorne 'deplores the dismal severity' of the Puritan moral code, 'and for all we know he is presenting Hester as the blackest sacrifice it ever offered at its altar'<sup>127</sup>. Indeed, we are deeply touched by the revival and happy transformation of Hester when she throws away the letter, and cannot but blame the society that imposed such a terrible torture. Hawthorne finally seems to take a definite stance towards the Puritan community, and hence towards the endless conflict between the individual and society- that of condemning the one and elevating the other. However, this conclusion, once again, is soon

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<sup>127</sup> Qt. In.: Ibid. p132

obscured by some important facts that we shall discuss in this chapter: the first one concerns Pearl, and the role she plays to make her mother wear the letter again; and the second one concerns Hester's final return to the community, and her resolve to put again the A on her own free will.

Indeed, Hawthorne prevents us from drawing easy conclusions about anything in the novel; the setting that Hawthorne chooses for such an event, the temporary liberation of Hester from the badge of shame, is problematic; indeed, the forest acquires in Hawthorne's work a complex meaning: when opposed to the city, the usual contrast would be that between 'the restraints of custom and the fresh expansiveness of freedom'<sup>128</sup>. Indeed, the forest is usually equated with freedom because of the distance it offers for the individual from social life and all the restraints it imposes on him/her. Hawthorne was very sensitive to 'the attractions of the open air'<sup>129</sup>, and 'the appeal of the forest'<sup>130</sup>, with its promise of independence and relief; yet, on the other hand, he was able to understand the Puritans' distrust of the forest, with the dangerous unbounded possibilities it offers and its evil temptations. Indeed, in the Puritans' imagination, the forest was the territory where the devil resided along with his agent witches. It is also the place where the natives, whom they considered savages and even feared for their dark arts, and wild beasts lived. In fact, their fear is based on the way the bible portrayed the wilderness as a cursed land, as an environment of evil and a hell on earth. The American wilderness they encountered, the unexplored vastness they faced, aggravated this dark perception of the forest and heightened their fear. Consequently, the forest in Hawthorne's fiction is not only a place that stands for romantic freedom, it is also a place where the individual has to face, on his own, a dangerous and frightening wilderness, both spiritual and physical. Hence, in his work, the forest is presented as 'the ambiguous setting of moral choice'<sup>131</sup> where, cut off from a social environment that dictates moral and religious codes of behaviour, the individual has to rely on his inner self in the face of temptation. Thus, we are to regard with suspicion the events that happen there, and wonder thus whether Hester's recovery of beauty, both physical and spiritual as described by the narrator, is as good as it appears to be.

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<sup>128</sup> Kaul, A. N. Ed. Op. Cit. p74

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

On the other hand, we feel that in her devotion to others and in her extreme self-denial, Hester is just playing a role; Sacvan Bercouitch goes as far as saying that we can easily place Hester among the different ‘hypocrites in Hawthorne’s work’<sup>132</sup>- as she assumes an appearance that seems to suit the community, and an inner world that rejects it completely. The aim behind placing the “A” for the Puritans- that of purification from sin and redemption, does not reach the inner world of Hester: it is just a badge of shame and ignominy that would remind others of the frailty of human nature, and the severity of the Puritan law. This carelessness about whether it affects Hester’s mind or not has afforded Hester, contrary to the expected impact, an inner realm of freedom. N. Baym explains this point as follows:

It is hoped that the external letter will work its way down into Hester’s heart and cause repentance, but nobody really cares and this indifference is Hester’s freedom. In fact, the effect of the letter so far as Hester’s character is concerned is the opposite of what was intended: turning her into a public symbol, it conceals her individuality and thus protects it.<sup>133</sup>

Thus, Hester gains freedom through a breach in the Puritan system- its carelessness about the inner transformation, which is more important and valuable. Hester just manages to live among the Puritans, and acts according to what might suit them; as Joyce A Rowe puts it, “[instead] of charitable feelings there are only charitable acts”<sup>134</sup>. Hester is thus left free to spiritually wander to outer spaces, and reach out for other moral spheres.

We are then led to wonder on the kind of freedom that Hester gains, which is discussed in the chapter entitled “A Flood of Sunshine”. For the first time we are given insight into Hester’s mind during the years of ignominy she went through within the Puritan community:

But Hester Prynne, with a mind of native courage and activity, and for so long a period not merely estranged, but outlawed, from society, had habituated herself to such latitude of speculation as was altogether foreign to the clergyman. She had wandered, without rule or guidance, in a moral wilderness; as vast, as intricate and shadowy, as the untamed forest, amid the gloom of which they were now holding a colloquy that was to decide their fate. Her intellect and heart had their home, as it were, in desert places, where she roamed as freely as the wild Indian in his woods. For years past she had looked from this estranged point of view at human institutions, and whatever priests or legislators had established; criticizing all with hardly more reverence than the Indian would feel for the clerical band, the judicial robe, the pillory, the gallows, the fireside, or the church. The tendency of her fate and fortunes had been to set her free. The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread. Shame, Despair, Solitude! These had been her teachers,— stern and wild ones,—and they had made her strong, but taught her much amiss.P170

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<sup>132</sup> Bercouitch, Sacvan. *The Office of the Scarlet Letter*. U.S.: The John Hopkins University Press, 1991. P6

<sup>133</sup> Baym, Nina. Op. Cit. p64

<sup>134</sup> Rowe, Joyce A. Op. Cit. P33

The narrator clearly expresses in this passage an analogy between the moral freedom Hester gained and the “untamed forest” that represents in the Puritan imagination evil, making us regard with suspicion the new moral realms she discovers there. Another analogy is drawn, this time between Hester and the wild Indian; this analogy is interesting, since what is compared is the perception of the white man’s institutions, which are meaningless for the stranger. This point confirms the fact that Hester is estranged from society and its moral law; she has gained a sense of freedom from all human institutions. We discover thus through this insight into Hester’s mind that she was not meditating upon her sin, but was wandering spiritually in ‘a moral wilderness’. Susan Manning refers to Hester as the heroine ‘whose mind, when deprived of society, ventures too far into the forest and flirts with the specters of the wilderness’<sup>135</sup>, which are not easy to categorize either as good or evil. Moreover, S. Bercovitch, for his part, qualifies this description of moral wilderness as the ‘allegorical landscape of misguided rebellion’<sup>136</sup>. Indeed, this notion of misguidance is suggested by the last words of the quotation- that Hester was taught ‘much amiss’. The narrator clearly states that the ‘teachers’ that Hester had in her moral wilderness- namely: shame, despair, solitude- estranged her completely from her society, and made her look with alien eyes at human law. A troubling ambiguity revolves around this point, as we do not know the attitude of the narrator, and hence of the author, towards Hester’s newly gained freedom. We are not presented with a clear picture of the romantic heroine who defies and transcends the strict, oppressive, and condemnable society. In fact, at the point where we would rejoice in such defiance and freedom, the words ‘but taught her much amiss’ make us pause, doubt whether this new state of mind is the one to be hoped for. The kind of freedom Hester gained is ambiguous: Hawthorne does not present it in fully positive light- this might suggest that finally, Hawthorne does not totally reject the Puritan moral code- another instance of inconclusiveness and lack of definite answers. Besides, we are given an extremely confusing revelation about Hester Prynne. When alone with Dimmesdale in the forest, she declares: ‘what we did had a consecration of its own’ (p166). Away from the community, Hester affirms the goodness of her nature, and even, as

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<sup>135</sup> Ford, Boris. Ed. *American Literature*. Op. Cit. p26

<sup>136</sup> Bercovitch, Sacvan. Op. Cit. p7

Leon Cha puts it, 'the goodness of her deed'<sup>137</sup>. Indeed, at this moment, Hester does not consider the fact that she has committed a sin, and legitimates her deed plainly. She has reached at this moment a state of complete independence from the Puritans. By recognizing that she is not a sinner, she severs the very ties that link her to the Puritan community, and she asserts her own personal morality over the religious one. We may even venture to say that Hawthorne overthrows the Puritan value system, and asserts a more individualized personal value system based on the Romantic conception of natural, innate goodness. However, Hester contradicts this completely when she reflects on the statue of a revolutionary figure:

Earlier in life, Hester had vainly imagined that she herself might be the destined prophetess, but had long since recognized the impossibility that any mission of divine and mysterious truth should be confided to a woman stained with sin, bowed down with shame, or even burdened with a life-long sorrow.p223-224

So, we are faced with two contradictory self-perceptions on the part of Hester: one expressed away from the community, and one within it. In the forest, Hester sees that all possibilities are open, and ventures far away from social and moral considerations; but within the community, Hester seems to accept and assume her status as a sinner. Moreover, at the end of the novel, and against all expectations, with her own free will, Hester returns to the Puritan community. We can hardly understand how this strong, revolutionary woman can choose to get back to the land where she experienced so much pain and suffering. Moreover, Hester does not merely go back to live again within the Puritan community, but decides to put again on her bosom the red badge of shame, the 'scorching stigma', on her own free will; in the following quotation, the narrator offers these explanations:

But there was a more real life for Hester Prynne, here, in New England, than in that unknown region where Pearl had found a home. Here had been her sin; here, her sorrow; and here was yet to be her penitence. She had returned, therefore, and resumed of her own free will, for not the sternest magistrate of that iron period would have imposed it--resumed the symbol of which we have related so dark a tale. Never afterwards did it quit her bosom. P223

As readers, we are not prepared for such a reversal, because we are not told about the reasons of Hester's final choice; put differently, we are not informed about the process

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<sup>137</sup> Chai, Leon. *The Romantic Foundations of the American Renaissance*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1987. P207

Hester went through, between the death of Dimmesdale and the revelation of the truth, and Pearl's happy marriage in England. As S. Bercovitch puts it: 'what remains problematic, what Hawthorne compels us to explain for ourselves (as well as on Hester's behalf), is her dramatic change of purpose and belief'<sup>138</sup>. Indeed, Hester's return marks 'a dramatic change' in her inner being: she was previously contemplating a moral wilderness, and reflecting on the meaninglessness of all human institutions, and now she completely complies with the Puritan law. Hawthorne chooses to abstain from us, as S. Bercovitch puts it, Hester's 'epiphany'<sup>139</sup>, that would account for her final decision. Besides, the narrator asserts that Hester, on her own free will, retakes "the symbol"- a deed which even the stern magistrates would not be able to impose. Moreover, the ambiguity does not only emanate from the fact that we are not explained the process of Hester's conversion to the scarlet letter- the ambiguity of the ending is also due to the fact that we cannot assign to it a clear-cut, definite implication: Hester neither celebrates Puritan law nor breaks with it- 'she neither reinstates the old norms nor breaks down with them'<sup>140</sup>. Hester's return is not a break with, nor a celebration of, the Puritan system.

The ending of the novel thus leaves more questions than it gives answers- does Hawthorne make Hester return to assert the supremacy of society over the individual? This is hardly the kind of impression we get at the ending, because Hester does acquire a stature that inspires 'awe' and 'reverence' among the people. And besides, in the words of Joyce A Rowe, the "power relations with which the novel began are reversed. The elders have disappeared from view, while Hester, the outlaw, alone remains"<sup>141</sup>. On the other hand, this cannot be an affirmation of the individual over the community, because, as Hester puts again the scarlet letter on her bosom, she bows down to the Puritans' sentence against her at the beginning of the novel.

In addition, it is significant that the scarlet letter is just called "a symbol", suggesting that now, at the end of the tale, it is completely liberated from any imposed social or moral meaning, and that it is up to Hester now to give it a meaning. Indeed, she is able, through

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<sup>138</sup> Bercovitch, Sacvan. Op. Cit. p25

<sup>139</sup> Ibid. P11

<sup>140</sup> Bloom, Harold. Ed. Op. Cit. p37

<sup>141</sup> Rowe, Joyce A. Op Cit. P44

her strong personality and natural goodness, to transfigure the letter into a symbol of goodness, mercy and forgiveness more strongly and efficiently than she previously did:

But, in the lapse of the toilsome, thoughtful, and self-devoted years that made up Hester's life, the scarlet letter ceased to be a stigma which attracted the world's scorn and bitterness, and became a type of something to be sorrowed over, and looked upon with awe, yet with reverence too. P223

We see here that the scarlet letter is completely transfigured, and acquires a meaning that even the narrator is not able to articulate, as he presents it in very vague terms, "a type of something", and relies on the sentiments it inspires in people, such as: sorrow, reverence and awe. This suggests that the symbol is now elevated above any simplistic interpretation, and that what is important is the reaction it is able to provoke in people. In fact, this is an expression of Hawthorne's own concern in the novel, which does not rely on inciting the readers to afford clear-cut interpretations, but rather resides in the mental process the narrative implicates them in; in other words, Hawthorne's focus relies on the "process" of thinking, and not the "results" of thinking.

Through the character of Hester, we have thus the demonstration of the impossibility to assign the scarlet "A" a definite interpretation. As we have seen, through its first appearance, it was subject to change through Hester's artistic manipulation of it; then, we have seen that the "A" could no more refer to adultery in the eyes of the community because of Hester's charitable acts, but rather referred to "Able"; on the other hand, it allowed Hester to develop an inner world of unbounded moral freedom which is, as we have seen, highly questionable and impossible to categorize as good or evil. Finally, as Hester decides to put again the scarlet letter on her bosom at the end of the novel, it is elevated to a certain level of meaning to which it is impossible to assign a simple, earthly interpretation; as we have seen, there is a focus on the emotions it raises in people rather than on what exactly it stands for.

#### d) Pearl: The Living Hieroglyphic

Hawthorne offers another perception of the scarlet letter through Hester's daughter: Pearl. In fact, Pearl is a character that can be described as a subject situated between the actual and the imaginary<sup>142</sup>: indeed, although she is an adaptation of Hawthorne's own daughter Una, she is considered by critics as the most surprising and the largest intimation of

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<sup>142</sup> Kaul, A. N. Ed. Op. Cit. p127

Hawthorne's farthest imaginings<sup>143</sup>. Pearl is presented in the novel as the living representation of the central symbol: a 'living hieroglyphic' of the letter A (p176). In fact, Pearl acquires throughout the novel an important symbolic potential due to the complex relationship she has with the scarlet letter. N. Baym declares that she is its 'symbol', 'agent', and 'double'<sup>144</sup>, and argues:

It is typical of Hawthorne's multilayered writing techniques that he should make a symbol that is a character, and a character that is a symbol, and thus utterly confound attempts to derive a single, uncomplicated meaning from his work.<sup>145</sup>

We will attempt to explore this link between Pearl and the letter through the latter's physical description, her nature, and her relationship with her mother.

Pearl is described as a perfectly beautiful little girl who has 'no physical defect' (P75). The narrator comments that the perfection of her beauty and the vitality she displays make of her 'worthy to have been brought forth in Eden, worthy to have been left there, to be the plaything of the angels, after the first parents were driven out' (p76); her perfect beauty is clearly, and typically equated with innocence. Yet, this is complicated by the fact that she is clearly defined in the narrative as the human embodiment of the scarlet letter- the embodiment of sin. Through this confusing analogy, Hawthorne proceeds to the inversion of values as we are not presented with the classical representation of innocence as beautiful and sin as ugly: little Pearl is presented as the beautiful, innocent-looking human personification of the symbol of sin-the scarlet letter.

In addition, Pearl's beauty is even more emphasized with Hester's extravagant taste for colourful, richly decorated dresses:

Her mother, with a morbid purpose that may be better understood hereafter, had bought the richest tissues that could be procured, and allowed her imaginative faculty its full play in the arrangement and decoration of the dresses which the child wore, before the public eye. So magnificent was the small figure, when thus arrayed, and such was the splendor of Pearl's own proper beauty, shining through the gorgeous robes which might have extinguished a paler loveliness, that there was an absolute circle of radiance around her, on the darksome cottage-floor.p76

Consciously or not, Hester carefully dresses Pearl in clothing that mimics the color and embroidery of the letter, which emphasizes the deep, intimate link between the scarlet

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<sup>143</sup> Bloom, Harold. Ed. Op. Cit. p4

<sup>144</sup> Baym, Nina. Op. Cit. p56

<sup>145</sup> Ibid. p83

letter and the little girl. Moreover, the narrator draws here a contrast between Pearl's radiant beauty, and the Puritan dark surroundings. She is the symbol of life in its movement and spontaneity, which contrasts with the Puritans' deathlike sternness and rigidity. She is the spot of light amidst the surrounding death-like darkness. As N. Baym puts it, 'the child is beauty and freedom and imagination and all the other natural qualities that the Puritan system denies'<sup>146</sup>. Hawthorne presents here a harsh criticism of the Puritans' stern and dark understanding of religion and morality, and calls for more spontaneity and enjoyment of life. However, Pearl is presented as the embodiment of sin; so, does Hawthorne, through equating sin with life, beauty and light, discard moral and religious principles, and calls for immorality and pure enjoyment of life? It is a question to which it is impossible to give a simple and straightforward answer.

Hawthorne presents an interesting discussion of Pearl's nature when the narrator comments that 'it lacked reference and adaptation to the world into which she was born' (p76). Later, Dimmesdale comments that Pearl has 'the freedom of a broken law'. In the following passage, the narrator explains that Pearl does not fit in with the Puritan society, because, in 'giving her existence, a great law had been broken, and the result was a being whose elements were perhaps beautiful and brilliant, but in disorder, or with an order peculiar to themselves, amidst which the point of variety and arrangement was difficult or impossible to be discovered'(p76). From the breach of a law, and the commitment of a sin, Pearl has come into existence, with a nature made up of new elements of which we are discouraged to attempt and understand. It is significant that this new 'order' is not qualified as good or bad: Hawthorne here abstains from pronouncing a judgment on the quality of pearl's nature, and prefers to use the word 'perhaps'; this pronounced hesitation allows him, once again, to avoid conclusive interpretations, and an invitation to the reader's investigation.

On the other hand, there is one aspect, however, which is not totally new in Pearl, as she inherited the passionate nature of her mother:

Hester could only account for the child's character—and even then, most vaguely and imperfectly—by recalling what she herself had been, during that momentous period while Pearl was imbibing her soul from the spiritual world, and her bodily frame from its material of earth. The mother's impassioned state had been the medium through which were transmitted to the unborn infant the rays of its moral life; and, however white and clear originally, they had taken the deep stains of

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<sup>146</sup> Baym, Nina. Op.Cit. p57

crimson and gold, the fiery lustre, the black shadow, and the untempered light, of the intervening substance. Above all, the warfare of Hester's spirit, at that epoch, was perpetuated in Pearl. She could recognize her wild, desperate, defiant mood, the flightiness of her temper, and even some of the very cloud-shapes of gloom and despondency that had brooded in her heart. They were now illuminated by the morning radiance of a young child's disposition, but, later in the day of earthly existence, might be prolific of the storm and whirlwind. PP76-77

Pearl inherited from her mother her passionate nature which, while tamed and controlled by her punishment and maternity, is given another chance of living through this being made anew out of sin tainted elements. This passionate nature is equated with concepts that define sin, as they emanate from fire and are shades of the color red, such as 'crimson and gold' and 'the fiery luster' that have stained the originally pure nature of Hester; does the narrator suggest that Hester was a good woman, pure and innocent, and that she is now irrevocably a sinner?. Moreover, 'the black shadow' is also enigmatic, but conventionally it represents either the dark side of human nature or even the devil itself. Pearl incarnates Hester's rebellion and defiance of the Puritan order, or in other words, what the narrator seems to equate here in the passage with sin. The crimson tainted nature of Hester, while oppressed and considered wrong, or even sinful in the Puritan community, is now 'illuminated by the marring radiance of a young child's disposition': it is given another chance of survival, since it is now analogous with light and life. This is another instance of the complex potential of the symbol in Hawthorne's work, which is in this case Pearl, through whom we are faced with a constant change of meaning and reversal of values. Thus, through Pearl, Hawthorne presents another view of the scarlet letter- a lively, beautiful, new creature, who is born free and independent from the Puritan community, and is thus given a chance to move forward. Indeed, we can see that through Pearl, Hawthorne gives human frailty the possibility of a new life, away from the oppressive death-like atmosphere of the stern, unyielding Puritan society. Sin is, through this character, equated with freedom and life. The narrative offers us other accounts of Pearl that further emphasize this extremely problematic and ambiguous link she has with sin. For example, Pearl is said to possess a certain knowledge about the red badge; indeed, the questions she asks are, even if innocently asked, deep and knowing: "What does the letter mean, mother?—and why dost thou wear it?—and why does the minister keep his hand over his heart?"(p154). Pearl is unconsciously aware of the sin of her mother, as she makes a link between the scarlet letter and Dimmesdale's hand over his heart. Her wondering at the

meaning of the scarlet letter is presented by the narrator as 'an innate quality of her being', as if her mission is 'to make out its hidden purport'(p151). S. Manning refers to the problematic innocence of Pearl, and argues that it 'is the innocence of every Romantic child; but if in one sense her questions are guiltless, in another they are more knowing, more instinctively cognizant of sin and evil than even the obsessively sin-seeking Puritans'<sup>147</sup>. Hawthorne proceeds to another reversal of values as now innocence is unconventionally associated with knowledge through Pearl- an aspect which makes much of the ambiguity of this confusing character, and of the symbol she represents. This is another aspect that makes the process of interpretation a problematic one, and pushes the reader towards questioning conventionally established truths.

Another source of ambiguity in the novel concerns Pearl's relationship with her mother. Indeed, H. Bloom argues that 'the most sinuously ambiguous relation in the romance is the one between Hester and Pearl'<sup>148</sup>. In fact, we see throughout the novel that Pearl is assigned different roles in the life of Hester; She is, as Dimmesdale observes, her joy and retribution at the same time:

It was meant for a blessing; for the one blessing of her life! It was meant, doubtless, as the mother herself hath told us, for a retribution too; a torture, to be felt at many an unthought of moment; a pang, a sting, an ever-recurring agony, in the midst of a troubled joy! Hath she not expressed this thought in the garb of the poor child, so forcibly reminding us of that red symbol which sears her bosom?" .p96

So, on one hand, Pearl represents a blessing in Hester's life, as motherhood is an alleviating element amidst pain and sorrow. On the other hand, she is her punishment, as she is the living scarlet letter, continually reminding her of her sin and her punishment. In addition, Pearl has a 'restraining role' in the life of Hester, as she is supposed to prevent her from falling again into sin; as the narrator says, this mother-daughter 'boon was meant, above all things else, to keep the mother's soul alive, and to preserve her from blacker depths of sin into which Satan might else have sought to plunge her!'(p96). N. Baym ponders on the role of Pearl in Hester's life, and argues that the little girl 'is not only the letter as Hester might conceive it, but its agent in a scheme that is quite independent of her', and adds that Pearl 'represents a form of conscience'<sup>149</sup>. So, while Pearl does alleviate the pain and sorrow of

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<sup>147</sup> Chai, Leon. Op. Cit. p107.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid. p5

<sup>149</sup> Baym, Nina. Op. Cit. p57

Hester, being her daughter and sole companion in life, she is also her daily punishment, as she operates as a searing conscience that daily and constantly warns her against relapsing into sin- a punishment which is even more severe than the sternest Puritans.

This restraining role of Pearl is very strongly shown in the episode in the forest where Hester, alone with Dimmesdale and far from the community, decides to throw away the red token. Pearl behaves in every possible manner to show her anger and dissatisfaction at the absence of the red letter she is used to seeing on her mother's bosom. She first refuses to cross the brook and join her mother; then, she immerses herself in a fit of passion which tortures Hester and disturbs Dimmesdale. Hester understands the child, and decides to wear again the scarlet letter to pacify her. At this point, Pearl's innocence is again made ambiguous, as she displays a certain sense of cruelty towards her mother when she just refuses to pick up the token for her, but obliges Hester to do it: 'Come thou and take it up.'(p180). The narrator depicts the inner torments Hester goes through as follows:

[Hester] advanced to the margin of the brook, took up the scarlet letter, and fastened it again into her bosom. Hopefully, but a moment ago, as Hester had spoken of drowning it in the deep sea, there was a sense of inevitable doom upon her, as she thus received back this deadly symbol from the hand of fate. She had flung it into infinite space!—she had drawn an hour's free breath!—and here again was the scarlet misery, glittering on the old spot! So it ever is, whether thus typified or no, that an evil deed invests itself with the character of doom. Hester next gathered up the heavy tresses of her hair, and confined them beneath her cap. As if there were a withering spell in the sad letter, her beauty, the warmth and richness of her womanhood, departed, like fading sunshine; and a gray shadow seemed to fall across her.p180

This episode invests the novel with a sense of inevitability and doom; Pearl prevents Hester from disavowing the scarlet letter, and denies her mother a moment of relief, even if temporary. The sense of doom expressed at this moment seems to cancel the prospect of escape that the two lovers were formulating in the forest. This point further complicates the reader's making out of the author's attitude towards the culprit and the Puritan code.

Another instance of Pearl's restraining role towards Hester is shown in the fact that the latter is prevented from becoming a reformer, a 'revolutionary figure', because of motherhood:

It is remarkable that persons who speculate the most boldly often conform with the most perfect quietude to the external regulations of society. The thought suffices them, without investing itself in the flesh and blood of action. So it seemed to be with Hester. Yet, had little Pearl never come to her from the spiritual world, it might have been far otherwise. Then, she might have come down to us in history, hand in hand with Ann Hutchinson, as the foundress of a religious sect. She might, in one of her phases, have been a prophetess. She might, and not improbably would, have suffered death

from the stern tribunals of the period, for attempting to undermine the foundations of the Puritan establishment. But, in the education of her child, the mother's enthusiasm of thought had something to wreak itself upon. Providence, in the person of this little girl, had assigned to Hester's charge the germ and blossom of womanhood, to be cherished and developed amid a host of difficulties. P140

Pearl reminds Hester of her sin and lawless nature, asserts the office of the scarlet letter, and prevents her from becoming a full revolutionary figure because of her role as a mother. The moral ambiguity here lies in the fact that whereas Pearl is the symbol of freedom in the novel, her role is to deny such freedom to her mother. As H. Bloom puts it:

Hawthorne presents in Pearl a profound challenge to the boundaries of socialization, but he also details her restraining role with a consistency that verges on the didactic.<sup>150</sup>

Pearl is a big challenge to the reader when it comes to sort out the author's attitude towards morality and romantic freedom. While she represents a break with the Puritan community, with all its strictures and moral rigidity, she is a far more severe moral agent than the Puritan punishment itself, working incessantly to prevent Hester from liberating herself. At the end of the novel, Pearl achieves a reconciliation with the world at the final revelation of the truth. She then departs into an unknown region, where she is believed to live happily. The narrator observes that Pearl 'might have mingled her wild blood with the lineage of the devoutest Puritan among them all'(p222), but she does not stay. Why doesn't Hawthorne make Pearl stay and mingle her blood with the Puritans, and thus start the premises of a revolution? No clear moral message is stated at the end.

The symbolic potential of Pearl, and of the letter she represents, is very complex, as it is presented along contrasts such as innocence and sin, freedom and oppression. Hawthorne proceeds through these contrasts to suggest a reversal of values that baffle boundaries between goodness and sin, right and wrong. The human embodiment of the scarlet letter, the symbol of sin, is characterized by perfect beauty, liveliness, and innocence. This innocence is, in its turn, invested with ambiguity, as it is co-existent in Pearl with 'knowledge'- a consciousness of sin. Moreover, Pearl, whose existence is associated with independence and freedom, is an impediment to Hester's own freedom from the Puritan community and achievement of her secret revolutionary prospects. Through the character of Pearl, Hawthorne presents a constant change in meaning. While on one hand, he makes

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<sup>150</sup> Bloom, Harold. Ed.Op. Cit. p42

the classical definition of moral values more complex and ambiguous, suggesting their questioning or even overthrow; on the other hand, he does not effect in the novel the moral revolution that is hinted at in Hester's rebellious mind and Pearl's very nature. He leaves no hint at his own attitude towards the facts depicted, nor the characters themselves, leaving it for the readers to think for themselves, and invest them in a continual process of questioning and re-interpretation.

The scarlet letter, the symbol around which the romance is built, is in a constant change of meaning. Once the symbol of sin and ignominy, now of goodness and freedom, and then a tool of repression, the contradictions it gives rise to are impossible to reconcile. Agustino Lombardo well comments on this complexity and the inconclusiveness it gives to the novel's meaning:

To sum up, when used in this way the symbol creates a complex, enigmatic plot within the narrative, turning the novel into a dramatic mirror of the conflicts, tensions and contradictions of life, destroying and creating, pointing out mysteries and trying to unravel them, expanding the meanings and tones of the narrative to then replace them with a more secret thread. It is thanks to the symbol that *The Scarlet Letter* reveals its true nature, which is far more ambiguous and contradictory than might at first appear. If the novel looks like a tale of guilt and retribution expressed in clearly defined moral terms, the symbol shows that in reality Hawthorne's judgment is suspended; the terms of the moral question are extremely uncertain for him and the novel does not come to any definite conclusion.<sup>151</sup>

This leads us back to the kind of ambiguity used by Hawthorne that we mentioned earlier—where the author puts 'all the truth [he] can into a work'<sup>152</sup>, but where certain characters and events remain unresolved even for him. This moral ambiguity, however, does not make the work morally void, but offers different modes of perception to the reader who is invited to bring his own reflection.

The difficulty to 'join all the threads' at the end and make out a clear moral message might confirm some critics' affirmation that Hawthorne is not a moralist, and that he has primarily aesthetic concerns. Yet, this is not the impression the novel leaves on the imagination of the reader: its complex exploration of sin, and the effects it has on the psychology of the individual; its contemplation of the conflicting relationship between the individual and society; and its deep concern with the intricacies of the human heart invite our moral participation and test our capacity for moral judgment. This quality makes of the novel a

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<sup>151</sup> Agustino Lombardo in: Cunliffe, Marcus. Ed. Op. Cit. p187

<sup>152</sup> Taylor, Graig? Op. Cit. P79

deep moral vehicle through which an endless moral debate is open, rather than a mere aesthetic manifesto. Indeed, as S. Bercouitch puts it, the novel's intricacies 'implicate us as co producers of meaning'<sup>153</sup>- in the sense that we are invited to reflect and participate in the narrative as meaning producers. N. Baym declares that 'if we hope for a reading experience that will leave us with firm moral messages, absolute truths clearly stated and authoritatively handed down, *The Scarlet Letter* is not the right book [...]. For Hawthorne is a story teller, not a moralist, and had no set doctrine to inculcate ... messages'<sup>154</sup>. The purpose behind the book is not didactic, imparting us with simple moral lessons to follow, but to present us with a moral stage where we can participate to work out our intellectual faculty and judge for ourselves. The moral ambiguity of the novel does not lead us to moral nihilism, but instead, represents a call for moral reflection and judgment- far more practical and effective than a mere set of moral principles. Hawthorne uses this strategy of ambiguity to present the reader with a ground for moral judgment and debate, instead of clear and easy moral solutions.

Moreover, the novel is a reflection on the issue of meaning and the process of interpretation. Indeed, as N. Baym argues, 'the letter evades all attempts to fix its meaning and, through such evasion, establishes itself as an entity that is beyond meaning'<sup>155</sup>. Indeed, the whole novel turns around the attempt to assign meaning to the physical object that Hester wears on her bosom- a letter which is, in fact, 'capable of being read in any number of ways'<sup>156</sup>. The purpose behind this is not a mere pessimistic message, as some critics saw it, that we live in a meaningless world. On contrary, it proves that truth is a matter of interpretation- a subjective and changeable process. Hawthorne, in fact, stresses this human faculty of reflection and judgment, and sets it against the Puritan belief in absolute and unquestionable truth. Thus, he confirms the belief that literature is not discovery, but exploration<sup>157</sup>.

Romance is 'an art of deception', which is deeply unsettling and embarrassing to custom and belief. The words beginning the novel refer to 'a sweet moral blossom that may be found along the track, and relieve the darkening close of a tale of human frailty and

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<sup>153</sup> Bercouitch, Sacvan. Op. Cit. p24

<sup>154</sup> Ibid. p94

<sup>155</sup> Ibid. p86

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Chase, Richard. Op. Cit. p82

sorrow”(p41). The ending of the novel, on the contrary, offers no moral blossom, but instead a settled moral ambiguity. Hawthorne is not a seeker of truth, but a seeker of contradictions, which reflects his self-doubting nature. S. Manning argues that Hawthorne’s great achievement is that the different modes of perception which are present until the end, do not make this book ‘morally void’<sup>158</sup>. Indeed, the moral ambiguity of the romance opens up ground for moral reflection, instead of presenting overtly moral values to the reader. By leaving an ending wrought with moral ambiguity, Hawthorne does not impose his authority through stating an overt moral lesson, but calls for the readers’ participation in reflection.

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<sup>158</sup> S. Manning in: Ford, Boris. Ed. Op. Cit. p110.

## **Chapter 2: Mark Twain's *The Adventures Huckleberry Finn***

Samuel Langhorne Clemens is considered by many the father of modern American literature, and the true representative of the American character. One of the most famous biographers of Mark Twain, A. B. Paine, presents the writer as the 'foremost-American-born author- the man most characteristically American in every thought and word and action of his life'<sup>159</sup>. Although Paine's biography has been widely criticized for its excessive romanticism, especially shown in the tendency to ignore certain negative aspects of Twain's character, the latter's heterodoxy for example, yet it articulates the general opinion towards an author who uses different American vernaculars as the main medium of expression- an author who has captured the spirit of the American western frontier, considered to host the purest cultural spirit of an uncontaminated American soil- an author who presents the issue of racism and, instead of condemning or supporting, highlights the divided Americans' attitude towards it. Moreover, we can say that Mark Twain is a typically American author because of, similarly to Hawthorne, his dualism. In the following chapter, we will attempt to explore the author's dualism and its possible sources, highlight the different sources of the ambiguity of the novel, and finally investigate the moral potential they offer.

### 1) Samuel Clemens: a Twain writer:

Roger Asselineau, in an interesting book entitled *The Literary reputation of Mark Twain*, traces the different, often contradictory, stereotyped receptions of Twain's work throughout time and space. Broadly speaking, we can categorize these stereotypes under two main headlines: Twain the humorist, the jester, and Twain the moral sage, the philosopher and the serious artist. One of the most important proponents of the first view is Bernard de Voto, who admires Twain's gift of humor- a humor 'rooted in the folk-lore of the frontier', and which makes of him a true, 'uncontaminated' American artist<sup>160</sup>. De Voto argues that one needs a sense of humor in order to fully appreciate Twain's achievement, and deplores occasional 'impulses to seriousness' on the part of the author, which he

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<sup>159</sup> Asselineau, Roger. *The Literary Reputation of Mark Twain: From 1910 to 1950*. Paris: Librairie Marcel Didier, 1954. P28

<sup>160</sup> Ibid. p48

considers 'regrettable lapses'<sup>161</sup>. So, for de Voto, and the opponents of "Twain the humorist", humor is all that matters in Twain's work, and that tendencies towards more serious matters are a weakness. On the other hand, the other category of critics, represented by Brooks, prefer to concentrate on the serious aspect of Twain's work. Brooks argues that it is humor that is a weakness in Twain's achievement, and even deplors it when it 'cannot be explained in terms of satirical purpose'<sup>162</sup>. In this view, there is no room for light humor in the work of Twain which is meant only for laughter. Furthermore, Brooks attempts to account for the reasons for Twain's attraction to humour in terms of socio-historical circumstances. He argues that Twain is a victim of a materialistic and intolerant America, forced to betray his vocation for truly serious artistry; in other words, Twain, in the need for money, was obliged to satisfy the mediocre taste of the public, who enjoyed humorous literature, and thus sacrificed his more serious aspirations. We are thus faced with two categories of critics who adopted two contrasted approaches to the nature of Twain's achievement: a category that admires the humour and rejects the seriousness of its moral content, and the other, on the contrary, that rejects humour and prefer to highlight the moral purport. On one hand, the light tone of the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, its use of the vernacular, the numerous funny situations depicted, and the absurdity of the ending seem to confirm the former view that Twain is only a humorist- a 'jester', and nothing more. On the other hand, the novel contains undeniably deep reflections on the nature of man, the role of conscience, the nature of religion, the impact of society on the individual's personal morality- issues that seem to give credit to the proponents of the second view that Twain is, despite deplorable lapses into humor, a serious artist.

This conflict among critics towards the nature of Twain's work is significant, as it sheds light on its complexity, and explains its long lasting popularity among readers and professional critics. As Michael D. Bell puts it, 'critics who propose one facet of the author as essential mostly regard the opposite facet as having impeded or subverted the development of his true nature'<sup>163</sup>. As we shall see, in order to fully appreciate Twain's achievement, one need

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<sup>161</sup> Bell, Michael Davitt. *The Problem of American Realism: Studies in the Cultural History of a Literary Idea*. London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993. P40

<sup>162</sup> Ibid. 40

<sup>163</sup> Michael D. Bell in: Budd, Louis J. ed. *New Essays on the Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. U.S.: Cambridge University Press, 1985. P35

not ignore one and privilege the other; indeed, both should be dealt with, as they meet and compete in Twain's work. Light humor and deep seriousness are two contradictory, irreconcilable, yet undeniable aspects of Twain's masterpiece: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. In fact, it is this dialogue between the humorous and the serious that gives rise to ambiguity in the novel, because, as readers, we are not directed towards what position to adopt towards certain issues. This dualism is, in fact, only one aspect of the different dualities that can be found to be hovering over Twain's work.

In an interesting article entitled "*Mark Twain, or the Ambiguities*", Arthur Schlesinger J. R. dwells on this dualism inherent in Twain and his work. He starts his article by commenting on the title of a biography of Twain, namely: *Mr Clemens and M. Twain*, written by Justin Kaplan. He argues that this title points out the different dualities in Twain's life and mind:

The title- Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain- signifies the dualities which dominated Clemens' life. It was not only that he was both man and pseudonym, or that he was a humorist steeped in pessimism, or that he was a Confederate who made a runaway slave the hero of his greatest novel, or that he was a Western vagabond who luxuriated in Connecticut gentility, or that he simultaneously condemned and embraced the acquisitive values of a materialistic age, [...] or that, the most American writer of his day, he spent a sixth of his life abroad, or that he believed that 'every man is a moon and has a dark side which he never shows to anybody'. It was more specific and obsessive than that. He was fascinated by Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, by the idea of men possessed by demons, by 'my double, my partner in duality, the other and wholly independent personage who resides in me' [...]<sup>164</sup>

Dualism is an inherent aspect of Twain's mind- a mind that keeps oscillating between one side of a matter and another, without successfully arriving at a satisfactory reconciliation. As Schlesinger says, he is a Westerner, steeped in the cultural tradition of the American frontier, but who marries a woman from the 'Connecticut gentility'. Moreover, there is ambiguity surrounding his attitude towards the race issue in America, and the debate still goes on among critics whether he is a racist or not. Furthermore, it is interesting to notice that he has points in common with Hawthorne, when he refers to the hidden hemisphere of the moon as representing the dark, hidden side of every human being. His fascination with the split personality- with the existence of a second self- a double who resides in him, are but to confirm a deeply ingrained dualism. As Richard Chase states, '[there] is no doubt that Mark Twain's imagination was profoundly affected by the doubleness of his personality, and

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<sup>164</sup> Schlesinger, Arthur JR. "Mark Twain, or the Ambiguities". The Atlantic, 1966  
[www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1966/08/mark-twain-or-the-ambiguities/305730](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1966/08/mark-twain-or-the-ambiguities/305730)

the contradiction of his feelings and opinions'<sup>165</sup>. Twain is thus a divided, dualistic writer, whose writing is simply an attempt to reach some kind of reconciliation and peace, but without success. This aspect is, moreover, at the heart of Twain's literary production; Arthur Schlesinger argues that surely 'for Mark Twain the interior tension was enormously exhilarating and productive and helps explain the unimaginable discharge of literary energy over half a century'<sup>166</sup>.

Moreover, just like Hawthorne was a divided man between a past of Puritan guilt and a present of transcendental hope, Twain assumed an ambivalent position between the past and the changing present. W. D. Howells portrays him as 'the regionalist from the American past challenging the transformations of the present'<sup>167</sup>. This portrayal tells much about the fact that Twain lived in an age of transition where conflicting resonances and directions seem palpable. Together with the writer Charles Dudley Warner, Twain named this period 'the Gilded Age', referring to the discrepancy between a beautiful, shining surface and hidden social problems. Yet, Twain's attitude towards this period is far from being simple; in fact, he is divided between approving of the present, synonymous with development, expansion and hope for a better future, and regretting the past, with its beautiful, often romanticized simplicity and innocence. As the following quotation explains, this division helped develop two contradictory voices in Twain:

Literary contradiction flourished in the Gilded Age, and –like Whitman in his own way- Twain manifested it. The critic of American society was also its celebrator, the times of moral flux and corruption were also times of national greatness and expansion. Never quite sure whether to enjoy or condemn, Twain developed two warring voices: that of the boyish comedian, that of the bitter satirist<sup>168</sup>.

Material acquisitiveness produced, in the words of Roger Asselineau, 'a tawdry culture' that lost its spiritual essence; postwar America engendered contradictory attitudes because of the dramatic expansion and development in the different domains of life, and the loss of seriousness and depth- a contradiction that typically characterizes the modern condition. Thus, Twain's adoption of the two 'warring voices', one for laughing lightly on the absurdity

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<sup>165</sup> Chase, Richard. Op. Cit. p149

<sup>166</sup> Schlesinger, Arthur JR. Op. Cit.

<sup>167</sup> Qt. In: Ruland, Richard, and Malcolm Bradbury. Ed. *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: a History of American Literature*. United States: Penguin Books, 1991. P203

<sup>168</sup> Ibid. p198

of the situation, and the other when the realization of the tragedy of modernity becomes too oppressive, is a way to cope with these contradictions.

Another source of contradiction that surrounds Twain and his work emanates from his writing mode, which vacillates between two seemingly contradictory genres, namely romance and realism. In fact, Twain is often considered by critics to have written mostly in the realistic mode; hence, it would be interesting to take a look at the definition of realism to verify the extent to which Twain's writing ascribes to this genre, which he defines as:

[T]he attempt to depict life as it is usually experienced, without recourse to miraculous events, larger-than-life characters, or supernatural intervention. In a realistic text, the emphasis is on the way things are for ordinary people, whose behavior and speech mirror their social position and cultural attitudes. In this sense realism is opposed to ROMANCE, which represents life as we would like it to be, or to other anti-realist approaches such as EXPRESSIONISM or IMPRESSIONISM.<sup>169</sup>

In other words, the focus of realism is the real or the believable realm where we see characters and events that we would meet in our everyday life; this is the main aspect that differentiates it from romance which operates in less life-like regions. W. D. Howells, one of the leading figures of American Realism, provides an interesting reflection on realistic fiction:

Let fiction cease to lie about life; let it portray men and women as they are, actuated by the motives and the passions in the measure we all know; let it leave off painting dolls and working them by springs and wires; let it show the different interests in their true proportions; let it forbear to preach pride and revenge, folly and insanity, egotism and prejudice, but frankly own these for what they are, in whatever figures and occasions they appear; let it not put on fine literary airs; let it speak the dialect, the language, that most Americans know- the language of unaffected people everywhere- and there can be no doubt of an unlimited future, not only of delightfulness but of usefulness for it.<sup>170</sup>

Howells argues that fiction should be truthful to life, depicting men and women as they are, not as we imagine them to be. Moreover, we see that the question of style is important for Howells, since language is the medium which differentiates realism from other modes of writing. Howells here equates 'style' with 'fine arts', and hence with superficiality, whereas the real is equated with the spontaneous, hence the human. For Howells, a good writer is the one who sacrifices the literary in the interest of the real- a writer who would write with 'no consciousness of style'<sup>171</sup>. In fact, in this question of style he comments that 'of all the

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<sup>169</sup> Quinn, Edward. OP.CIT. p353

<sup>170</sup> Qt. In: Bell, Michael Davitt. Op. Cit. p40

<sup>171</sup> Ibid. p20

literary men [he has] known, [Twain] was the most unliterary in his make and manner'<sup>172</sup>. We understand that Howells is in fact complementing Twain by calling him unliterary- a writer who is not concerned with the literary, which is equated with the artificial and shallow. Thus, following what we have said about Realism, Twain's work seems to comply with its most important characteristic: depicting ordinary individuals with their spontaneity in his revolutionary use of the Southern vernacular. However, other important factors that are to be taken into consideration prevent any such easy categorization.

One of the most important impediments to proclaiming Twain as a realist is the rarity of his pronouncements on the subject. Indeed, unlike W. D. Howells and other self-proclaimed realists, Twain has not issued any kind of manifesto about realism; this is well articulated in the following quotation:

[Unlike] his contemporaries, Howells and Henry James, Twain wrote little formal criticism, certainly no declaration of literary principles in the order of James' 'The Art of Fiction' (1885) and Howells' 'Criticism and Fiction' [...]. Unlike Howells and James, Twain apparently did not need or want to write sustained manifestos about the nature and purpose of the art of fiction. For this reason, if for no other, he stands apart from the so-called realists who rose to prominence in the 1880s.<sup>173</sup>

We understand that Twain's abstaining from any pronouncement on the function of art differentiates him from the other realists who overtly proclaim their literary engagements. Besides, as we shall see throughout our analysis of the novel, Twain fails to comply with Howells' definition of art and its function. Indeed, what came to be called Howellsian realism has at its centre an ideology that clearly advocates the moral function of art. Howells clearly assimilates the office of the writer to that of teacher who feels responsible towards society, and uses his art as a means for moral education and guidance. Moreover, in order to put this office into effect, the writer should discredit all that is irresponsible: the 'romantic', the 'literary', and the 'artificial'<sup>174</sup>. Twain's work seems to fulfill this condition- the novel we are concerned with repeatedly ridicules the romantic and the artificial; however, as we shall argue, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is the best representation of escape from this kind of responsibility that Howells places at the core of his definition of realism. Hence, regarding these contradictions, it is not possible to affirm that Twain is a realist writer and that his writing inscribes itself in the realistic genre.

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Budd, Louis J. ed. Op. Cit. PP37-38

<sup>174</sup> Ibid. p43

Hence, from the above considerations, we can safely deduce that Twain is not a realist in principle, because he does not provide any sustained theory about his writing that pertains to realism, neither in practice, as it is overtly contradicted in his work. As we have seen in the introduction, R. Chase, in fact, places Twain within the genre of romance, together with other writers such as Melville and Hawthorne. This seems unlikely if we are to take into consideration Twain's famous attack on the romantics; indeed, in a letter to his friend Howells Twain declares:

You are really my only author; I am restricted to you; I wouldn't give a damn for the rest. I bored through *Middlemarch* during the past week, with its labored & tedious analyses of feelings & motives, & its paltry & tiresome people? Its unexciting & uninteresting story, & its frequent blinding flashes of single-sentence poetry, philosophy, wit, & what-not, & nearly died from the over work.... Well, you have done it [ that is, re-created experience; the reference is to Howells' most recent novel] with marvelous facility- & you make all the motives & feelings perfectly clear without analyzing the guts out of them, the way George Eliot does. I can't stand George Eliot, & Hawthorne & those people; I see what they are at, a hundred years before they get to it, & they just tire me to death. [...]<sup>175</sup>

We clearly see in this letter Twain's vehement rejection of those writers who give too much consideration to feelings and what he considers 'boring' psychological analysis. Yet, what is significant about this letter is the fact that it is not an attack from a realist: the reason for Twain's dislike of these authors is not due to their 'sentimentality' and their being 'sloppy romantics', but their concern with 'extended psychological analysis'<sup>176</sup>. This is hardly a feature attached solely to romance, but is also found in realistic fiction; moreover, as Bell argues, Twain affirms that he dislikes romance because it is tiresome, and not because it is unrealistic. Moreover, the values Twain mentions in this letter, such as interesting characters, excitement and surprise, are found in romance, not in realistic fiction, which is supposed to render the reality as it is, without much concern for excitement and entertaining characters. Twain asserts that 'the personages of a tale shall confine themselves to possibilities and let miracles alone or, if they venture a miracle, the author must plausibly set it forth as to make it look plausible and reasonable'<sup>177</sup>. Twain starts with the necessity that a writer should avoid 'miracles' and deal only with the 'plausible'; this can easily be taken for a realistic stance, yet, it is soon abandoned by the permission to deal

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<sup>175</sup> Qt. In: *ibid.* 40

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>177</sup> Qt. in: Chase, Richard. *Op. Cit.* p148

with 'miracles', and the means a writer should find to make it look plausible. This reminds us of Hawthorne's positioning of romance between the real and the imaginary, and the way he puts this into practice by introducing his novel with the Custom House sketch, where he positions the tale within the realm of reality with the help of the discovered letter A and documents pertaining to it, before acknowledging that other details emanate from his own imagination. We can find here similarities between Hawthorne's blending of the real and the imaginary and Twain's writing process, which are further supported by the notes he wrote on the margins of *A Connecticut Yankee*:

If you attempt to (build) create and build a wholly imaginary incident, adventure or situation, you will go astray, and the artificiality of the thing will be detectable. But if you found on a fact in your personal experience, it is an acorn, a root, and every created adornment that grows up out of it and spreads its foliage and blossoms to the sun will seem realities, not inventions. You will not be likely to go astray; your compass of fact is there to keep you on the right course. Mention instances where you think the author was imagining. Others where he built upon a solid and actually lived basis of fact.<sup>178</sup>

We understand that for Twain fact is, in the words of Joe B. Fulton, 'the point d'appuis of his artistry'<sup>179</sup>, which is very similar to Hawthorne's departure from a fact taken from reality, a piece of ragged cloth. Fulton argues that 'Twain blends the techniques of romance and realism within his fiction, linking a romantic concept of inspiration with a very realistic concept of how fiction should be made'<sup>180</sup>. We can safely declare that Twain inscribes his work into the genre of American romance as represented by the author he seemed to dislike, Nathaniel Hawthorne; and indeed, Twain's work is loaded with anomalies, dilemmas, and moral ambiguity, which characterize this genre, and which will be our present concern of study.

*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is considered Twain's masterpiece, yet, it is one of the most controversial works which has raised endless debates among critics. Indeed, this novel is where we can clearly observe Twain's ambivalent attitude towards man's moral nature, racism, and the function of literature- three main aspects which engender its moral ambiguity. Contrary to Hawthorne who chooses to introduce his novel with a sketch where he gives the readers details pertaining to the story they are about to read, inviting them,

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<sup>178</sup> Qt. In.: Fulton, Joe B. *Mark Twain in the Margins: The Quarry Farm Marginalia and A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 2000. P11

<sup>179</sup> Ibid. p13

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

even urging them, to take it seriously, Twain prefers to start it with a very short and confusing note:

Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot.<sup>181</sup>

Apparently, Twain puts this note before the beginning of the novel as a warning for the reader not to take it seriously; indeed, we are urged not to seek a 'motive', nor a 'moral', and not even a 'plot'- in other words, neither form nor content should be given serious consideration. However, the reading experience impels us to do just the opposite, because of the deep reflections it offers about human nature, moral values, social morality, and the role of literature. At the end of the novel, we are left with more questions on these issues than answers, and we generally tend to forget about this notice. We wonder then what if Twain's warning is in fact an invitation, behind the guise of humor typical to Twain, to do just the opposite- to find a motive to the novel? What if the focus of the reader should be on trying to find a moral, which implies an active engagement in the moral dilemmas it engenders? In the following study, we will attempt to cover the main moral ambiguities overshadowing the novel, and their effects on its moral dimension.

## 2) 'Conscience' vs. 'Sound Heart': Huck's Inner Debates

The novel is told through the first person point of view- through the eyes of the young and anarchic Huck Finn. The main advantage of using this point of view is the active involvement it engenders in the reader who lives the events of the novel and responds to them at the same time as Huck. Moreover, it allows us to follow closely the moral development of Huck, as we have a direct access to the reflections and moral debates he goes through. The first thing we notice is that Huck experiences a marked difficulty to find the right course of action in the face of certain circumstances. In fact, we see that Huck is in a continual struggle with conscience- a word which is repeated many times in the novel, making it one of the main concerns of the narrative.

Twain makes a very interesting and significant comment on his novel, referring to it as 'a book of mine where a sound heart and a deformed conscience come into collision and conscience suffers defeat'<sup>182</sup>. In order to get a full appreciation of this comment, we can

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<sup>181</sup> Twain, Mark. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*(1884). Penguin Books, 1994 (All references to this book are taken from the same source)

<sup>182</sup> Qt. In.: Rulan, Richard, and Malcolm Bradbury. Op. Cit. p198

refer to an interesting dialogue published in 1906 entitled 'What is Man', where Twain discusses the nature of man, destiny, free will, and other psychological issues. He presents man as a machine that solely operates under the effect of external influences. He also provides an interesting definition of conscience that seems to suit the one discussed in the novel. The old man that takes part in the dialogue refers to it as follows: 'Conscience- that independent Sovereign, that big silent absolute monarch inside of a man who is the man's Master'<sup>183</sup>, and adds that there are different consciences because there are different men; in fact, contrary to what we expect from an 'independent sovereign', the old man argues that conscience is 'trained', and functions solely according to that training. In other words, conscience is a product of external, environmental factors, and is not the objective arbiter between good and bad that helps the individual keep on the right path. This helps better understand the concept of 'deformed conscience' that Twain mentions- a conscience shaped by external social factors. As we have seen, Twain clearly states in the novel that it turns around the confrontation between a sound heart, in reference to a romantic conception of human nature, which is innocent and pure when uncorrupted by society, and a deformed conscience, when shaped by social training. In other words, Twain refers to the confrontation between personal morality, looked up to with admiration, because equated with spontaneity and freedom, and social morality, equated with oppression. Twain adds that it is this deformed conscience that suffers defeat, from which we understand that it is Huck's natural goodness that triumphs at the end. We will presently explore Huck's inner debate, and verify whether it is personal or social morality that prevails.

The novel starts with the chapter entitled 'Civilizing Huck', where we see the efforts of the Widow Douglas and Miss Watson to inculcate in Huck the religious and moral values traditionally accepted in society. In fact, at the very beginning of the novel, we are presented with the rigid and constraining social conventions of the Widow Douglas, with her strict discipline and lack of spontaneity. Huck, on his part, is already depicted as the potential social revolutionary who rejects good social manners and prefers nature and freedom. The fact that he wears 'unsuitable garments' suggests that a well organized social

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<sup>183</sup> Neider, Charles. Ed. *The Complete Essays of Mark Twain*. U.S.: Da Capo Press, 2000. p347

life does not fit him. Yet, this social training starts to have a certain impact on Huck, who starts to like 'civilized life':

At first I hated the school, but by and by I got so I could stand it. Whenever I got uncommon tired I played hookey, and the hiding I got next day done me good and cheered me up. So the longer I went to school the easier it got to be. I was getting sort of used to the widow's ways, too, and they warn't so raspy on me. Living in a house and sleeping in a bed pulled on me pretty tight mostly, but before the cold weather I used to slide out and sleep in the woods sometimes, and so that was a rest to me. I liked the old ways best, but I was getting so I liked the new ones, too, a little bit. The widow said I was coming along slow but sure, and doing very satisfactory. She said she warn't ashamed of me.  
P24

Even if Huck is still the anarchic and independent social up-turner, who slides out at night and sleeps in the wood, we clearly notice that the widow and the school start to have some effects on him; he starts to behave, and gradually even wins the approval of the widow.

After this episode, Huck plunges again into freedom and anarchy, as is illustrated in the following passage:

It was kind of lazy and jolly, laying off comfortable all day, smoking and fishing, and no books nor study. Two months or more run along, and my clothes got to be all rags and dirt, and I didn't see how I'd ever got to like it so well at the widow's, where you had to wash, and eat on a plate, and comb up, and go to bed and get up regular, and be forever bothering over a book, and have old Miss Watson pecking at you all the time. I didn't want to go back no more. I had stopped cussing, because the widow didn't like it; but now I took to it again because pap hadn't no objec-tions. It was pretty good times up in the woods there, take it all around. P32

This passage is taken from the episode where Huck is kidnapped by his drunk father and held captive in the woods. We clearly see that Huck is in his natural element, and looks back negatively at the social training he's been receiving from the Widow. He overtly questions and rejects social values, but he does so unconsciously, following his natural instincts or, in Twain's words, his 'sound heart'. This sound heart is the innocent, spontaneous, and anarchic nature of Huck, which rejects social conventions. So, from the outset of the novel, we are presented with this confrontation between Huck's personal, natural and unconscious morality, and social morality.

The raft is the ideal setting where we clearly see this inner confrontation taking place; indeed, the raft is a neutral setting, far from the external social environment, where Huck feels 'free and easy and comfortable' to formulate his own individual moral reflections. However, we discover that, even on the raft, Huck is not totally free from social influences, which makes the moral debate he goes through even more interesting. The most important inner struggle Huck goes through concerns Jim and his socially imposed position of a slave.

On the raft, both Jim and Huck are freed from these social constraints, and are allowed to develop primarily as individuals, without regard for social background; it is 'a special world of human intimacy where a fundamental human bond develops between the tattered, instinctive white boy and the superstitious, equally instinctive black slave'<sup>184</sup>. Indeed, on the raft, Huck and Jim meet simply as human beings, free from the controlling and distorting social awareness. As a result, a touching affection starts to grow between the two. The first signs of this unlikely friendship are seen in chapter 15 where Huck and Jim are separated and lost in the fog. When they finally find each other, Huck decides to play a trick on Jim, making him believe that it was all but a dream. When the latter discovers Huck's intentions to make a joke at him, he gives rise to one of the most moving passages in the novel:

"What do dey stan' for? I'se gwyne to tell you. When I got all wore out wid work, en wid de callin' for you, en went to sleep, my heart wuz mos' broke bekase you wuz los', en I didn' k'yer no' mo' what become er me en de raf'. En when I wake up en fine you back agin, all safe en soun', de tears come, en I could a got down on my knees en kiss yo' foot, I's so thankful. En all you wuz thinkin' 'bout wuz how you could make a fool uv ole Jim wid a lie. Dat truck dah is TRASH; en trash is what people is dat puts dirt on de head er dey fren's en makes 'em ashamed."PP89-90

With this spontaneous outburst of anger, we realize the depth of Jim's affection for Huck, who cares more for the latter's safety than his own. In addition, in an uncalculated manner, he calls Huck 'friend', breaking thus all the boundaries that separate them in the social context. In response to this, Huck feels sorry to have played a trick on Jim, and struggles to make up his mind to apologize to him:

It was fifteen minutes before I could work myself up to go and humble myself to a nigger; but I done it, and I warn't ever sorry for it afterwards, neither. I didn't do him no more mean tricks, and I wouldn't done that one if I'd a knowed it would make him feel that way. P90

We see that Huck has to go through a serious inner struggle before taking the decision to apologize. The words he uses at the beginning of this passage, 'go and humble myself to a nigger', express the strong hold social morality has on the mind of Huck, despite the drives towards freedom and anarchy we see in the beginning. This constitutes the first reference to conscience as framed, or rather deformed, by society, against which Huck had to fight before crossing the social boundaries that separate him from Jim. Then Huck declares that he has not regretted the decision he has taken, and promises never to play mean tricks on Jim. As Reichart Mark puts it, these resolutions are 'a major step in Huck's personal

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<sup>184</sup> Rulan, Richard, and Malcolm Bradbury. Op. Cit. p199

development'<sup>185</sup>, since Huck learns and experiences a sense of responsibility towards another individual; as Bell argues, 'Huck learns about personal responsibility when he betrays Jim's trust'<sup>186</sup>. We feel that Huck's moral sense is developing, since it is the first decision he takes on his own, far from the constraints of a social environment. Huck acts on his own, and it is the 'sound heart' that wins over. Moreover, it is significant that it is through his growing affection for Jim that Huck's personal awareness develops, and certainly not through the teachings of a Miss Watson. This suggests that Twain gives more importance to experience, which involves ethical reflection and leads to a heightened sense of moral judgment, rather than to abstract theoretical moral values deprived of any practical meaning.

Throughout the novel, Twain is intent to show the extent to which socially ingrained beliefs are hard to counter and dismiss. In the following passage, we notice that Huck's relationship with Jim is increasingly putting pressure on his socially deformed conscience:

Jim said it made him all over trembly and feverish to be so close to freedom. Well, I can tell you it made me all over trembly and feverish, too, to hear him, because I begun to get it through my head that he WAS most free -- and who was to blame for it? Why, ME. I couldn't get that out of my conscience, no how nor no way. It got to troubling me so I couldn't rest; [...]Conscience says to me, "What had poor Miss Watson done to you that you could see her nigger go off right under your eyes and never say one single word? What did that poor old woman do to you that you could treat her so mean? Why, she tried to learn you your book, she tried to learn you your manners, she tried to be good to you every way she knowed how. THAT'S what she done."P91

In this passage, Twain shows the extent to which an individual's conscience can be deformed by external factors, and the prejudice it brings to a sound moral judgment. We see Huck's conscience here so deformed that he comes to care about the feelings of Miss Watson at the loss of her 'nigger', instead of recognizing and denouncing the inhumanity that permeates the institution of slavery. Yet, despite this, it is Huck's sound heart that triumphs here, because he does not denounce Jim on the rest of the journey- he even protects him from an eventual revelation of the truth.

Throughout the chapter, we witness that the growing affection between Huck and Jim recurrently wins over social conventions. One instance that shows Huck's attachment to Jim is found in the episode where two men want to enquire about the raft. Huck cleverly lies

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<sup>185</sup> Reichardt, Mark R. ed. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. U.S.: Ignatus Critical Editions, 2009. p392

<sup>186</sup> Ibid. p356

that his family has got the smallpox, which immediately scares away the curious enquirers.

However, this does not leave Huck's mind at ease:

They went off and I got aboard the raft, feeling bad and low, because I knowed very well I had done wrong, and I see it warn't no use for me to try to learn to do right; a body that don't get started right when he's little, ain't got no show- [...] well, then, say I, what's the use you learning to do right, when it's troublesome to do right and ain't no trouble to do wrong, and the wages is just the same? I was stuck. I couldn't answer that. So I reckoned I wouldn't bother no more about it, but after this always do whichever come handiest at the time.p95

Social morality has so much deformed Huck's conscience that he comes to take his own background as a reason for what he now considers his wrong doing; indeed, for him, helping Jim is an offence that has reached the dimension of a sin. On the other hand, Huck reflects on his state of mind after the eventual denunciation of Jim, and to his amazement, it would be the same feeling of guilt, because, in this case, even though unconsciously, he goes against his sound heart, which has come to regard Jim as a friend, not just a slave.

Moreover, the passage is important because it offers insight into the nature of the debate Huck goes through; indeed, we notice here that Huck does not just refer to good and bad to account for his action, but to his personal feelings. Steven Mailloux deals with this point as follows:

Only Huck's public conscience cites reasons based on the ethical opposition between good and bad. In contrast, Huck's natural "goodness" bases its argument on pragmatic considerations about feeling happy and about actions being troublesome, considerations that tend to break down simple distinctions between good and evil.<sup>187</sup>

Huck's personal morality, in other words, is not based on the traditional ethical distinction between good and evil, but on personal, subjective good and bad feelings. Through Huck, thus, Twain discredits traditional morality and its reliance on shallow and unverifiable theoretical conceptions of good and evil, and puts forward the ability of the individual to discriminate between good and bad through personal intuition. In other words, man is endowed with the capacity to think and judge- and this capacity should be nourished and heightened through practical experience, not obscured behind theoretical, external social values.

This moral dilemma Huck experiences attains its paroxysm in Chapter 31: Huck goes through a strong inner struggle over writing a letter to the widow and denouncing Jim or not. He feels that writing the letter would cleanse him from sin, and allow him to pray again. The

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<sup>187</sup> Steven Mailloux in: Budd, Louis J. ed. Op. Cit. p120

following passage, although rather too long, is important to quote, because it shows clearly the inner dilemma Huck experiences after writing the letter:

I felt good and all washed clean of sin for the first time I had ever felt so in my life, and I knowed I could pray now. But I didn't do it straight off, but laid the paper down and sat there thinking-thinking how good it was all this happened so, and how near I come to being lost and going to hell. And went on thinking. And got to thinking over our trip down the river; and I see Jim before me, all the time, in the day, and in the night-time, sometimes moonlight, sometimes storm, and we a-floating along, talking, and singing, and laughing. But somehow I couldn't seem to strike no places to harden me against him, but only the other kind. I'd see him standing my watch on top of his'n, 'stead of calling me, so I could go on sleeping; and see him how glad he was when I come back out of the fog; and when I come to him again in the swamp, up there where the feud was; and such-like times; and would always call me honey, and pet me, and do everything he could think of for me, and how good he always was; and at last I struck the time I saved him by telling the men we had smallpox aboard, and he was so grateful, and said I was the best friend old Jim ever had in the world, and the *only* one he's got now; and then I happened to look around, and see that paper.

It was a close place. I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was a-trembling, because I'd got to decide, for ever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself:

'All right, then, I'll go to hell'- and tore it up. P208

At the beginning, Huck eases his 'deformed' conscience through writing the letter to deliver Jim; now he has done what society would require of him, and hence he feels at peace. Yet, a moment of reflection which takes him back to the day he spent on the raft with Jim suffices to immediately abandon the enterprise. The passage where he remembers Jim is very moving as we denote a real, deep affection that Huck feels towards Jim. It is a moment of realization for Huck reaching the dimension of a moral climax, which is expressed in the words: 'I'll go to hell'- a cry with which Huck commits himself to his friendship with Jim, giving victory to his personal morality, his 'sound heart', over the social morality. As Mailloux puts it, 'Huck's feelings triumph over his conscience; friendship wins over racism'<sup>188</sup>. The triumph of Huck's personal morality is expected by readers, since we are prepared for this moment by the narrative that highlighted the friendship and loyalty of the two characters. However, we are left skeptical about the implication of such a triumph because of the tone with which Huck accompanies it.

In the passage that follows Huck's decision to go to hell, he provides interesting comments:

It was awful thoughts and awful words, but they was said. And I let them stay said; and never thought no more about reforming. I shoved the whole thing out of my head, and said I would take up wickedness again, which was in my line, being brung up to it, and

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid. p123

the other warn't. And for a starter I would go to work and steal Jim out of slavery again; and if I could think up anything worse, I would do that, too; be- cause as long as I was in, and in for good, I might as well go the whole hog. PP208-209

The moral climax is the moment when the protagonist is supposed to reach moral maturity and, in the case of Huck, a new consciousness. However, the impact of Huck's admirable decision not to denounce Jim is weakened by his negative attitude towards it. Tom Quirk, among other critics, presents it as a failure:

Far from becoming the moral hero of the book at this point, Huck has quelled his moral sense for the moment and [...] looks forward to outdoing the freeing of Jim by committing unspeakable acts in the future. These are thoughts of a 13-year-old boy and should not be given much credence.<sup>189</sup>

In other words, Quirk argues that Huck could have become a hero who self-consciously rejects the oppressive social conventions of his time, and imposes a new conscience based on more personal and human terms. We are left wondering at the significance of this moment: why has not Twain made of it a moment of deliverance for Huck from compelling social conventions, and the forging of a new, liberating conscience? The confrontation between personal morality and social morality is present throughout the novel, and attains its highest point of tension when Huck decides to 'go to hell' - the strength of this decision is reflected in the strength of the words used. However, despite what we expect, it does not have the moral import it should have because its importance is spoiled by Huck's debunking of his decision and his background. Does Twain create this ambiguity on the purpose of fulfilling the commandments of the notice where he insists on not taking the novel seriously? Or is it a way the author found to alleviate the moral seriousness of the scene, and hence let the reader think on his own and find out his own conclusion?

### 3) Racism: Jim

The issue of race in the novel has raised important debates among critics between those who argue for its racist character, and those who reject it and consider it in a more humanitarian way. However, the moral ambiguity that hovers around this issue prevents us from taking a straightforward position with either category of critics. In fact, ambiguity is due to the portrayal of Jim, which denotes a marked ambivalence in Twain towards the

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<sup>189</sup> Messent, Peter. and Louis J. Budd. Ed. *A Companion to Mark Twain*. U.K.: Blackwell Publishing, 2005. PP33-34

question of racism. In an interesting book entitled *Was Huck Black?*, Shelley Fisher Fishkin discusses this ambivalence through the novel, and argues that no clear-cut answer to the questions raised about race in the novel can be provided. On the contrary, as he says, 'Twain move back and forth between challenge and affirmation, rejection and assent, as regards his culture's norms of "blackness" and "whiteness"'<sup>190</sup>. In other words, Twain did not simply approve or reject the racial differentiations imposed by his society- a point which makes much of the moral ambiguity found in the novel. In order to highlight Twain's contradictory position towards the issue of race, we are going to focus on the problematic portrayal of Jim, who is depicted, on the one hand, in the tradition of minstrelsy and its denigrating stereotypes about the blacks in America, and, on the other hand, as a human being worthy of admiration and respect.

Minstrelsy is a typically American entertainment based on acting and singing performed by white people in blackface. It started in the 1840s, and was very popular; yet, with the development of the civil rights movement, people started to see its racist character.

Minstrel shows mainly turn around the denigrating depiction of black people as 'dim-witted, lazy, buffoonish, superstitious, happy-go-lucky, and musical'<sup>191</sup>. It was, in fact, an expression of the cultural attitudes of the time towards the black race that justified and supported slavery. Among the white Americans of his time, Twain loved minstrelsy, and expressed it well in his autobiography saying that 'the genuine nigger show, the extravagant nigger show' was 'the show which to me had no peer', and adds that it is 'a thoroughly delightful thing' to him. Twain's comments on minstrelsy denote a genuine admiration for it, an 'unguarded attraction', as Eric Lott puts it, to one of the most controversial artistic performances in the American history. Lott denotes 'Twain's ability to lose sight of the sorry circumstances that underlie his mirth and his continued and unexamined interest in racial exoticism'<sup>192</sup>. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was written during a period when minstrel shows enjoyed a peak of popularity, and we can easily sort out the aspects that pertain to

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<sup>190</sup> Fishkin, Shelley Fisher. *Mark Twain and African-American Voices*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.P79

<sup>191</sup> Wikipedia: the free encyclopedia. "Minstrel Show".  
<En.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minstrel\_show>

<sup>192</sup> Robinson, Forrest G. Ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Mark Twain*. U.S.: Cambridge University Press, 1995.P4

them such as the portrayal of a runaway slave and the humor made at his expense.

However, as we shall demonstrate, Twain's portrayal of Jim is not an 'unguarded' adoption of minstrelsy- in fact, it waves back and forth between acceptance and rejection of the denigrating racist stereotypes.

Jim is first mentioned in the novel by Huck as 'Miss Watson's big nigger', and the first thing we come to know about him is his superstitious nature. One of the most important episodes that show Jim's superstitious nature occurs at the beginning of the novel: Tom and Huck escape secretly at night to get out and, on their way, skip Jim's hat off while he sleeps, and hang it on a limb over him. When Jim wakes up and finds his hat, he tries to account for what happened through inventing a story:

[...] Jim said the witches bewitched him and put him in a trance, and rode him all over the State, and then set him under the trees again and hung his hat on a limb to show who done it. And next time Jim told it he said they rode him down to New Orleans; and after that, every time he told it he spread it more and more, till by and by he said they rode him all over the world, and tired him most to death, and his back was all over saddle-boils. Jim was monstrous proud about it, and he got so he wouldn't hardly notice the other niggers. P15

Jim's invention of such a story, and the exaggerated details he adds to it, point out his extreme naiveté and dim-wittedness. In addition, these denigrating aspects are extended to all niggers who 'would come miles to hear Jim tell about it' (p15). We can safely consider this episode to emanate directly from the tradition of minstrelsy, as it nourishes one of the most demeaning stereotypes against the blacks- their exaggerated superstitious nature, which denotes lack of wit or simple mindedness. However, there are certain factors which force us to see this episode in a completely different light.

In the following passage, Huck informs us of the unexpected dimension that Jim's tale has acquired:

Niggers would come miles to hear Jim tell about it, and he was more looked up to than any nigger in the country. Strange niggers would stand with their mouths open and look him all over, same as if he was a wonder. [...] Jim was most ruined, for a servant, because he got stuck up on account of having seen the devil and been rode by witches. P15-16

Despite the gullibility and ignorance of 'negroes' typical of the minstrel show, we clearly see that Jim has turned the trick played on him to his own advantage. He has become a local celebrity, as 'negroes' would come from all around the place to hear the tale. This signifies a triumph for Jim, since he is admired and looked up to with respect. Eric Lott comments on this point as follows:

Despite Huck's rather hard judgment of Jim's self-investment, the fact is that he becomes a "wonder" within the black community and is "most ruined" for a servant- unsuited for slavery- in the wake of his tales. The superstition to which we are encouraged by Huck to condescend has real and potentially subverting results in the world of the novel. One notes that Jim's actual words are not rendered here, which in the orthographic hierarchy of white dialect writing might have had the effect of reducing their impact. This is a moment when Jim, as he does in other ways throughout Huck Finn, uses tricks and deceits to his advantage. We may call this a kind of blackface antiracism, of whose political duplicity and indeed variability Twain was not always the complete master.<sup>193</sup>

Lott highlights here the important points to be deduced from this passage: firstly, there's the fact that Jim succeeds to amaze his fellow slaves through his masterful use of rhetoric, as he shows a wide and active imagination, and good skills at expressing it through the story he invents. Secondly, this triumph elevates him above his fellows and even, in the words of E. Lott, makes him 'unsuited for slavery'. Moreover, Lott raises an important point when he asserts that the story Jim invents is not told directly by him, but through Huck Finn. If it was told by Jim himself, it would have reduced the impact it actually makes on the readers. This suggests that Twain is intent on highlighting Jim's triumph and 'actual power', which implies that he wants to impose respect for Jim. This is an instance where Twain counters the tradition of minstrelsy which focuses on humor at the expense of the negro; here, Twain reduces the impact of humor through omitting Jim's words, and appeals to a more serious attitude on the part of the readers.

S. F. Fishkin puts to light another important point concerning Jim's witch adventure. He argues that Twain is well documented about the Minstrel show, but that we cannot consider them the only source of reference to him. Fisher points out the African-American oral traditions and their influence on Twain's work. Indeed, Fisher affirms that this change in the frame of reference reveals other 'alternative sets of meanings'<sup>194</sup>. In the American folklore, transmitted mainly orally, there is a tale of being ridden by witches as recorded by Richard Dorson in *American Negro Folktales*, and also by Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps in *The Book of Negro Folklore*. The only difference between Jim's tale and the traditional one is the fact that while Jim is taken on a ride all over the State, and even all over the world, the folklorist tales involve 'a stationary position'- the victims ridden within the bed, or at most within the room. Moreover, Fisher adds another tradition to which we can ascribe Jim's tale: the whites' tradition of telling certain stories to their slaves to discourage them from

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<sup>193</sup> Eric Lott in: Robinson, Forrest G. Ed. Op. Cit. P8

<sup>194</sup> Fishkin, Shelley Fisher. Op. Cit. p83

eventual escape. In her book entitled *Night Riders in Black Folk History*, Gladys-Marie Fry refers to the whites' attempts at intimidating the slaves through telling them stories about scary night riders, and even disguising themselves as ghosts to convince the skeptics. On the other hand, Fry argues that the whites' deceit has taken an unexpected turn in the minds of the slaves; indeed, she explains that these stories served 'the cultural function of preserving the heroic exploits of a suppressed people. The theme in evidence is that the Black, though manipulated, overpowered, and mistreated, emerges to some extent as a culture hero'<sup>195</sup>. The legends invented by the whites are turned thus into triumph through which the Blacks could maintain and nourish a 'sense of confidence, autonomy, hope and self-esteem'<sup>196</sup> in the face of oppression and debasement. We can easily notice the striking similarities between Jim's tale and these legends- Jim does attain the dimension of a cultural hero with a bolstered sense of self-esteem and confidence.

Thus, whether Jim's tale is inspired from the African-American oral tradition, or from the legends invented by the whites, both lead us to one and same conclusion: Twain did not necessarily rely, at one hundred percent, on the tradition of minstrelsy, but had besides other frames of reference, which are justified considering the fact that he lived with slaves, and could not escape being in contact with their cultural heritage. Consequently, we can assume that Twain did not write with the intention of casting the denigrating stereotypes against the negroes as used by minstrel shows- he was just writing with a full awareness of the different folktales found in the culture he was raised in.

The dialogue that runs between Huck and Jim around the question of language is another instance where the reader is left wondering whether to attribute it to the minstrel show tradition, or to take it in a more serious light and recognize, once again, Jim's triumph. In this dialogue, Jim has difficulties in comprehending the fact that French people do not speak English. Huck tries to explain it to him through the example of the cat and the cow that have different forms of communication:

'Looky here, Jim; does a cat talk like we do?'

'No, a cat don't.'

'Well, does a cow?'

'No, a cow don't, nuther.'

'Does a cat talk like a cow, or a cow talk like a cat?'

'No, dey don't.'

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid. p84

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

'It's natural and right for 'em to talk different from each other, ain't it?'  
"course.'

'And ain't it natural and right for a cat and a cow to talk different from *us*?'

'Why, mos' sholy it is.'

'Wel, then, why ain't it natural and right for a *Frenchman* to talk different from us? You answer me that.' PP83-84

Huck uses here the Socratic dialogue, proceeding through a logical question-answer technique that supposedly leads to a reasonable conclusion, to which Jim seems to acquiesce. Yet, the latter unexpectedly formulates a counter argument, and chooses to answer Huck through the same adoption of the Socratic Logic:

'Is a cat a man, Huck?'

'No.'

'Well, den, dey ain't no sense in a cat talkin' like a man. Is a cow a man?- er is a cow a cat?'

'No, she ain't either of them.'

'Well, den, she ain't got no business to talk like either one er the yuther of 'em. Is a Frenchman a man?'

'Yes.'

'Well, den! Dad blame it, why doan' he talk *like* a man? You answer me *dat*!' p84

We cannot deny the fact that it is Jim who wins over Huck in this debate- Jim uses Huck's own tactics in a clever way, and reaches a logic that even Huck is forced to acknowledge, but just prefers to hide behind these unconvincing superior words: 'I see it warn't no use wasting words- you can't learn a nigger to argue. So I quit' (p84). As Steven Mailloux puts it, Huck quits not because of the reason he mentions- the dim-wittedness of Jim, but because he simply lost the game. Mailloux adds:

At first, the rhetorical exchange appears to emphasize Jim's ignorance, but by the time readers get to the end, they realize that the staged argument demonstrates Jim's rhetorical ingenuity. Twain emphasizes the ideological irony of this performance when he has Huck conclude the exchange: "I see it warn't no use wasting words- you can't learn a nigger to argue. So I quit." Of course readers reject the racist slur as a rationalization. They know Huck gives up because he has lost the argument: It is precisely because Jim has learned to argue by imitating Huck that he reduces his teacher to silence. Far from demonstrating Jim's inferior knowledge, the debate dramatizes his argumentative superiority, and in doing so makes a serious ideological point through a rhetoric of humor.<sup>197</sup>

Indeed, the first impression we get from our reading of this passage is the extreme ignorance and naiveté of Jim, who is not capable of understanding such a simple truth, which makes a direct reference to the tradition of minstrelsy. However, a deeper reading makes us notice details that come to contradict completely this first interpretation: indeed,

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<sup>197</sup> Budd, Louis J. Ed. Op. Cit. p117

we are forced to recognize that Jim shows a great ingenuity in using the Socratic dialogue, and to turn it to his own advantage. Even if the conclusion he reaches is not acceptable, logics directly leads Huck's mind to accept it. Once again, so, Jim succeeds to turn the humor supposedly made at his expense into triumph and superiority; once again, Twain radically turns his back on minstrelsy.

There is another episode in the book which is characterized by a marked ambivalence concerning the espousal or rejection of minstrelsy on the part of Twain: Jim's emotionalism. This aspect of Jim is, as Eric Lott puts it, central to the tradition of minstrelsy<sup>198</sup>. One of the most important instances is to be found in the following passage:

I went to sleep, and Jim didn't call me when it was my turn. He often done that. When I waked up, just at daybreak, he was sitting there with his head down betwixt his knees, moaning and mourning to himself. I didn't take notice, nor let on. I knowed what it was about. He was thinking about his wife and his children, away up yonder, and he was low and homesick; because he hadn't even been away from home before in his life; and I do believe he cared just as much for his people as white folks does for ther'n. It don't seem natural, but I reckon it's so. He was often moaning and mourning that way, nights, when he judged I was asleep, and saying, 'Po' little 'Lizabeth! Po' little Johnny! It's mighty hard; I spec' I ain't ever gwyne to see you no mo', no mo'!' He was a mighty good nigger, Jim was. P154

The burst of emotion Jim occasionally has is mainly due to the fact that he misses his family. Instead of presenting us with exaggerated emotionality, as it is traditionally done in minstrel shows, we are in front of a human being, a husband and a father, who suffers because he is cruelly torn from his family. Moreover, there is a factor that urges us to take this passage seriously: Huck's observations about Jim; the first one concerns the fact that Jim often omits to wake Huck up at night to assure his watch. This observation is made at the beginning of the passage in order to appeal to our admiration and move us emotionally. And then, Huck concludes with this declaration: 'He was mighty good, Jim was'. The sincerity of these words make us feel affection towards Jim. Contrary to the minstrel shows that tend to depict exaggerated emotionality, and present it as being typically black, here we are presented with an emotionally well-balanced individual who feels the right emotions for the right, universally acknowledged, reasons.

Another emotionally moving passage occurs when Jim tells Huck about the day when he discovered that his daughter was dead. He starts by telling Huck that he asked the girl to shut the door, but the latter didn't move, which thus made Jim extremely angry:

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<sup>198</sup> Robinson, Forrest G. Ed. Op. Cit. p9

'En wid dat I fetch' her a slap side de head dat sont hzer a-sprawlin'. Den I went into de yuther room, en 'uz gone 'bout ten minutes; en when I come back, dah was dat do' a-stannin' open yit, en dat chile stannin' mos' right in it, a -looking' down and mourning', en de tears running' down. My, but I was mad, I was a-gwyne for de chile, but jis' den- it was a do' dat omen innerds- jis' den, 'long come de wind en slam it to, behine de chile, ker-blam!- en my lan' de cile never move'! my breff mos' hop outer me; and I feel so- so- I doan' know how I feel. I crope iut, all a-trembling', and crope aroun' en open de do' easy en slowyw, en poke my head in behine de chile, sof' en sill, en all uv a sudden, I says pow! Jis' as loud as I could yell. She never bydge oh Huck, I bust out a-cryin' en grab her up in my arms, en say, "Oh, de po' little thing! De Lord God Almighty forgive po' ole Jim, kaze he never gwyne to forgive himself a long's he live!" Oh, she was plumb deaf and dumb, Huck, plumb deaf and dumb- en I'd ben a-treat'n her so!' p155

Once again, Twain includes some observations of Huck that work as directives to guide our response to Jim; as Fisher puts it, 'Huck's frame for Jim's story cues the reader into the emotional plane that Jim's tale will inhabit [...]. Huck here signals to the reader that something sad and serious- not comic- will be voiced in Jim's rough, uneducated black speech'<sup>199</sup>. Jim here depicts in a very precise manner an extraordinarily sad event in his family life, and it does not fail to touch us. Once again, there is no exaggerated emotionality here, and no attempt at ridicule, as in the tradition of minstrelsy. On the contrary, we can easily forget that these are the words of a black slave in antebellum America. Moreover, Fisher points out an important fact about Twain's revision of this passage. For example, the author decides to write 'never' instead of 'nurver', and 'pretty' instead of 'putty', reducing thus what is called 'eye dialect'<sup>200</sup>. Fisher argues that 'Twain refused to allow the dialect to break the flow of the speaker's words. His use of eye dialect (like "wuz") is minimal. His primary concern is communicating Jim's very human pain'<sup>201</sup>. Twain, thus, breaks his own rules of dialect use in order to suppress any obstacle that might lie between Jim and the readers. And thus, once again, Twain breaks another rule, that of minstrelsy.

We have seen so far the different instances that show how Twain plays on the tradition of Minstrelsy- how, behind apparent conformity to its features, he rejects them, and opts for a more humanitarian dimension. However, we are far from assuming that Twain adopts a clear and definite position towards the issue of race, because he does not overtly reject minstrelsy; in fact, except for the episodes we have discussed, and few others, the novel has undeniable affinities with the demeaning stereotypes of this controversial American tradition. Besides, Twain has expressed an overt admiration for the shows, and is even to

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<sup>199</sup> Fishkin, Shelley Fisher. Op. Cit. p100

<sup>200</sup> Ibid. p101

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

blame for his 'largely uncritical response to this most American institution'<sup>202</sup>. As Ralph Ellison puts it, there is dignity in Jim behind the mask of minstrelsy; yet, as other critics put it, it is a 'suffocated dignity'<sup>203</sup>- that is shadowed by the denigrating stereotypes of the gullible, naïve, superstitious and dim-witted black slave. This ambiguity seems to denote a division in the writer's mind- a duplicity that is impossible to solve within the novel.

#### 4) The ending: Howellsian responsibility, conscience, and racism?

Howellsian realism, as we have seen in the introduction, involves a strong sense of responsibility of the writer, who must discredit the 'romantic', the 'literary', and the 'artificial'. Howells firmly declares that the writer has a direct social responsibility, and that he should overtly assume the role of a teacher, which implies that the literary work becomes a tool for moral education. We have seen the extent to which Twain admires Howells, declaring that he is the only author who delights him through the life-like depictions of characters and situations. However, as we will presently see, Twain does not seem to take Howells' notion of responsibility for a fundamental rule in his writing; in fact, he completely departs from it. In this section, we are going to explore this notion of irresponsibility through Huck, and how it makes us look back at issues we have already discussed- such as conscience, personal morality, and the issue of racism.

This notion of irresponsibility is to be found most prominently in the detailed depictions of atmosphere and state of mind of Huck and Jim on the raft. For example, in Chapter 12, Huck comments on the several nights spent on the river as follows:

This second night we run between seven and eight hours, with a current that was making over four mile an hour. We caught fish, and talked, and we took a swim now and then to keep off sleepiness. It was kind of solemn, drifting down the big still river, laying on our backs looking up at the stars, and we didn't even feel like talking loud, and it warn't often that we laughed, only a little kind of a low chuckle. We had mighty good weather, as a general thing, and nothing ever happened to us at all, that night, nor the next, nor the next. P70

There is a strong sense of delight in Huck's tone here; the moments of peace and quiet are welcomed breaks from their tumultuous and noisy adventure. Huck depicts a strong sentiment of harmony, solemnity, and happiness nourished by the surrounding, nearly freezing stillness. Another similar episode occurs later, in Chapter 19:

Two or three days and nights went by; I reckon I might say they swum by, they slid along so quiet

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<sup>202</sup> Fishkin, Shelley Fisher. Op. Cit. p92

<sup>203</sup> Ibid. p81

and smooth and lovely. Here is the way we put in the time. It was a monstrous big river down there - - sometimes a mile and a half wide; we run nights, and laid up and hid daytimes; soon as night was most gone we stopped navigating and tied up – nearly always in the dead water under a towhead; and then cut young cottonwoods and willows, and hid the raft with them. Then we set out the lines. Next we slid into the river and had a swim, so as to freshen up and cool off; then we set down on the sandy bottom where the water was about knee deep, and watched the day- light come. Not a sound anywheres -- perfectly still -- just like the whole world was asleep, only sometimes the bullfrogs a-cluttering, maybe. The first thing to see, looking away over the water, was a kind of dull line -- that was the woods on t'other side; you couldn't make nothing else out; then a pale place in the sky; then more paleness spreading around; then the river softened up away off, and warn't black any more, but gray; you could see little dark spots drifting along ever so far away -- trading scows, and such things; and long black streaks – rafts [...]. P118-119

Again, Huck depicts a marked sentiment of harmony: he seems to enjoy very much the stillness and quiet of the river, and the kind of life they lead on the raft- where there is no appeal for any kind of action that involves other people, or that requires any kind of ethical effort. Indeed, Huck, and we strongly perceive the voice of Twain, delights in these moments of extreme individualism and subjectivity, where attention is given to the beauty of the river and the well-being of one self. Michel Davitt Bell qualifies these descriptions as impressionistic; indeed, there's a detailed rendering of impressions through the subjective perception of Huck, rather than an objective description of the river. Moreover, as Bell points out, there's 'insistence on perception ("a kind of dull line", "little dark spots drifting along", "long black streaks") preceding objective interpretation ("the woods on t'other side", "trading scows, and such things", "rafts")<sup>204</sup>. This impressionistic technique heightens the sense of irresponsibility, and calls for the enjoyment of the present moment for its own sake. This dive into the subjective, into the inner world, and the happiness and bliss expressed in such moments is an escape from a world that constantly calls for one's judgment and sense of responsibility. Just like the forest in *The Scarlet Letter*, the raft is a refuge from the constraining demands of society, where the individual is free to think about himself without being harassed by social conventions and necessity for any kind of action. In these moments, Huck lives privileged moments of irresponsibility. We have the impression that this is the true self of Huck, his true longing in life- a life of freedom from the oppressive sense of responsibility imposed by society. At the end of the novel, it is this longing that pushes Huck to escape- to reach for 'the territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can't stand it' (p281). As Bell

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<sup>204</sup> Bell, Millicent. Ed. Op. Cit. p48

reflects, Huck 'does not seek to change society but repeatedly flees it- to the raft, where life is "free and easy and comfortable"- or, at the close,"for the territory ahead of the rest"<sup>205</sup>.

However, the final escape of Huck is not the only seemingly amoral behavior of the latter: indeed, Jim's fake detention is one of the most disturbing episodes of the novel.

Since the beginning of the novel, Huck's response to the exaggerated veneration of Tom for the romantic adventure stories he reads is clearly expressed through the tone he adopts, and the ironical reflections he makes on it. For example, in Chapter 2, he relates a dialogue between Tom and Ben Rogers around forming a gang, and the things they have to do:

"Ransomed? What's that?"

"I don't know. But that's what they do. I've seen it in books; and so of course that's what we've got to do."

"But how can we do it if we don't know what it is?"

"Why, blame it all, we've GOT to do it. Don't I tell you it's in the books? Do you want to go to doing different from what's in the books, and get things all muddled up?"

"Oh, that's all very fine to SAY, Tom Sawyer, but how in the nation are these fellows going to be ransomed if we don't know how to do it to them? -- that's the thing I want to get at. Now, what do you reckon it is?"

"Well, I don't know. But per'aps if we keep them till they're ransomed, it means that we keep them till they're dead. " P18

Much of the humor of this scene is done at the expense of Tom, who blindly follows what is said in the books, and takes it for absolute truth without any attempt at reflection. Huck's superiority of mind is largely proven throughout the novel: he has a quick intelligence and an ability to judge and weigh the consequences. Moreover, as we have discussed, Huck goes through a deep inner struggle when it comes to the fate of Jim- the runaway slave who has become a close friend. Despite the failure to articulate the struggle in a conscious and mature manner, Huck decides to 'go to hell', and remains loyal to Jim. However, the episode in the Phelps plantation seems to contradict this, as Huck accepts Tom's illogical and cruel plan for Jim's evasion. It is interesting to note that at the Phelps plantation, Huck takes on the name of Tom- a gesture that can be interpreted, as Bell suggests, to be an adoption of the latter's values<sup>206</sup>. As readers, we are disappointed at Huck's final espousal of Tom's plan- we can't but see it as a degradation on the part of Huck, whom we have come to admire and respect for his reasonable judgment. Moreover, we see Huck's participation in this demeaning plan for Jim as a betrayal of the latter's love and trust that we have seen

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid. p46

<sup>206</sup> Ibid. p51

developing throughout the novel; as Joyce A. Rowe puts it, the 'authentic feeling which has arisen between Huck and Jim, based upon mutual respect for one another's integrity, dies in the Phelps Farm'<sup>207</sup>. On the other hand, and what renders this episode even more problematic, is Jim's consent to the plan, which raises again the debate about the racist character of the novel, as it overshadows Jim's discernment and sense of human dignity. In order to fully appreciate these points, let us consider what happens at the Phelps plantation: Tom decides to help Huck get Jim to escape because of the project of adventure and excitement; yet, in view of the easiness of the task he gets weary, and decides to make things more interesting- holding Jim longer and making him do improbable things, convincing him that this would make of him a famous prisoner. The things Jim has to do verge on the absurd; for example, he has to hold a journal and write it with his own blood; he has to share his prison with all sorts of animals, such as snakes, spiders, and rats. The absurdity of the situation attains its paroxysm when Jim gets out of prison to help Huck and Tom get inside. While we are amused by these humorous scenes, we notice, to our dismay, that Huck does not do anything to stop the mockery, and liberate Jim from the harsh and useless suffering he goes through. The affection and respect Huck seems to have experienced towards Jim on the raft are just illusions now. In the words of M. D. Bell, 'what happens at the Phelps farm seems to turn away from, or even to undermine, what Huck has experienced with Jim. Huck's participation in Tom's cruel "evasion" seems an inexplicable betrayal of what Huck has already twice decided not to betray: his personal responsibility to Jim'<sup>208</sup>. Indeed, this episode puts into question any eventual conclusion we happened to formulate about the relationship between Jim and Huck- that both succeeded finally to cross racial boundaries to meet as two free individuals, two friends on an equal level. We are frustrated by Huck's final behaviour towards Jim, whom we understand he still considers an inferior black slave. Moreover, we are also frustrated by Jim's attitude towards all that is happening to him: to do all that he is told, being so impressed by the superior intelligence of Tom; indeed, Jim accepts, without really attempting to understand, Tom's evasion plan: 'Jim he couldn't see no sense in the most of it, but he allowed he was white folks and knowed better than him; so he was satisfied, and said he would do it all just as Tom said' (p240). Once again, the stereotypes, simple mindedness and extreme gullibility of Jim, are put to

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<sup>207</sup> Rowe, Joyce A. Op. Cit. P53

<sup>208</sup> Bell, Michael Davitt. Op. Cit. p56

light, leaving no room for the respect Jim succeeded to impose in the previous episodes that were discussed.

The final chapter of the novel, we are led to conclude, has the function of undermining the different conclusions we might have come to formulate throughout our reading experience despite the hovering ambiguity: Huck's moral growth and the forging of a mature conscience, untainted by deforming social conventions; the demise of racial stereotypes denigrating Blacks; the call for mutual respect and racial equality. The ending is considered by many critics as a deplorable fall into the Burlesque. According to this reading, the novel loses all credibility, and we are generously invited by the author to take it just as a book of entertainment- of funny adventures. Some critics put forwards some reasons for this relapse into the humorous, arguing that socio-historical circumstances, namely the genteel, the materialistic America, have prevented Twain from becoming 'the great writer he could have been'<sup>209</sup>. This is the category of critics who believe that in the case of Twain, the humorist wins over the serious, committed artist. However, we can view the ending from another perspective.

We can say that the very fact that the ending is a source of disappointment for many is significant. Indeed, the disappointment of most readers reveals that they were led by the novelist to expect a certain ending that would espouse the interpretations they came to articulate- yet, Twain is far from satisfying these expectations; Steven Mailloux advances a very interesting theory that provides an explanation of Twain's choice of such a problematic ending to his masterpiece; he states that Twain chooses to end his novel with a problematic that puts into question the nature of the work itself, and the attitude adopted towards it; he declares that the ending invites the readers to reflect on Twain's position towards slavery, 'whether it contradicts his earlier attack on racism or deliberately represents the impossibility of the ex-slave freedom'<sup>210</sup>. In other words, the reader is left to choose between two contradictory interpretations- an instance which heightens the moral ambiguity of the work. However, this does not shatter the moral dimension of the novel; on the contrary, the ending is an invitation to the reader to reflect on the moral issues raised, and to participate in their elucidation. In fact, the ending forces us to reconsider the moral problematic we encountered before. Mailloux insists that this participation is an inherent

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<sup>209</sup> Bell, Millicent. Ed. Op. Cit. P168

<sup>210</sup> Ibid. p129

feature of the reading experience of the novel: 'the fact that the problem (contradiction) appears at all testifies that the novel works, not as a formal unity but as a rhetorical performance in which the reader must participate in order to read at all'<sup>211</sup>; that is to say, the ending of the novel is not chosen in accordance with the plot and the themes it has been covering: it departs from the convention of the bildungsroman, the novel of moral growth which ends in mature individual awareness and social reintegration. Instead, it becomes 'a rhetorical performance', a ground upon which the reader joins the author to discuss lingering-problematic issues concerning race, society, and human nature in general.

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

Concluding remarks:

The two novels we have covered in this part share an important point in common: they both seem at first hand to express a distaste for theoretical morality in favour of practical morality, in the sense that the individual is put in certain circumstances and is left to deal with them on his own, according to his own nature, and not following some abstract moral codes at work in society. Hester Prynne does not, at any moment in the novel, comply with the Puritan moral laws of her community, neither before nor after the commitment of her sin; she is in fact elevated above the Puritan society with the complexity and strength of an inner world that transcends space and time boundaries, and offers a vision of a new world with a completely new set of values. Despite some rare moments of subjugation mentioned at the beginning of the novel, Huck Finn similarly rebels against the moral codes of his society through his escape on the raft and the intimate relationship he develops with Jim; and he does all this following his own moral instinct that Twain presents as pure and unpolluted by the corrupting society he lives in.

In both cases, we notice that society, along with the moral codes through which it operates, compares unfavourably with these individuals and the inner subjective morality they put at work. Yet, the authors do not seem willing to overthrow these social codes of behaviour, as we notice in both novels the fact that the protagonists are never completely detached from that society they seem to reject; as Joyce A. Rowe puts it, referring to Hester and Huck, '[w]hile each is committed to a visionary mode of being, both are marginally but nevertheless vitally connected to the society at hand'<sup>212</sup>. This is suggested in the case of Huck in the affection and recognition he feels towards widow Watson, for example, and in his attitude towards Jim at the Phelps plantation that seem to shatter all the intimacy and respect developed on the raft. Hester, on her part, never rebels against the punishment imposed by the Puritan community, and even chooses to get back and resumes, on her own, the wearing of the scarlet letter on her bosom.

The authors do not guide us, as readers, towards any kind of conclusion, even the seemingly obvious one, that of rejecting social-theoretical morality and opt for a practical one following a pure moral instinct; Hawthorne and Twain choose to end their works in

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complete ambiguity. However, as we have seen, this does not obliterate the moral dimension of the novels, as they both offer opportunities for reflexion on lingering issues such as the complexity of human nature, the relationship between the individual and society, and the very nature of morality as it is inspired from that spontaneous moral instinct of the individual, or from the codes imposed by society to insure order and harmony. The authors seem to encourage us to think on these issues, which they leave unresolved, so that we remain active participants in the ethical discourse of the novels, rather than give us the final solutions to the problems raised. Hence, ambiguity is not equated with moral nihilism here, but with the active ethical engagement of the readers.

Part Two:

Aestheticism and Decadence in  
Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*  
and  
Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.



Preamble:

The present part deals with the binary issue of morality and immorality in two modernist works: Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902). The works are situated in important epochs in Western history in terms of developments and dramatic changes in different spheres of life. In order to fully appreciate the novels in question, we need to take a look at the main aspects of their socio-historical backgrounds.

An observation of the different renderings by critics and scholars of the period from the end of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century reveal two broad contradictory approaches to what came to be called modernity. Whereas the term is supposedly equated with progress and betterment of human life, it also means for many decline, decay, and uncertainty. In the following quotation, Karl Marx tackles this paradox:

On the one hand, there have started into life individual and scientific forces which no epoch of human history had ever superseded. On the other hand, there exist symptoms of decay, far surpassing the horrors of the latter times of the Roman empire. In our days, everything seems to be pregnant with its contrary. Machinery, gifted with the wonderful power of shortening and fructifying human labor, we behold starving and overworking it. The new-fangled sources of wealth, by some weird spell, are turned into sources of want. The victories of art seem bought by the loss of character. At the same pace that mankind masters nature, man seems to be enslaved to other men or to his own infamy. Even the pure light of science seems unable to shine but on the dark background of ignorance. All our invention and progress seem to result in endowing material forces with intellectual life, and stultifying human life into a material force.<sup>213</sup>

Modernity seems, then, to be built upon extreme contrasts: improvement and decay, gain and loss, freedom and slavery, as everything is 'pregnant with its contrary'. Moreover, we understand from this quotation that it is the realm of the individual moral life that has taken the most serious blows. The sense of decay and loss concerns spirituality, faith and values, in contrast to the material and technological progress. In his analysis of Faust, M. Berman reflects on what he terms the tragedy of development and comments:

It appears that the very process of development, even as it transforms the wasteland into a thriving physical and social space, recreates the wasteland inside the developer himself. This is how the tragedy of development works.<sup>214</sup>

The modern man's will for development, for bettering the material world and creating a thriving social space where to enjoy a comfortable life style is done at the expense of his

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<sup>213</sup> Qt In : Berman, Marshall. *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*. New York: Simon and Schister, 1982. PP19-20

<sup>214</sup> Ibid. PP68-69

moral life. In other words, the more he pursues material ends, the more he empties his spiritual world. This dilemma of modernity, this sense that there is no way to reconcile the material, which is gained, and the spiritual, which is lost, results in 'nihilism'. Moreover, as Marx suggests in the first quotation above, scientific development had an important role in ushering in this modern nihilism, since it shook the traditionally held conceptions of human nature and conventional morality. Indeed, while man used to be at the centre of the universe, 'the measure of all things', scientific development upset this 'megalomania' since 'Copernicus, Darwin and Freud have shown the unsustainability of this claim cosmologically, biologically and psychologically'<sup>215</sup>. Copernicus opposed the church with the theory that it is the sun which is at the centre of the universe, and that the earth is just one, insignificant planet among others revolving around it. Darwin further disturbed Christian beliefs in proclaiming the animal descent of man: Man is not created by God in his own image, but is the product of a long, complex and random process of evolution, who shares with the animal world strong biological instincts that define his actions and his behaviour. In fact, as Paul Sheehan argues, one of the most knotty problems at the heart of Western thought is this biological nature of man; the essence of the problem is that while man is considered part of nature among other living creatures, he is, on the other hand, 'a breed apart': while '[b]iology forces us to belong, consciousness keeps us separate'<sup>216</sup>. In other words, we are part of the animal species, and we biologically belong to the natural world, but we are also transcendent beings, endowed with and elevated above other creatures with consciousness. Nietzsche also dwells on the nature of man, and calls man to deny that which makes of him a metaphysical man, conscience, and return to the 'naturalized man', the animalized one, which he considers a move towards the repossession of life<sup>217</sup>. For his part, another important figure, Sigmund Freud, revealed the split nature of man in foregrounding the unconscious- that dark, unknown territory, home of animal, unbridled instincts and impulses. This stands in a sharp contrast with past concepts of soul, which was viewed as 'the seat of reason' by Descartes and Kant. Freud's theory, in fact, added to the credibility of Darwin's theory, as he presented man as a creature determined and guided by hidden uncontrolled instincts.

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<sup>215</sup> Sheehan, Paul. *Modernism, Narrative and Humanism*. U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2002. P6

<sup>216</sup> Ibid. P26

<sup>217</sup> Ibid. P47

Thus, technological and scientific developments have brought about the rise of materialism and the decline of moral values. This was expressed by what came to be known as the intellectual loss of “a halo”. Used by Marx as well as Beaudelaire, the halo is the symbol of the intellectual’s position in society which is above common people; this might include the doctor, lawyer, priest or artist, for example. These categories have lost their ‘halo’, in the sense that they have descended, or been forced to descend into the common order.

Baudelaire advances this theory of loss in his famous prose poem entitled ‘*Loss of a Halo*’, where he suggests that the artist lost his high and privileged position in society the moment he entered the real, ordinary world. On one hand, this loss can be regarded as a gain because now the artist is enabled to merge with the everyday life of ordinary people, giving his art more depth and significance. On the other hand, it suggests the loss of his high spiritual role as a guide, a teacher, and holder of knowledge. According to Berman, this led to the emergence of the modernist aestheticism, as it pushed, in his words, the ‘modernist orthodox to refashion this lost halo into the modernist dictum ‘art for art’s sake’<sup>218</sup>.

The movement of modernism in art is closely associated with what came to be called the aesthetic revolution, where ‘art turns from realism and humanistic representation towards style, technique, and special form in pursuit of a deeper penetration of life’<sup>219</sup>. In other words, this aesthetic revolution is art turning from the concern with the outside reality towards a concern with itself. Flaubert very well catches the spirit of aestheticism when he declares: ‘what strikes me as beautiful, what I should like to do, is a book about nothing, a book without external attachments, which would hold itself together through the internal force of its style’<sup>220</sup>. This denotes an art independent from the humanistic, the material, the real- an art which goes beyond the limitations of time, history and convention. The artist is free and able to transcend the reality, however complex and traumatic it may be, and achieve harmony and pleasure in his own work:

Now human consciousness and especially artistic consciousness could become more intuitive, more poetic; art could now fulfill itself. It was free to catch at the manifold- the atoms as they fall- and create significant harmony not in the universe but within itself.<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> Berman, Marshall. Op. Cit. P122

<sup>219</sup> Bradbury, Malcolm and James McFarlane. Ed. *Modernism: 1890-0930. A Guide to European Literature*. P25

<sup>220</sup> Qt. In: Ibid. p27

<sup>221</sup> Ibid p25

On the other hand, this turn towards aestheticism betrays a deep crisis of culture; indeed, the artist is witness to the surrounding disintegration of traditional values, and experiences feelings of chaos and alienation, 'so that the modernist writer is not simply the artist set free, but the artist under specific, apparently historical strain'<sup>222</sup>. In other words, aestheticism is a relief, an escape for artists from a nightmare of instability and chaos. Consequently, what came to be referred to as the "fin-de-siècle", the 1890s, saw the emergence of multiple avant-garde movements which all claimed freedom and irresponsibility of the artist, such as Decadence, Impressionism and Symbolism. This Aesthetic movement, broadly speaking, was a move away from realism, from what was considered a limiting concern with the reality, towards a concern with the soul and its complexities. The scientific development revealed an inner world which is much bigger and mysterious than the external one, and brought about the obsession of the fin-de-siècle writers with the soul which remains dark, unexplored and fascinating.

The Aesthetic movement thus involves a concern with art for its own sake, without outer considerations-moral, social, or political. In his famous *Degeneration*, Max Nordau argues that the new aesthetes' stress on notions of beauty, sensations and immediate experience is a sign of a morbid mental pathology which would inevitably lead to cultural decline. As Jenny Bourne Taylor puts it, the cultural decline is set against the past belief in progress and evolution which would inevitably lead to 'the degeneration of humanity [...] which takes the forms of atavisms, or reversions to more 'primitive' or child-like stages'<sup>223</sup>. Nordau and many other scholars of that time were outraged by the dangerous superficiality characterizing the aesthetic works, and saw it as a sign of degeneration. One of the most prominent spokesmen of the Aesthetic movement is Walter Pater who, with his *Conclusion to the Renaissance*, announces the main precepts of the new art:

Every moment some form grows perfect in hand or face; some tone on the hills or sea is choicer than the rest; some mood or passion or insight or intellectual excitement is irresistibly real and attracts to us- for that moment only. Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end ...To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy is success in life.<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid. p26

<sup>223</sup> Jenny Bourne Taylor in: Marshall, Gail. Ed. *The Cambridge Companion to The Fin de Siècle*. U.K.: Cambridge University press, 2007. P14.

<sup>224</sup> Pater, Walter. *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*. Authorama, Public Domain Books, 2010. <[www.authorama.com/renaissance-11.html](http://www.authorama.com/renaissance-11.html)>

We clearly see here the importance Pater gives to the moment and experience as ends in themselves. As James Ali Adams puts it, 'Pater offers an ethical program [...] cut free of traditional ethical imperatives, a form of philosophical hedonism with no obligation beyond the cultivation of exquisite pleasure'<sup>225</sup>. Pater frees the individual from any kind of obligation, and urges him to enjoy the present, "lived" moment; and this is, according to Pater, what art seeks to achieve: 'for art come to you professing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for the moment's sake'<sup>226</sup>. Pater internalized much of this aesthetic approach to art from the French writers, considered the pioneers of this movement. Gautier, the first to have articulated the idea of art for art's sake in the preface to his novel, *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835), criticizes critics for their 'hypocritical moralizing and their habit of sniffing out lewder elements of an artwork rather than paying attention to the beauty of the object'<sup>227</sup>. Gautier argues that it is only to beauty that art has responsibility, and that only the 'useless' can be made beautiful; the object's utility detracts the attention for its ultimate function as a source of pleasure.<sup>228</sup> In other words, Gautier clearly advocates the amorality of art, and calls on the critics not to spoil a work of art in their search for a meaning that grows beyond its boundaries. Baudelaire, for his part, emphasized the concept of sensory experience through his interest in "synaesthesia", which is, as Dennis Denisoff explains, 'the condition in which one sensory stimulation results in the experience of another, such as when smelling lily results in hearing the sound of a trumpet'<sup>229</sup>. Baudelaire believed that it is through sensory experience that higher, spiritual meaning can be reached, and encouraged giving free vent to sensual pleasure. We clearly see Baudelaire's influence on Pater in the latter's stress on sensation and impression: Instead of a blind belief in abstract moral codes, the individual is called on to trust his senses and experience the world around him- a radical move away from conventional morality and religious faith towards subjectivity and individualism. The Aesthetic movement, to recapitulate, with its expression of degeneration and reversal into primitivism, its superficiality and hedonism, constitutes a revolution in ethics and aesthetics, as it explicitly rejects traditional moral conventions and past conceptions of art

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<sup>225</sup> Adams, James Eli. *A History of Victorian Literature*. U.S.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009. P259-259

<sup>226</sup> Pater, Walter. Op. Cit.

<sup>227</sup> Marshall, Gail. Ed. Op. Cit. P34

<sup>228</sup> Ibid. P34

<sup>229</sup> Dennis Denisoff in: Ibid. P34

as serving a moral purpose. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Heart of Darkness* are modernist works which offer an overt rejection of past conventions in ethics and aesthetics, and which clearly express the spirit of their time: Confusion, indeterminacy, inconclusiveness, darkness and pessimism pervading the whole. Both works offer an exploration of the inner soul and its capacities for good as well as evil. The authors in question have adopted quite different techniques to tackle the modern predicament: both adopt ambivalent attitudes, as they contradict the Aesthetic-Decadent principles they profess and do not overtly reject morality. In this part, we aim to demonstrate the fact that behind the mask of superficiality and immorality worn by the modernist movement, as represented through these works, lay a deep concern with moral issues and a reflection on the moral responsibility of the artist.

### Chapter Three: *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

#### 1) Oscar Wilde: The Aesthete

Oscar Wilde is considered a foremost representative of the spirit of 'fin-de-siècle'. He is often depicted as a symbol of this period and an expression of its state of mind. Indeed, not only does his literary work earn him this reputation, but even his own life parallels his creative output. He constantly behaved as a rebel and found delight in rejecting the Victorian moral and social conventions, and cultivated the image of a 'dandy', or as the French say, 'flâneur', obsessed with his physical appearance and all aspects of material beauty. The extravagance of his uncommon suits and his long hair shocked and attracted the high society from which he never kept too far. Some critics even declare that he attracted more attention with his flamboyant lifestyle than with his literary production, as James Eli Adams who declares that he 'had been more a social lion and provocateur than a writer'<sup>230</sup>. Indeed, even before the publication of his major works, Wilde went to America to give lectures on Aestheticism; Dennis Denisoff argues that even if Wilde was not 'the most knowledgeable person on the subject, nor the most invested'<sup>231</sup>, he performed the role of the aesthete in his 'posturing and costume [which] supported such decadent perspectives as the importance of surface and artifice, and the superiority of detailed beauty to a quest for deeper meaning'<sup>232</sup>. This gives the vision of an aesthete whose knowledge of life was superficial and shallow, and this is the image that Wilde wanted to project around him. Moreover, the scandal of his revealed homosexuality brought an end to his career as a writer, and sealed his name definitely with the spirit of decadence of his time. Wilde explores and advocates the main tenets of aestheticism in his fictional works as well as in his essays. In his famous "*The Decay of Lying*", Wilde deplores the disappearance of lying, of true fiction, and the propagation of realism as the most suitable form of aesthetic expression. In this essay, Wilde advocates the superiority of art over nature, as he argues that nature lacks design, is full of imperfections, and is indifferent to man. Realism is to be rejected for its reliance on nature, on real facts, which are hideous and degrading. In fact, Wilde advances a concept of decadence which is completely in opposition to its

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<sup>230</sup> Adams, James Eli. Op. Cit. p408

<sup>231</sup> Dennis Denisoff in: Marshall, Gail. Ed. Op. Cit. p39

<sup>232</sup> Ibid. p39

conventional definition, as he affirms that it is 'when life gets the upper hand and drives art into the wilderness'<sup>233</sup>. Wilde defines true art as being in complete opposition to life, to the real world, and presents it as the cause of its disappearance; moreover, he declares that 'society sooner or later must return to its lost leader, the cultured and fascinating liar'<sup>234</sup>, who is the true artist. However, we feel a deep contradiction running through this essay: On one hand, Wilde affirms that 'the aim of the liar is simply to charm, to delight, to give pleasure'<sup>235</sup>, and that art is disconnected from any reference to the outside world:

Art finds her own perfection within, and not outside of herself. She is not to be judged by any external standard of resemblance. She is a veil, rather than a mirror. She has flowers that no forests know of, birds that no woodland possesses. She makes and unmakes many worlds.<sup>236</sup>

This quotation expresses the supremacy of art over nature, and claims that art exists in a world of its own, which has no link whatsoever to the outside world; in other words, art does not represent the social and moral conditions of its age since it 'never expresses anything but itself'<sup>237</sup>.

After asserting that beauty is the main concern of the artist, Wilde has Vivian, one of the protagonists in "*The Decay of Lying*", specify the main criteria of the beautiful: '[the] only beautiful things are the things that do not concern us'<sup>238</sup>. However, on the other hand, Vivian indirectly reasserts the link between art and nature in advocating the depth and spirituality that life gains from art; in his admiration for the Greeks he declares:

They knew that life gains from art not merely spirituality, depth of thought and feeling, soul-turmoil or soul-peace, but that she can form herself on the very lines and colours of art'.<sup>239</sup>

Wilde ponders here on the 'gains' that life receives from art, placing it on a higher position, and affirming that art can have a positive influence on nature- can make it better. Vivian further develops this thought through deploring the realism of America and the resulting absence of spirituality:

The crude commercialism of America, its materializing spirit, its indifference to the poetical side of things, and its lack of imagination and of high unattainable ideals, are entirely due to that country

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<sup>233</sup> Wilde, Oscar. *Intentions* (1891). The Project Gutenberg EBook, 1997.

<[www.gutenberg.net](http://www.gutenberg.net)>

<sup>234</sup> Ibid.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid.

having adopted for its national hero a man who, according to his own confession, was incapable of telling a lie.<sup>240</sup>

In the first quotation, Vivian highlights the important impact Art can have on life, as it provides the latter with spiritual depth, which contradicts the main precepts of the aesthetic movement centered on external beauty and momentary pleasure. In the second quotation, he attacks the Americans' lack of imagination and of high 'unattainable ideals', depicting them as materialistic and incapable of appreciating the true essence of art: pure fiction, as opposed to Realism.

Wilde presents here this notion of spiritual depth contrasted with the crude materialism of modern society; yet his approach is not deprived of contradiction: We cannot assume that art is self-contained, that the only beautiful things are the things that do not concern us, and that art has no relation to the external world, while advocating, at the same time, its spiritual role and impact on life. How can art challenge and overcome the external materialistic concerns if it does not take them first into consideration? And how can we, as readers, be affected and driven out of these materialistic concerns towards deeper spiritual reflection if we do not feel we are concerned? This is where the contradiction lies, in the fact that Aestheticism preaches the self-containment of art, its dissociation from the external world, and its concern with things that are not, in any way, a matter of concern, while indirectly recognizing that there is an inevitable link between art and life, and that each influences the other.

The image of irresponsibility and superficiality that Wilde sought to cultivate and publicize betrays a deep concern with social and moral issues which could not, as we shall see, be repressed in his work. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, we see Wilde's expression of his view on the nature of art and its relation to life. It tells the story of the young, handsome Dorian Gray who, under the influence of Lord Henry Wotton, discovers the mysteries and hidden pleasures of a sinful life. The novel engendered a shock among the Victorian society of the time which still attempted to cling to some conventions concerning art and its elevating role. Critics considered it as 'a dangerous book'<sup>241</sup>, and did not fail to link it to the poisonous French literature which was increasingly gaining popularity in the fin de siècle period. The book was attacked for its homosexual insinuations, its preaching of hedonism, selfishness,

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<sup>240</sup> Ibid.

<sup>241</sup> Sloan, John. *Oscar Wilde*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. P19

and the self-containment of art- aspects which inscribe the novel in the Decadent-Aesthetic movement. However, as we shall demonstrate presently, these decadent ideas are presented in the novel only to be shown as untenable, and that they ought to be rejected. In fact, what Wilde presents in the novel is a denunciation of the decadent lifestyle through showing the impossibility to sustain it. George C. Schoolfield argues that ‘certainly, Wilde takes pains to give the book the air of a novel of the decadence’<sup>242</sup>, a statement which suggests that Wilde attempts, with some difficulty, to make the novel appear to be decadent, but which is not in its essence. The doctrines of the Decadent-Aesthetic movement are shown to be flawed and unsustainable, and this is what we attempt to demonstrate in the present chapter. Our study will be focused on the main precepts of the movement: hedonism, beauty and atavism.

## 2) A New Hedonism

It is Lord Henry Wotton, the novel’s skeptical character, who uses these words in order to articulate his theories about the primacy of the sensual over the spiritual, and the vital pursuit of pleasure regardless of any moral or social considerations. The importance of the body, of sense-perception, is a characteristic feature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Tim Armstrong tackles this point as follows:

In eighteenth century natural philosophy, the body is a relative transparent mechanism, passing impulses to a reflective mind. In the nineteenth-century this process takes on a new opacity: sensation is a function of a complex physiology involving sensory organs, nervous system, and a processing brain. The person becomes a mechanism for the processing of informants. As a result, many fundamental categories- spaces, time- become psychological rather than ideal, and analyzable in terms of the machinery of the body (the process of life itself) rather than abstract categories.<sup>243</sup>

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the function of the body is merely to pass impulses to the mind which has the higher function of reflection. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Tim Armstrong argues, the distinction between mind and body is not as simple as it used to be, because the sensory organs are related to nervous systems which pass information to a processing brain- mind and senses are in a highly complex interaction, to the extent that we don’t know whether we situate the nervous systems as sensory organs or as parts of a reflective mind. J. B. Taylor puts to light this growing confusion between body and mind in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in an

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<sup>242</sup> Schoolfield, George C. *A Baedeker of Decadence: Charting a Literary Fashion, 1884-1927*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003. P63

<sup>243</sup> Armstrong, Tim. *Modernism: A Cultural History*. U.K.: Polity Press, 2005. P91

attempt to establish 'a physiological basis for madness'<sup>244</sup>. The growing confusion arising from such scientific investigations are expressed by what Taylor presents as 'the old question': 'Is there a co-ordinating power within each individual, formed through memory and shaping individual will, that constitutes the core of the self? Or are we nothing but a series of bodily sensations, cerebral reflexes and fragmented memories that together constitute the fiction of individuality?'<sup>245</sup>.

Moreover, this change expresses the more significant shift from the 'ideal', or 'abstract' to the 'concrete': experience is not to be valued according to abstract categories, but according to 'the machinery of the body'. This shift in natural philosophy is paralleled by a shift in moral philosophy where abstract concepts are discarded in favour of concrete scientific ones. The resort to the concrete and verifiable, to the sensory, is a repudiation of conventional moral theories that have grown too abstract and remote from experience, and expresses a need for an alternative that would help the individual face a new and challenging modern reality. The Aesthetic movement thus expresses the age's concern with the senses, and hence represents in itself a protest against abstract moral theories of the age. The senses are the direct referents to a concrete reality providing the individual with a sense of mastery over the growing moral confusion of the modern age. In other words, the decadents' concern with the senses is a stance against abstract moralizing. However, with this obsession with the sensory experience grows the paradoxical questioning about the soul and its function. In fact, the Decadents are not able to wholly discard the soul, which represents the realm of the spiritual- the abstract they attempt to deny.

In the following poem, the English author Richard Le Gallienne tackles this separation between body and soul in the "Decadent" as follows:

The Decadent was speaking to his soul—  
Poor useless thing, he said,  
Why did God burden me with such as thou?  
The body were enough,  
The body gives me all.<sup>246</sup>

Le Gallienne presents the Decadent as a being tormented by his soul as it burdens him and seems to mar sensual pleasures; he seeks to discard it but in vain; this is what R.K.R.

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<sup>244</sup> Jenny Bourne Taylor in: Marshall, Gail. Ed. Op. Cit. P19

<sup>245</sup> Ibid. P26

<sup>246</sup> Le Gallienne, Richard. *The Decadent to His Soul*. Fullonlinebooks.com/poems/the-decadent-to-his-soul.<kswy.html. 2010>

Thornton presents as the 'Decadent Paradox'<sup>247</sup>- the fact that the decadents call for the perusal of sensual pleasure and the importance of the moment on the one hand, and their inability to reject completely the soul whose function is to warn against sinful pleasures. In the following passage, we have a clear division between the soul, which is an elevated symbol of goodness and purity, and the body, which is to be kept down in a "sty":

The man was once an apple-cheek dear lad,  
The soul was once an angel up in heaven  
O let the body be a healthy beast,  
And keep the soul a singing soaring bird;  
But lire thou not the soul from out the sky  
To pipe unto the body in the sty.<sup>248</sup>

The body and soul here are presented as two different categories which must be kept separate in order to maintain the health of the two; indeed, we have a clear notion of the body which risks to contaminate the soul with its beastliness. Le Gallienne here depicts the vain efforts of the decadents to ignore the elevating sphere of spirituality, where the soul dwells, and focus on purely sensory experiences. This paradox is clearly depicted in the novel, and represents a major weakness in the theory that Lord Henry Wotton professes:

The new hedonism

There are numerous passages in the novel where our senses are assaulted by detailed descriptions of odours, sounds and light; the very first paragraph of the novel is a good example of this:

The studio was filled with the rich odour of roses, and when the light summer wind stirred amidst the trees of the garden, there came through the open door the heavy scent of the lilac, or the more delicate perfume of the pink-flowering thorn.<sup>249</sup>

When reading this passage, we have the impression that we smell the rich odour of roses, hear the sway of the trees stirred by the summer wind, and see the pink colour and summer light. The fact that Wilde starts his novel with such a sensory provoking description is a sign that he intends it to comply with the most important features of the Decadent movement: the sensory experience and the importance of the 'moment'. With this passage, and together with many similar recurring descriptions, Wilde asserts that it is through the senses

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<sup>247</sup> Thornton, R.K.R. *The Decadent Dilemma*. London: Edward Arnold, 1983. P45

<sup>248</sup> Le Gallienne, Richard. Op. Cit.

<sup>249</sup> Wilde, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). Penguin Books, 1994. P7 (all references to this novel are taken from the same source)

that we come to grasp, comprehend and fully experience our surroundings, and hence existence itself. In addition, the senses are not only means to relate to the physical environment surrounding us, since they are attributed a spiritual dimension; it is through Lord Henry that Wilde articulates his unconventional theories, particularly this link between the senses and the soul:

Lord Henry went out to the garden and found Dorian Gray burying his face in the great cool lilac-blossoms, feverishly drinking in their perfume as if it had been wine. He came close to him and put his hand upon his shoulder. "You are quite right to do that," he murmured. "Nothing can cure the soul but the senses, just as nothing can cure the senses but the soul." [...] "Yes," continued Lord Henry, "that is one of the great secrets of life--to cure the soul by means of the senses, and the senses by means of the soul." P28

This doctrine clearly sets the senses and the soul as two different spheres which, however, have a curing effect on each other. This reminds us of the Decadent paradox we have seen: the inability of the decadent artists to get rid of the soul, and hence their subsequent need to reconcile the two. Wilde tries to evade the seeming contradiction of this doctrine through presenting it as 'one of the great secrets of life', surrounding it with a veil of ambiguity and unsolvable mystery. We are left wondering: how do the senses cure the soul? When does the soul need to be cured? Is it in a specific occasion of grief and suffering, or is it a constant need? And do the senses really cure it? And how does the soul cure the senses? When does it do so- when the senses are defected? Or when brought to excessive use? We will presently attempt to answer these questions through exploring the effect of this doctrine on Dorian.

From the reaction Dorian has when he hears Henry's theory, we understand that it has started to affect him immediately:

The lad started and drew back. He was bareheaded, and the leaves had tossed his rebellious curls and tangled all their gilded threads. There was a look of fear in his eyes, such as people have when they are suddenly awakened. His finely chiseled nostrils quivered, and some hidden nerve shook the scarlet of his lips and left them trembling. P28

We feel that the whole being of Dorian, the physical and the mental, is shaken. He started, drew back; his nostrils quivered and his lips trembled, and there was a look of fear in his eyes- the fear of discovery. The physical being responds strongly to Lord Henry's words, as if the words uttered have "awakened" the senses from the sleep of innocent youth. The fear expressed in the eyes of Dorian refers to the fear of his innocent, or rather ignorant, because inexperienced, soul. This moment is important because it depicts the awakening of

the senses and foreshadows the conflict between body and soul that Dorian is about to experience. Later on, Wilde goes deeper into this theory through Lord Henry:

Soul and body, body and soul--how mysterious they were! There was animalism in the soul, and the body had its moments of spirituality. The senses could refine, and the intellect could degrade. Who could say where the fleshly impulse ceased, or the psychical impulse began? How shallow were the arbitrary definitions of ordinary psychologists! And yet how difficult to decide between the claims of the various schools! Was the soul a shadow seated in the house of sin? Or was the body really in the soul, as Giordano Bruno thought? The separation of spirit from matter was a mystery, and the union of spirit with matter was a mystery also. P70

We see here Lord Henry speculating on the nature of man, and blur the boundaries between, if we can say, his two "sides". He claims that the soul has some animalism, with which the senses are usually identified, and that the body can be spiritual. However, he does not seem to come up with a solution--there is no explanation pertaining to the way the soul degrades and the senses refine. The separation as well as the union of body and soul are mysteries, he says, to which there is no explanation, and it is through the experience of Dorian that Henry puts to test this theory.

After the death of his mistress, the actress Sybil Vane, Dorian is shocked and tormented by a guilty conscience, because he knows he was the reason for her suicide. However, as soon as Henry starts pouring into his ears his theories, we see Dorian immediately changing his attitude, and even adopting an aesthete-decadent one. He feels that a choice has already been made for him:

He felt that the time had really come for making his choice. Or had his choice already been made? Yes, life had decided that for him--life, and his own infinite curiosity about life. Eternal youth, infinite passion, pleasures subtle and secret, wild joys and wilder sins--he was to have all these things. 122-123

Dorian feels free to indulge his senses, and follow them wherever they would take him without limit. This passage reminds us of Pater who insists on the importance of enjoying the intensity of each passing moment. Dorian decides to fully experience each passing moment of his existence through fulfilling every passion and desire. However, paradoxically, this sense of 'ecstasy' is accompanied by a sense of shame, which the narrator mentions in relation to the portrait of Dorian that keeps recording his sins and the effects they have on his soul: 'the portrait was to bear the burden of his shame, that was all' (p123). With this sentence is articulated the choice that Dorian had: between the pleasure of the senses and the integrity of his soul, which is embodied in the portrait. The words "that was all" suggest

that Dorian found a solution for the conflict between his desires and his conscience in letting the portrait “bear the burden”; however, this is only an irony, since the novel is to demonstrate the suffering, torments and anguish that Dorian is going to endure from this moment and on.

Another reflection on the senses and their connection with the soul is given through Dorian’s point of view. Despite the length of the passage, we elect to quote it in its entirety for a better rendition of its import:

The worship of the senses has often, and with much justice, been decried, men feeling a natural instinct of terror about passions and sensations that seem stronger than themselves, and that they are conscious of sharing with the less highly organized forms of existence. But it appeared to Dorian Gray that the true nature of the senses had never been understood, and that they had remained savage and animal merely because the world had sought to starve them into submission or to kill them by pain, instead of aiming at making them elements of a new spirituality, of which a fine instinct for beauty was to be the dominant characteristic. As he looked back upon man moving through history, he was haunted by a feeling of loss. So much had been surrendered! and to such little purpose! There had been mad willful rejections, monstrous forms of self-torture and self-denial, whose origin was fear and whose result was a degradation infinitely more terrible than that fancied degradation from which, in their ignorance, they had sought to escape; Nature, in her wonderful irony, driving out the anchorite to feed with the wild animals of the desert and giving to the hermit the beasts of the field as his companions.

Yes: there was to be, as Lord Henry had prophesied, a new Hedonism that was to recreate life and to save it from that harsh uncomely puritanism that is having, in our own day, its curious revival. It was to have its service of the intellect, certainly, yet it was never to accept any theory or system that would involve the sacrifice of any mode of passionate experience. Its aim, indeed, was to be experience itself, and not the fruits of experience, sweet or bitter as they might be. Of the asceticism that deadens the senses, as of the vulgar profligacy that dulls them, it was to know nothing. But it was to teach man to concentrate himself upon the moments of a life that is itself but a moment.  
PP150-151

First, Dorian claims that the senses have been fought against and repressed because they were misunderstood. They were a source of fear because they were seen as ‘stronger’ than the intellect, and likened with animalism. Dorian asserts the senses should be made, instead, elements of ‘a new spirituality’- and this is to be realized through the cultivation of the sense of beauty (which we will study in the next point). Here is another instance where we see that the relationship between body and soul remains problematic, as the way we come to spiritualize the senses is ambiguous; we are made aware of the ‘loss’ engendered by the denial of the senses, because they represent an undeniable part of human nature. Yet, what would the denial of the intellect engender- the free indulgence of the senses being a denial of the will? Dorian here attempts to advance a theory that would reconcile

the senses with their counterpart- the soul, but in vain, since he focuses more on the senses without giving a deep, rational reflection on the intellect, and the role it might have. The last sentence again recalls Pater with his concentration on the importance of the moment.

However, there is an aspect that is ignored in Pater's theory: the moral aspect. Mathew Sturgis refers to this point while commenting on the second paragraph of the above quotation:

The phraseology echoed, where it did not copy, the words of Pater's famous exhortation. But Lord Henry has chosen to ignore all these cautious qualifications that Pater elucidated so carefully in *Marius the Epicurean*, by which 'fullness of life' and moral 'insight' were set above 'pleasure' as the true guides of existence.[...] Lord Henry, however, takes the words of the 'conclusion' at their lowest possible value and reduces life to a safari amongst intense momentary experiences, sought and enjoyed for their aesthetic impact only. The moral perspective is obliterated to the extent that Lord Henry convinces Dorian to look even upon 'evil' as 'simply a mode through which he could realize his conception of the beautiful'.<sup>250</sup>

Wilde's choice of ignoring the moral aspect of Pater's theory is significant: he is determined to reject moral considerations, and focus on physical sensations as the only aims in life.

However, the protagonist does not prosper very well when he applies this theory to his life.

Indeed, Dorian does not achieve harmony, peace, and a sense of fullness when he indulges his senses, but is prey to guilt, remorse and a longing for getting back to his prior innocence.

With this we can safely state that Wilde contradicts and rejects the decadent aesthetic theories that he himself professes.

Moreover, when we see the young man fully absorbed in a life of sin and passion, we are given an insight into Dorian's mind, speculating again about the separation or union of body and soul, without reaching satisfactory conclusions. His mind sways between 'mysticism, with its marvelous power of making common things strange to us', and 'the materialistic doctrines of *Darwinismus* movement' (PP153-154), which proposes the conception of the absolute dependence of the spirit on certain physical conditions, morbid or healthy, normal or diseased. However, this oscillation is interrupted by his inclination to, or rather his obsession with the senses:

And so he would now study perfumes and the secrets of their manufacture, distilling heavily scented oils and burning odorous gums from the East. He saw that there was no mood of the mind that had not its counterpart in the sensuous life, and set himself to discover their true relations, wondering what there was in frankincense that made one mystical, and in ambergris that stirred one's passions,

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<sup>250</sup> Sturgis, Mathew. *Passionate Attitudes: The English Decadence of the 1890s*. London: Macmillan, 1995.P122

and in violets that woke the memory of dead romances, and in musk that troubled the brain, and in champak that stained the imagination; and seeking often to elaborate a real psychology of perfumes, and to estimate the several influences of sweet-smelling roots and scented, pollen-laden flowers; of aromatic balms and of dark and fragrant woods; of spikenard, that sickens; of hovenia, that makes men mad; and of aloes, that are said to be able to expel melancholy from the soul. P154

Dorian attempts here to make links between the mind and the senses. In fact, what Dorian does is not to find counterparts of moods in the sensuous life, but to enumerate the different impacts that perfumes have on the mind. Indeed, we have the frankincense that makes one mystical, ambergris that stirs passion, musk that troubles the brain, ... instead of finding parallels between the body and soul as he sets himself to do in the beginning, Dorian emphasizes the fact that the sense can influence the mind. The kind of influence mentioned is, moreover, rather negative: instead of curing the soul, as Henry professes, the senses trouble, stain, sicken, and there is no curing property in stirring passions, or in reminding of dead romances. The only point that Dorian mentions that can be attributed to such curing property is the last one: the 'aloes that are said to be able to expel melancholy from the soul'. However, as we are going to see, Dorian's own experience is a refutation of this. After the murder of his friend, the painter Basil Hallward, Dorian cannot help feeling depressed and melancholic. A terrible sense of guilt is not easily repressed despite a luxurious lifestyle. In these moments, he remembers the words of Henry saying: 'To cure the soul by means of the senses, and the senses by means of the soul', and tries to apply them. The way to sensual pleasure is easy as there were 'opium-dens, where one could buy oblivion'; however, these dens are not only dens of pleasure, but also of "horror", where one would destroy the memory of old sins with new ones. How can dens that promise forgetfulness be called dens of horror? Isn't it a sign of a mind conscious of the degradation that such places offer, and a revolt, although repressed, against a decadent lifestyle? We witness thus, for the first time, a conflict within Dorian: between decadence and straightness, evil and goodness. The following passage further highlights this point:

'To cure the soul by means of the senses, and the senses by means of the soul!' How the words rang in his ears! His soul, certainly, was sick to death. Was it true that the senses could cure it? Innocent blood had been spilled. What could atone for that? Ah! for that there was no atonement; but though forgiveness was impossible, forgetfulness was possible still, and he was determined to forget, to stamp the thing out, to crush it as one would crush the adder that had stung one. Indeed, what right had Basil to have spoken to him as he had done? Who had made him a judge over others? He had said things that were dreadful, horrible, not to be endured. PP212-213

We witness here the struggle of a guilty conscience to get over a crime, a conscience that, after all, has not been silenced by years of hedonism. We see Dorian's awareness of the horrible crime he committed; he is not able to take it lightly, as he did in the case of Sybil Vane, because now he has committed the murder with his own hands. The only solution left to ease his mind is forgetfulness through the senses- which proves not to be really curing: forgetting a malady does not mean to get cured, but letting it grow stronger until it issues in a tragic ending. The strength of the conflict Dorian experiences is suggested through the strong words used: he is 'determined to forget' and to 'stamp the thing out', 'to crush it'. The use of these words reveals the strength of the sickness of his soul, and the difficulty to surmount it. We can see this sickness projected in the setting where 'the moon hung low in the sky like a yellow skull' (P212), where 'the streets grew more narrow and gloomy' (P212), where shadows at dark windows 'moved like monstrous marionettes' (P213). Yellow is a colour suggesting sickness and, more importantly, is the colour adopted by the decadents as their trade mark. The skull suggests death, in reference to the object of his guilt, the death of Basil, as well as the death of his own soul. The narrow streets provide an impression of oppression, in reference to the oppressing sense of guilt, and the gloom refers to the dark regions of sin that Dorian's soul has reached. People are transformed into monstrous shadows with no substance, which suggests that Dorian has lost touch with the normal world, and is not able to have normal human intercourse anymore. With these symbols, we are given a strong impression that Dorian has gone too far with no possibility of return. We notice also that Dorian's perception of the world is distorted, because his soul is sick. His conscience is projecting itself not only in the hideous portrait, but also in the world he sees. It is sending to him warnings that he is not ready to accept and recognize because he just wants to forget. The soul, after all, has some impact on the senses, but not that of curing, as Henry's theory affirms, but that of warning through representing dark, monstrous images of sin and deterioration.

Henry's theory about the soul and senses is shown to be flawed since, when put into practice, it does not provide a sense of fullness and harmony; the more Dorian indulges his passions and desires, the more he is tormented by a guilty conscience. There is no way to deny the soul and its natural claims for goodness and purity. Moreover, the claim that the senses cure the soul is completely rejected, as Dorian never manages to overcome his sense of guilt and depression. Lord Henry is said never to apply the theories he professes, he puts

them to the test through Dorian, and the test proves the inconsistencies and failure of his claims. The New Hedonism professed by Lord Henry and practiced by Dorian proves to be only a theory which cannot be applied successfully in the practical life.

### 3) Beauty: The Moral Aesthetic

The moral aesthetic is an important and interesting theory advanced by the decadent Aesthetic movement, and tackled in the novel. The moral aesthetic consists in adopting the sense of beauty as the only guide in the individual's moral life. We can, in fact, regard this obsession with beauty as a reaction against the socio-historical circumstances of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thomas Reed Whissen tackles this point as follows:

Set against drab, grim, polluted London of what Robert Adams calls the "gray" nineties, the outlandish fashions and eccentric affectations of Oscar Wilde and his crowd seem more sad than silly. The world they saw, the world they had unwillingly inherited, had been made unbelievably ugly, in a relatively short time, by all the horrors accompanying a rapidly expanding industrial society, especially one that lacked the experience to know how to handle pollution and sanitation, poor working conditions, and overcrowded cities.

Looking about them at what must have seemed a hopeless situation- a social worker's nightmare- the sensitive artists of the times rebelled in the only way they knew how, the only way left- inwardly. They saw no possibility whatsoever of reforming society, and so they set about distancing themselves from it. They fancied themselves "aesthetes", choosing "art for art's sake" as their credo. Since nothing artistic seemed to have any effect whatsoever on a society determined to glorify bad taste, these aesthetes could only conclude that "all art is useless" and take whatever satisfaction they could in producing works that existed only for their own sake. In fact, they soon came to elevate literary criticism to the position of the highest art form, maintaining that if art is a notch above reality, criticism is a notch above art. <sup>251</sup>

The "aesthetes" thus reacted against the ugly environment produced by a rapidly developing industrial society. Because of their incapacity to change the degrading surroundings, the aesthetes withdrew into fiction where they could create beautiful worlds of their own. We can thus understand their obsession with beauty as a reaction against the ugly modern world; in fact, one of the first writers to articulate the concept of beauty in art is the French Gautier, as M. Sturgis argues:

Art, Gautier insisted, must be an autonomous realm, free from the prevailing dogma which insisted that everything must have its social use. He maintained that art's only goal was beauty and that any attempt to impose upon it some other aim (whether moral, political or even practical) was but to contaminate the pure stream and to create ugly- or bad- art. It was an extreme position but Gautier sustained it through the sheer energy of his writing. <sup>252</sup>

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<sup>251</sup> Whissen, Thomas Reed. *The Devil's Advocates: Decadence in Modern Literature*. U.S.: Greenwood Press, 1989. pxix

<sup>252</sup> Sturgis, Mathew. Op. cit. o16

If art concerns itself with moral or social issues, it becomes ugly, or bad; art is beautiful only when it denies any kind of attachment to the reality. Thus, the aesthetes reacted against the ugly industrial world taking shape around them, and escaped into a definition of art which professes the urge to preserve it from the contaminating touch of the ugly reality. Only that which is useless can be beautiful, because they understood that an object's utility detracts from its function as a source of pleasure<sup>253</sup>.

Oscar Wilde was much influenced by this theory and proclaimed it in his essays as well as in his literary works. In the first line of his famous preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, he states the role of the artist as follows: 'The artist is the creator of beautiful things'(P5), and concludes it with the statement that 'All art is quite useless'(P6). Wilde clearly argues that the only aim of the artist is the creation of beauty, and that art must be useless, unconcerned with any other dimension beyond its own. In his essays Wilde dwells on this concept of beauty and strives to highlight all its main aspects. In *The Decay of Lying*, Wilde assumes an extreme aesthetic stance when he deplores 'the decay of lying as an art, a science, and a social pleasure'<sup>254</sup>, and adds that the 'ancient philosophers gave us delightful fiction in the form of facts; the modern novelists present us with dull facts under the guise of fiction'<sup>255</sup>. Facts are shunned in favour of imagination, because facts are equated with ugliness, and if, as Vivian says, 'we carry on with our monstrous worship of facts, Art will become sterile, and beauty will pass away from the land'<sup>256</sup>. We have here an articulation of the aesthetic doctrine which rejects art's concern with the reality, and presents a new definition of the concept of beauty, which is very clearly expressed in the words of Vivian: '[the] only beautiful things [...] are the things that do not concern us'<sup>257</sup>. It is this concept of beauty which is at the heart of the Aesthetic doctrine of 'art for art's sake' - art should not be concerned with things that are 'useful or necessary to us, or affect us in any way, either for pain or for pleasure, or appeal strongly to our sympathies, or is a vital part of the environment in which we live'<sup>258</sup>. However, we wonder how things can really affect us if we cannot relate to them, if they do not belong to our sphere of knowledge- things towards

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<sup>253</sup> Marshall, Gail. Ed. Op. Cit.7.p34

<sup>254</sup> Wilde, Oscar. *Intentions*. Op. Cit.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid.

which we should be 'indifferent'? Wilde argues that the role of art is 'the telling of beautiful untrue things', and that the artist's role is to 'charm, delight, and give pleasure'<sup>259</sup>. However, the fact that Wilde does not seem to bring a clear definition of the things that are beautiful, that give us pleasure, and yet for which we must be indifferent, makes this a rather romantic, or escapist theory that is contradicted in his own work.

At the very beginning of the novel, the narrator presents a portrait of 'a young man of extraordinary personal beauty' (p7). It is significant that Wilde chooses to introduce first the portrait, and then Dorian himself, indirectly stating the superiority of art over life. What is also significant about this statement is the choice of the word 'personal', rather than simply 'physical'. 'Personal' pertains to the appearance of the young man as well as to his personality. The portrait, thus, reflects the physical as well as the spiritual aspects of Dorian- in this sense beauty does not refer only to the physical appearance, but also to character. There are two important passages in the novel that refer to this link between Dorian's beauty and his personality; the first passage where Lord Henry comments on Dorian's beauty occurs early in the novel: Contemplating the picture Basil has just finished, Henry theorizes about beauty and its effect on the individual's physical appearance:

Beauty, real beauty, ends where an intellectual expression begins. Intellect is in itself a mode of exaggeration, and destroys the harmony of any face. The moment one sits down to think, one becomes all nose, or all forehead, or something horrid. Look at the successful men in any of the learned professions. How perfectly hideous they are! Except, of course, in the Church. But then in the Church they don't think. A bishop keeps on saying at the age of eighty what he was told to say when he was a boy of eighteen, and as a natural consequence he always looks absolutely delightful. Your mysterious young friend, whose name you have never told me, but whose picture really fascinates me, never thinks. I feel quite sure of that. He is some brainless beautiful creature who should be always here in winter when we have no flowers to look at, and always here in summer when we want something to chill our intelligence. (p9)

Henry here draws a sharp contrast between beauty and the intellect, as he argues that beauty disappears the moment an intellectual expression starts. Dorian, in Henry's view, is 'a brainless creature' who never thinks. We understand here that thinking does not refer to man's natural function of the brain without which, we can say, one loses his sanity: Dorian is a sane, and mentally well-balanced young man. Here, Henry refers to reflecting on the dark side of life that he is determined to make Dorian discover. The beauty that fascinates him in the portrait is equated with naiveté and lack of experience in the world. In the other

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<sup>259</sup> Ibid.

passage that carries on this link between physical appearance and personality occurs when Lord Henry meets Dorian in person:

Lord Henry looked at him. Yes, he was certainly wonderfully handsome, with his finely-curved scarlet lips, his frank blue eyes, his crisp gold hair. There was something in his face that made one trust him at once. All the candour of youth was there, as well as youth's passionate purity. One felt that he had kept himself unspotted from the world. (p23)

Henry is struck by the extreme physical beauty of Dorian, and also by the goodness and purity of his beautiful expression; in other words, Dorian's physical beauty is in harmony with his spiritual beauty. We see here clearly that the concept of beauty is equated with goodness, innocence. On one hand, this point confirms Wilde's rejection of the ugly reality, and the need to distance oneself from it, the same as Dorian has kept himself 'unspotted from the world'. On the other hand, this suggests that the concept of beauty is not presented in physical terms only, but also in spiritual ones, and specifically in moral ones. Indeed, Henry admires Dorian's purity of mind, candour, trustfulness and goodness. This betrays a concern with morals on the part of Wilde which contradicts his aesthetic-decadent proclaimed doctrines. In addition, he contradicts the very definition of beauty that we have seen earlier—that the beautiful things are the things that do not concern us, whereas the candour, trust and sincerity that Dorian inspires are universal moral values that we see do concern Lord Henry in particular, and consequently the readers in general. We cannot say, as Gilbert argues in *The Critic as Artist*, that 'beauty reveals everything, because it expresses nothing'<sup>260</sup>, as it does reveal the 'beautiful' nature of Dorian.

It is significant that Lord Henry starts his poisonous influence on Dorian through commenting on his beauty and its brevity. Addressing himself to Dorian, Henry exclaims:

You have a wonderfully beautiful face Mr Gray [...]. But what the gods give they quickly take away. You have only a few years in which to live really, perfectly, and fully. When your youth goes, your beauty will go with it, and then you will suddenly discover that there are no triumphs left for you, or have to content yourself with those mean triumphs that the memory of your past will make more bitter than defeats. P30

Lord Henry tries to make Dorian realize the transience of youth and beauty, and urges him to seize the moment and live a full life. In fact, he tries to make Dorian 'think' and drives him down to the real world, and adopt a fully hedonistic lifestyle. Dorian responds very quickly

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<sup>260</sup> Wilde, Oscar. Intentions. Op. Cit.

to Henry's words that have succeeded to make him think. We can see this when Dorian first sees his portrait for the first time- he also seems to see for the first time his own beauty:

A look of joy came into his eyes, as if he had recognized himself for the first time. He stood there motionless and in wonder, dimly conscious that Hallward was speaking to him, but not catching the meaning of his words. The sense of his own beauty came on him like a revelation. He had never felt it before. Basil Hallward's compliments had seemed to him to be merely the charming exaggeration of friendship. He had listened to them, laughed at them, forgotten them. They had not influenced his nature. Then had come Lord Henry Wotton with his strange panegyric on youth, his terrible warning of its brevity. That had stirred him at the time, and now, as he stood gazing at the shadow of his own loveliness, the full reality of the description flashed across him. Yes, there would be a day when his face would be wrinkled and wizen, his eyes dim and colourless, the grace of his figure broken and deformed. The scarlet would pass away from his lips and the gold steal from his hair. The life that was to make his soul would mar his body. He would become dreadful, hideous, and uncouth. P33

Dorian does not seem to be aware of his own beauty until he meets Henry who makes him discover it. He experiences a moment of revelation when he realizes the perfection of his physical appearance, and, for the first time, 'thinks' about the time when he would inevitably lose it.

There are some inconsistencies that arise from the passages we have quoted. There is the fact that at first Dorian's physical beauty is linked with his spiritual beauty. In addition, it is contrasted with thinking, which Henry insists, spoils it. Then, there is an emphasis on Dorian's physical beauty which threatens to disappear with the progress of time- there is no reference to his spiritual beauty any more. We witness a denial of the spiritual nature of Dorian in favour of a superficial concern with the body. However, paradoxically, as Dorian discovers his beauty, and realizes the urge to make the most of it, the beautiful portrait starts degrading to become hideous and ugly.

Moreover, it is not only Dorian's physical beauty which is at issue in the novel; there is also this abstract sense of beauty which constitutes the core of the moral aesthetic advanced by the Aesthetic movement. In one of his letters, Wilde proposes a theory where aesthetics would be higher than ethics:

The Saint and the artist Hedonist certainly meet—touch in many points. Right and wrong are not qualities of actions, they are mental attitudes relative to the incompleteness of the ordinary social organism. When one contemplates, all things are good. For myself, I look forwards to the time when aesthetics will take the place of ethics, when the sense of beauty will be the dominant law of life: it will never be so, and so look forward to it.<sup>261</sup>

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<sup>261</sup> Qt in: Sloan, John. Oscar Wilde. Op. cit. p160

Wilde then calls for the rejection of conventional morality, and for the reliance on aesthetics as the true guide in life. In *The Critic as Artist*, he has Gilbert say:

Aesthetics are higher than ethics. They belong to a more spiritual sphere. To discern the beauty of a thing is the finest point to which we can arrive. Even a colour-sense is more important, in the development of the individual, than a sense of right and wrong.<sup>262</sup>

According to Wilde, the ethical sense that naturally serves to discern between right and wrong is to be replaced with the sense of beauty that would differentiate between the beautiful and the ugly. He advances thus an extreme moral aesthetics where past abstract moral conventions are rejected in favour for the concrete, the aesthetic- this is typical of a modern culture that has grown weary of abstract ethical theories. The following passage further articulates this theory:

[There] is in us a beauty-sense, separate from the other senses and above them, separate from the reason and of nobler import, separate from the soul and of equal value- a sense that leads some to create, and others, the finer spirits as I think, to contemplate merely. But to be purified and made perfect, this sense requires some form of exquisite environment. Without this it starves, or is dulled. You remember that lovely passage in which Plato describes how a young Greek should be educated, and with that insistence he dwells upon the importance of surroundings, telling us how the lad is to be brought up in the midst of fair sights and sounds, so that the beauty of material things may prepare his soul for the reception of the beauty that is spiritual. [...] By slow degrees there is to be engendered in him such a temperament as will lead him naturally and simply to choose the good in preference to the bad, and, rejecting what is vulgar and discordant, to follow by fine instinctive taste all that possesses grace and charm and loveliness.<sup>263</sup>

In this passage, Wilde explains that in every individual, there is a sense of beauty which is natural and instinctive, nobler than reason and equal to the soul. There is a marked concern with morals which contradicts the aesthetic insistence on their rejection and the emphasis on beauty for its own sake. Moreover, we understand that the perception of material beauty leads to a nobler spiritual beauty which is clearly equated here with moral goodness: 'grace', 'charm' and 'loveliness'. We can clearly see here the influence of the theories of the Aesthetic Society founded in Edinburgh in the 1850s; indeed, the society highlighted the instinctive origin of this sense of beauty as they combined and articulated the circulating theories of the time concerning the role of art and its relation with nature. Jerome Hamilton argues that they 'felt that art by recording a special perfection', which was obviously

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<sup>262</sup> Wilde, Oscar. *Intentions*. Op. Cit.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.* p174-175

present in nature, 'would help the soul to rise towards Perfection Universal'<sup>264</sup>. In addition, they were convinced that 'the sensibility of beauty was implanted in the human breast for moral improvement'<sup>265</sup>. The role of art, according to this view, is to represent that perfect beauty found in nature, and with it, effect the moral improvement of the spectator/reader. Although the Aesthetes distorted this theory, rejecting nature altogether and affirming the necessity to create beautiful worlds of their own, there is a similarity which lies in the fact that beauty has this capacity to awaken in the individual the sense of beauty which would make of him/her a better person. Our interest in the novel is to see whether this sense of beauty which seems to have been awakened in Dorian by the portrait effects this so called moral, or as the Aesthetes prefer to say, spiritual improvement.

After the awakening of thought that Dorian experienced when he met Lord Henry, he decides to go out in search of new experiences. On this quest for new sensations, he discovers a little, insignificant theater where he beholds for the first time the beautiful actress Sibyl Vane. Dorian's admiration for her is such as he deems her 'sacred'; he immediately gets excited about the affair and hastens to confess to Henry his love for her. However, we soon discover that Dorian cares much for the outward show than real sentiments. He admires Sibyl only because she is beautiful; moreover, her beauty is not only physical, but resides in the fact that she embodies different heroines. Thus, this shallowness of his feelings towards her are revealed in the fact that he never comes to know her true personality, but just stands in admiration for the different roles she plays. When Lord Henry wittily asks him 'when is she Sibyl Vane?', Dorian answers: 'Never'; in fact, Dorian admires Sybil as he would admire a piece of art. In the following passage, Basil dwells on the role of art, and articulates the meaning of its spiritualizing effect:

To spiritualize one's age--that is something worth doing. If this girl can give a soul to those who have lived without one, if she can create the sense of beauty in people whose lives have been sordid and ugly, if she can strip them of their selfishness and lend them tears for sorrows that are not their own, she is worthy of all your adoration, worthy of the adoration of the world. This marriage is quite right. I did not think so at first, but I admit it now. The gods made Sibyl Vane for you. Without her you would have been incomplete. P96

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<sup>264</sup> Buckley, Jerome Hamilton. *The Victorian temper: A Study in Literary Culture*. London: George Allen and Unwin LTD, 1952. P144

<sup>265</sup> Ibid.

In the words of Basil, we clearly understand that to spiritualize is to awaken the sense of beauty in people, and get rid of their selfishness through their identification with and response to the work of art. However, we discover that Dorian remains selfish, and is unable to identify with Sibyl as a human being rather than an "art work".

We see this in his reaction after the terrible acting she does, for, once she has discovered the meaning of real love, she says, she cannot act it any more. A sharp contrast is drawn here between Sibyl and Dorian; she realizes the primacy of life over art, the deep meaning inherent in the former, and the shallowness of the latter:

The common people who acted with me seemed to me to be godlike. The painted scenes were my world. I knew nothing but shadows, and I thought them real. You came--oh, my beautiful love!--and you freed my soul from prison. You taught me what reality really is. To-night, for the first time in my life, I saw through the hollowness, the sham, the silliness of the empty pageant in which I had always played. To-night, for the first time, I became conscious that the Romeo was hideous, and old, and painted, that the moonlight in the orchard was false, that the scenery was vulgar, and that the words I had to speak were unreal, were not my words, were not what I wanted to say. You had brought me something higher, something of which all art is but a reflection. P101

Sybil realizes that she cannot act anymore because she has discovered the fact that, compared to real feelings, the ones she used to act are but mere, sordid and empty imitations. On the other hand, Dorian has just the opposite reaction:

I loved you because you were marvellous, because you had genius and intellect, because you realized the dreams of great poets and gave shape and substance to the shadows of art. You have thrown it all away. You are shallow and stupid. My God! how mad I was to love you! What a fool I have been! You are nothing to me now. I will never see you again. I will never think of you. I will never mention your name. You don't know what you were to me, once. Why, once . . . Oh, I can't bear to think of it! I wish I had never laid eyes upon you! You have spoiled the romance of my life. How little you can know of love, if you say it mars your art! Without your art, you are nothing. I would have made you famous, splendid, magnificent. The world would have worshipped you, and you would have borne my name. What are you now? A third-rate actress with a pretty face."p102

When Sybil ceases to be a heroine among the other actors, when she quits the sphere of art to join the sphere of reality, Dorian is disgusted and even horrified, adopting thus a purely aesthetic stance in reaffirming the primacy of art over life. However, Wilde denies the important role that art has, which is to spiritualize, since we are shown the extreme selfishness of Dorian who is not able to love the woman beyond the actress- the essence beyond the appearance. In such case, we can say that beauty, represented by Sybil, has not

awakened the sense of beauty, and hence, has not achieved that spiritualization or moral improvement. Le Gallienne comments on this point as follows:

The Sense of beauty, however, is not necessarily a religious sense- save in so far as it gives birth to the sense of wonder, of love, of gratitude. Curiously enough, in our own day, among what we call decadent artists, we find its influence not, as one would have expected, as a spiritualizing, but as a materializing, an actually degrading influence. Even when, as I make bold to say of its worst forms, decadent art is not merely the expression of moral mental and spiritual disease, lusts that dare no other operation finding vent in pictorial and literary symbolism, even when it retains a certain innocence and health, it does its best to limit its appeal to what we call the sensual faculties. It merely addresses the sensual eye and ear the more obviously, and endeavours desperately to limit beauty to form and colour, scornfully ignoring the higher sensibilities of heart and spirit.<sup>266</sup>

Le Gallienne here asserts that beauty is in fact materializing, leading the individual to care more and more for form and sensation, rather than spiritualizing. The effect of beauty is in fact a degrading one since, as we see with the case of Dorian, it produces shallow and superficial individuals who rely on their sensual faculties.

Wilde contradicts his own claims about beauty and its spiritualizing process, since he demonstrates that this is only an illusion to compensate for the lack of meaning and depth of aestheticism and its rejection of any other considerations except for itself. In addition to the way he depicts Dorian's experience after the separation of Dorian and Sybil, we see the former wandering in the streets as follows:

Where he went to he hardly knew. He remembered wandering through dimly lit streets, past gaunt, black-shadowed archways and evil-looking houses. Women with hoarse voices and harsh laughter had called after him. Drunkards had reeled by, cursing and chattering to themselves like monstrous apes. He had seen grotesque children huddled upon door-steps, and heard shrieks and oaths from gloomy courts.<sup>103-104</sup>

We have here a notion of descent into dark, evil regions- even a descent into hell, suggested through 'the archways', the evil-looking houses, the harsh laughter, the monstrous apes and the shrieks. Since the descent occurs just after the cruel rejection of Sybil, we have the impression that Dorian has stumbled from a higher life of innocence and goodness, into a lower life of sin and evil. Moreover, the hellish atmosphere suggests that the retribution for his acts has already started without his own consciousness of it. Moreover, shortly after we are made aware of the changes over the portrait:

As he was turning the handle of the door, his eye fell upon the portrait Basil Hallward had painted of him. He started back as if in surprise. Then he went on into his own room,

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<sup>266</sup> Qt. In : Thornton, R.K.R. Op. Cit. P46-47

looking somewhat puzzled. After he had taken the button-hole out of his coat, he seemed to hesitate. Finally, he came back, went over to the picture, and examined it. In the dim arrested light that struggled through the cream-coloured silk blinds, the face appeared to him to be a little changed. The expression looked different. One would have said that there was a touch of cruelty in the mouth. It was certainly strange.<sup>105</sup>

It is clear that the changes on the portrait are caused by Dorian's choice of art over life—the first sin that the portrait starts to display. So, through the experience of Dorian, Wilde contradicts, and even seems to reject, one of the core theories of the Aesthetic movement: art's concern with beauty and its spiritualizing effect. Moreover, he does not make Dorian prosper very well after the affair, as he leads a life characterized by torment, anguish and even fear. He thus shows the inconsistencies of such theories, and the impossibility to carry them out in art as well as in life. Furthermore, the episode when Sybil commits suicide represents another instance that reveals Wilde's doubts about the Aesthetic theories. Leon Chai asserts that '[at] the heart of the Aesthetic movement is a desire to redefine the relation of art to life, to impart to life itself the form of a work of art and thereby raise it to a higher level of existence'<sup>267</sup>. This is shown in the way Lord Henry chooses to console Dorian for the loss of Sibyl, and help him out of his pain:

"It is an interesting question," said Lord Henry, who found an exquisite pleasure in playing on the lad's unconscious egotism, "an extremely interesting question. I fancy that the true explanation is this: It often happens that the real tragedies of life occur in such an inartistic manner that they hurt us by their crude violence, their absolute incoherence, their absurd want of meaning, their entire lack of style. They affect us just as vulgarity affects us. They give us an impression of sheer brute force, and we revolt against that. Sometimes, however, a tragedy that possesses artistic elements of beauty crosses our lives. If these elements of beauty are real, the whole thing simply appeals to our sense of dramatic effect. Suddenly we find that we are no longer the actors, but the spectators of the play. Or rather we are both. We watch ourselves, and the mere wonder of the spectacle entralls us. In the present case, what is it that has really happened? Someone has killed herself for love of you. I wish that I had ever had such an experience. It would have made me in love with love for the rest of my life. P117

Henry makes Dorian see Sibyl's death as a beautiful tragedy, better than any romance he could aspire to. We understand from these words that life is far from being perfect, and that it is beautiful only when it contains artistic elements— we have a sense of the elevation of life to art, as it is made more attractive and less painful. Although Dorian feels the pain intensely

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<sup>267</sup> Chai, Leon. *Aestheticism: The Religion of Art in Post Romantic Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1990. P1

at the beginning, under the influence of Henry, he is seduced into imparting Sibyl's death an artistic dimension:

He would not think any more of what she had made him go through, on that horrible night at the theatre. When he thought of her, it would be as a wonderful tragic figure sent on to the world's stage to show the supreme reality of love. A wonderful tragic figure? Tears came to his eyes as he remembered her childlike look, and winsome fanciful ways, and shy tremulous grace. He brushed them away hastily [...]. P122

We see in this passage Dorian's attempt to detach his emotions from the tragic events, and concentrate on the beautifully tragic dimension; yet, we feel that there is a struggle within himself as he is betrayed by tears that he quickly tries to dissimulate. Thus, all that Dorian had to do is to be a mere spectator of his own life, to crush any kind of emotional involvement with it, and keep looking for new experiences. This is what the sense of beauty leads him to become: a heart-less, shallow, and selfish man- the spiritual dimension is completely denied. Indeed, as Dorian declares: 'To become the spectator of one's own life, as Harry says, is to escape the suffering of life' (p128). However, it is in fact a denial of life as a whole, with its pain as well as its joys.

The sense of beauty that Wilde calls for in his essay as the true guide instead of conscience or reason transforms Dorian into a selfish, shallow and superficial aesthete for whom there is no possibility of return. Ironically, Dorian finds himself more and more immersed in a life invaded by ugliness: That of the people he meets, of the places he goes to, and, primarily, of the painting that records his descent into evil. In addition, Dorian is said to like the ugliness of the reality and to discard the beauty of art:

It is said that passion makes one think in a circle. Certainly with hideous iteration the bitten lips of Dorian Gray shaped and reshaped those subtle words that dealt with soul and sense, till he had found in them the full expression, as it were, of his mood, and justified, by intellectual approval, passions that without such justification would still have dominated his temper. From cell to cell of his brain crept the one thought; and the wild desire to live, most terrible of all man's appetites, quickened into force each trembling nerve and fibre. Ugliness that had once been hateful to him because it made things real, became dear to him now for that very reason. Ugliness was the one reality.

The coarse brawl, the loathsome den, the crude violence of disordered life, the very vileness of thief and outcast, were more vivid, in their intense actuality of impression, than all the gracious shapes of art, the dreamy shadows of song. They were what he needed for forgetfulness. In three days he would be free. P214

We feel here a marked note of disillusionment in Dorian with the doctrines he used to hold concerning art and its beauty. Art is merely gracious and dreamy, without a solid core that would hold the individual together in times of troubles and anxiety. Dorian is forced to face

and recognize ugliness which, as we have seen, is equated with the reality. With this, Wilde admits the impossibility of escape, and even the danger of the denial of life as he presents Dorian alienated from society, and left prey to his lust and passions.

Moreover, Wilde seems to give a fatal blow to this theory when Dorian is transformed into a bloody, cold-hearted murderer. Dorian kills Basil when he shows the latter the portrait, and what it has come to; he kills the person whom he used to consider 'a true friend', cutting the last emotional involvement he seemed to have had with any human being. Moreover, Dorian kills him when he tries to make him repent, which suggests that no way back for him is possible now: He cannot repent for his sins, and he cannot resume contact with the human society.

To conclude, the concept of beauty, at the heart of the Aesthetic movement, is shown to be flawed, and unable to resist the test of real life. Wilde makes the point that beauty just by itself is superficial, and leads to no form of spirituality: There is no point in considering the sense of beauty a guide to the individual's moral choices and decisions. In extreme cases, beauty can instead develop selfishness and heighten superficiality in individuals, leading ultimately to their alienation and destruction.

#### 4) Degeneration

The term 'decadence' has been attributed different interpretations that pertain to decline, regression in different social, political and cultural spheres. As T.R. Whissen puts it, 'decadence has come to be associated with a long list of words beginning with the letter 'D': decay, decline, deterioration, depravity, debauchery, disintegration, degeneration, dissipation'<sup>268</sup>. Degeneration is in fact a scientific term used in psychology, psychiatry and criminology. It has been attributed to states of mental disorders expressed through 'states of trance, dreams and 'double consciousness'<sup>269</sup>. The Society for Physical Research 'urged that even normal minds were reservoirs of contending forces, divided between the realms of consciousness and dreams'<sup>270</sup>. Dreaming was considered a state of degeneracy, because it is a 'transition from waking to sleeping consciousness', and 'a reversion into a primitive infantile type of psychosis'<sup>271</sup>. In addition, dreaming is considered a revelation of a 'hidden

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<sup>268</sup> Whissen, Thomas Reed. Op. Cit. PXXII

<sup>269</sup> Ibid. p17

<sup>270</sup> Adams, James Eli. Op. Cit. P371

<sup>271</sup> Marshall, Gail. Ed.Op. Cit. p25

past': home of the oppressed 'primal, instinctual impulses'<sup>272</sup>. This reversal into the past, to primitivism, is not only witnessed in the workings of the mind, but also in cultural development, or rather degeneration. The English zoologist E. Ray Lankester counters Darwin's theory of evolution through arguing that not all species develop along 'their own 'lines of descent'<sup>273</sup>. Some of them become degenerate because they adapt to 'less varied and less complex' environments'<sup>274</sup>; in this case we understand that degeneration is a direct consequence of an environment that lacks the necessary stimulating factors. This further shows the discrepancy that characterizes modernity, which can be articulated between development and spiritual regression: This degeneration that the Fin-de-Siècle period witnesses is a result of a starving cultural environment that grew too materialistic and superficial. It is with his famous book entitled *Degeneration* that Max Nordau made the term widespread as a specific feature of the fin de siècle. He treats the modernist writers as pathological, neurotic cases who express nothing in their work except a 'degenerate mind, with its shifting nebulous ideas, its fleeting formless shadowy thought, its perversions and aberrations, its tribulations and impulsions'<sup>275</sup>.

Degeneration, thus, is the regression of the human race, a halt, or even turning back in its evolutionary process- a fall back into the past which is equated with primitivism. It constitutes the irony of the modern era which prides itself over the development it has achieved in different fields. The degenerate mind that Nordau attacks is not the cause of the decadent society, but a symptom of it. Victorian narratives present this divide of the modern era; the modernist writer, the aesthete, is but an expression of the slit that modern society experiences. Nordau considers Oscar Wilde as the leading figure of English Decadence, and denounces him as a man who 'apparently admire immorality, sin and crime'<sup>276</sup>. In this point, we will seek to demonstrate how Wilde expresses this degeneration, and how, contrary to what Nordau assumes, he rejects, rather than 'admires' it.

We start our discussion with the following quotation from Wilde's *Intentions*:

What is termed sin is an essential element of progress. Without it the world would stagnate, or grow old, or become colourless. By its curiosity Sin increases the experience of the race. Through its intensified assertion of individualism, it saves us from monotony of types. In its rejection of the

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<sup>272</sup> Ibid. P25

<sup>273</sup> Ibid. p15

<sup>274</sup> Ibid.

<sup>275</sup> Nordau, Max. *Degeneration*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993. P300

<sup>276</sup> Ibid. P320

current notions about morality, it is one with the higher ethics. [...] the mere existence of conscience, that faculty of which people prate so much nowadays, and are so ignorantly proud, is a sign of our imperfect development. It must be merged in instinct before we become fine. Self-denial is simply a method by which man arrests his progress, and self-sacrifice a survival of the mutilation of the savage, part of that old worship of pain which is so terrible a factor in the history of the world [...].<sup>277</sup>

Wilde argues that human civilization is in an evolutionary process because of sin, and that without it, it would come to stagnate and grow old- to degenerate. Wilde is reputed for his rejection of conventions in art and morality. Here he equates sin with progress and conscience, the human faculty that dictates the rules of conduct, with degeneration. The whole novel turns around sin and conscience, and, as we shall see, Wilde is far from sustaining this view so vehemently preached here through the experience of Dorian.

It is through Lord Henry Wotton that Wilde expresses similar views of sin and its relation with progress. In the following passage Lord Henry argues:

I believe that the world would gain such a fresh impulse of joy that we would forget all the maladies of mediaevalism, and return to the Hellenic ideal--to something finer, richer than the Hellenic ideal, it may be. But the bravest man amongst us is afraid of himself. The mutilation of the savage has its tragic survival in the self-denial that mars our lives. We are punished for our refusals. Every impulse that we strive to strangle broods in the mind and poisons us. The body sins once, and has done with its sin, for action is a mode of purification. Nothing remains then but the recollection of a pleasure, or the luxury of a regret. The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself, with desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful.p25

The mutilation of the savage and the self-denial that Henry here deplures are references to the repression of man's natural instincts; more precisely, the use of the word 'savage' makes it clear that Henry refers here to man's animal passions that are repressed into the realm of the sub-conscious, and thus are still able to exercise some effect on the mind and poison it. Henry restates Freud's theory which claims that the more we repress a desire, the stronger it comes back in symptomatic forms to the surface of our consciousness. He calls, then, for the fulfillment of these repressed desires, and asserts the liberation it would provide for the individual. He refutes, thus, the theories spread at the 'fin de siècle', which considered the instinctual, animal side as a degeneration, but as a spur towards progress. If we deny these animal impulses, Henry adds, we 'degenerate into hideous puppets, haunted by the memory of the passions of which we are too much afraid, and the exquisite

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<sup>277</sup> Wilde, Oscar. *Intentions*. Op. Cit. p158-159

temptations that we had not the courage to yield to' (p31). We notice here the fact that Henry equates courage with sin, whereas earlier in the novel, he clearly equates conscience with cowardice: 'Conscience and cowardice are really the same things, Basil. Conscience is the trade-name of the firm. That is all' (p13). So, Henry clearly preaches immorality, calling for the rejection of conscience which draws us back into a degenerate state, and for sin, which spurs us on the evolutionary process. This theory is to be put into practice and tested through Dorian.

Indeed, Dorian feels a strange fascination, mingled with pleasure, towards Lord Henry since the beginning of their acquaintance. Henry's words have not fallen on innocent ears- in fact, we have a notion of awakening, as Dorian discovers a side of his personality that he did not seem to be aware of, which explains the purity and innocent goodness that Basil and Lord Henry so much admired. Through making him 'think', Lord Henry has awakened in Dorian the sinful, repressed side, and has driven him out of his innocence to wander in the modern city looking for sin:

You filled me with a wild desire to know everything about life. For days after I met you, something seemed to throb in my veins. As I lounged in the park, or strolled down Piccadilly, I used to look at every one who passed me and wonder, with a mad curiosity, what sort of lives they led. Some of them fascinated me. Others filled me with terror. There was an exquisite poison in the air. I had a passion for sensations. . . . Well, one evening about seven o'clock, I determined to go out in search of some adventure. I felt that this grey monstrous London of ours, with its myriads of people, its sordid sinners, and its splendid sins, as you once phrased it, must have something in store for me. P59

The diction here is interesting: wild, mad poison, passion, monstrous, sordid, are references to the kind of life Dorian is going to lead, where he is to fulfill his wild impulses and mad passions. Dorian then becomes a source of poison for those who approach him, as one of the minor characters exclaims that no innocent woman should be left by his side; then he becomes finally a sordid, monstrous murderer.

Thus, Dorian gives vent to his wild instincts, and fulfills all kinds of passions without limits. As we have seen previously, he comes to care only for physical sensations, leaving no room for intellectual or spiritual activity, except in the contemplation of his new sinful experiences. The sense of his denegation is evident, as he seems to regress into a lower, animal order, centered around sensory experiences. The notion of his fall into animalism is suggested through his fascination for what is called in the novel 'barbaric music':

The harsh interval and shrill discords of barbaric music stirred him at times when Schubert's grace, and Chopin's beautiful sorrows, and the mighty harmonies of Beethoven himself, fell unheeded on his ear. He collected together from all parts of the world the strangest instruments that could be found, either in the tombs of dead nations or among the few savage tribes that have survived contact with Western civilizations, and loved to touch and try them. [...] the fantastic character of these instruments fascinated him, and he felt a curious delight in the thought that Art, like Nature, has her monsters, things of bestial shape and with hideous voices. Yet after a time, he wearied of them, and would sit in his box at the opera, either alone or with Lord Henry, listening in rapt pleasure to 'Tannhauser', and seeing in the prelude to that great work of art a presentation of the tragedy of his own soul. P155-156

The music that so fascinates Dorian is the one that gives expression to the animal or bestial nature of man. It is said that it comes from nations that have survived contact with the modern civilization, suggesting that these nations have not developed on the evolutionary scale, and are still on that early stage of human civilization which is still close to the animal, savage world. Dorian's degeneration is thus clearly stated in this strange fascination with savage music. However, after having had enough of this barbaric music, of animalism, Dorian cannot help but come back to civilization, symbolized through the opera box, and listen to the tragic opera of Wagner. Wilde makes it clear that the fall into animalism cannot be sustained for long, as Dorian 'wearied' of it. There is a marked paradox in the fact that on one hand, Wilde deplores the mutilation of the savage, and calls for the complete fulfillment of the individual's base, animal instincts. On the other hand, he makes his protagonist tired of it, and long for resuming contact with civilization. Moreover, Dorian is said to meditate upon the tragedy of his soul when he listens to the sad and tragic prelude- what kind of tragedy, we wonder? Is it his soul's fall and deterioration? We clearly see that Sin does not liberate Dorian, as Wilde professes it does, but enslaves him to fulfill other baser passions; this is clearly stated by the narrator as follows: 'That curiosity about life which Lord Henry had first stirred in him, as they sat together in the garden of their friend, seemed to increase with gratification. The more he knew, the more he desired to know. He had mad hungers that grew more ravenous as he fed them'(p149).

Furthermore, the process of degeneration of Dorian's soul is reflected in the central object of the novel: the portrait. Indeed, as we have seen previously, what was once the reflection of his extreme beauty as well as his goodness and innocence, is gradually deteriorating as Dorian gets more and more immersed in his obsession with sin. In fact, the degradation

Dorian witnesses in the portrait plays the role of conscience, which constantly reminds him of his faults, and urges him to redeem himself to save the beauty of his soul:

For every sin that he committed, a stain would fleck and wreck its fairness. But he would not sin. The picture, changed or unchanged, would be to him the visible emblem of conscience. He would resist temptation. He would not see Lord Henry any more- would not, at any rate, listen to those subtle poisonous theories that in Basil Hallward's garden had first stirred within him the passion for impossible things. (p107)

We clearly see here Dorian trying to shake himself free from the poisonous influence of Henry, to lead 'an earnest, dutiful life', as John Sloan puts it<sup>278</sup>. He even tries to convince the latter of the importance of conscience, and the new life he was determined to start: 'I know what conscience is, to begin with. It is not what you told me it was. It is the divinest thing in us. Don't sneer at it, Harry, any more- at least not before me. I want to be good. I can't bear the idea of my soul being hideous' (P113). We see here Dorian's realization of the importance of conscience, and the strength it can exercise on the mind to lead it on the straight path.

Dorian thus revolts against Lord Henry and is determined to start anew. However, this resolution comes too late, as by the moment he is formulating it, Sibyl Vane committed suicide. This tragedy leaves Dorian weak and prey to Henry's poisonous theories. In fact, we can say that this marks the turning point where Dorian starts a deeper descent into the lower life of animal passions. Dorian experiences this descent with delight in his new experiences, as well as with pain at his own degeneration made visible on the portrait:

A feeling of pain crept over him as he thought of the desecration that was in store for the fair face on the canvas. Once, in boyish mockery of Narcissus, he had kissed, or feigned to kiss, those lips that now smiled so cruelly at him. Morning after morning he had sat before the portrait, wondering at its beauty, almost enamored of it, as it seemed to him at times. Was it to alter now with every mood to which he yielded? Was it to become a monstrous and loathsome thing, to be hidden away in a locked room, to be shut out from the sunlight that had so often touched to brighter gold the waving wonder of its hair? The pity of it! The pity of it! P123

We notice here Dorian's horror at the portrait, which represents his soul's degeneration, and his urge to hide it in a 'locked room'. Indeed, to ease his pain, Dorian hides the portrait in a remote room in the house of which he constantly keeps the keys with him, and to which, however, he goes to witness the effects of hideous sins on his soul. He constantly tries to ignore the changes, and to delight in the fact that finally, it is not him who changes,

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<sup>278</sup> Sloan, John. Op. Cit. P145

but in vain- he never gets rid of the pain it causes to him. Dorian seems helpless, unable to stop his descent into sin, and keeps formulating good resolutions. Towards the end of the novel, he decides, for example, to spare an innocent woman from his poisonous grip, and desperately hurries to watch the effect on the portrait. However, the portrait, the embodiment of his inner self, shows that it was not a selfless act of goodness, but was done following the egoistic desire to experience something new. In the following passage, we see the strong hope Dorian has to be good again, and the happiness and liberation this would bring him:

A new life! That was what he wanted. That was what he was waiting for. Surely he had begun it already. He had spared one innocent thing, at any rate. He would never again tempt innocence. He would be good. [...]He took the lamp from the table and crept upstairs. As he unbarred the door a smile of joy flitted across his strangely young-looking face and lingered for a moment about his lips. Yes, he would be good, and the hideous thing that he had hidden away would no longer be a terror to him. He felt as if the load had been lifted from him already. P253

Dorian experiences a short moment of happiness and liberation, forcing himself to believe that he can end his nightmarish, sinful life and start anew again. This short lived moment of enthusiasm is significant as it demonstrates that man's happiness cannot reside in a sinful life, that man naturally longs for goodness- a blow that Wilde throws on the doctrines of the decadent movement he himself represents. Yet, when he is in front of his portrait, Dorian is horrified because it has not got any better with the 'good ' deed he thought he made, and in attempt to free himself from what became 'the source of his morbid self-loathing'<sup>279</sup>, he stabs the portrait and consequently kills himself. His death the moment he stabs the portrait is significant as it reasserts the importance of what the portrait stands for: the soul, and more precisely conscience; as Wilde himself puts it: in his attempt to kill what the portrait represents, 'conscience', 'Dorian Gray kills himself'<sup>280</sup>.

In theory, Wilde equates conscience with cowardice and sin with courage, whereas the novel demonstrates just the opposite: it is easier for Dorian to indulge the different passions he has, than to stop and fulfill the warnings of conscience. In the novel, it is self-control, the repression of one's passionate, animalistic drives that demands that inner strength called courage, not their fulfillment. Moreover, Wilde equates sin with progress, and conscience with stagnation. Yet, while we expect him to make his protagonist fulfill his desires, and

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<sup>279</sup> Ibid. p146

<sup>280</sup> Qt. In: Ibid.

hence lead a full and complete life, we discover that Dorian is never completely happy, because he is unable to deny his conscience. This point in the novel seems to have been made 'without the consent' of Wilde as, with a touch of regret in his tone, he is forced to acknowledge that there is a moral to his tale. In the following quotation, M. Halliwell refers to this sense of forced recognition:

[...] Dorian Gray's portrait becomes a zone of in-betweenness' in which his fantasy life is refracted into a pictorial representation of his moral degradation. The search for the unfettered soul energizes all the characters- Gray, Henry Wotton and the painter Basil Hallward- but also suggests that stirrings of morality continue to disturb the 'romance of art', a view substantiated by Wilde's admission to Arthur Conan Doyle that the novel has an 'inherent moral' that he wished to subordinate to 'the artistic and dramatic effect.'<sup>281</sup>

Indeed, the theories of Henry Wotton, and hence Wilde, are shown to be unsustainable through the novel. His philosophy that 'the aim of life is self-development', and to live one's life 'fully and completely' transform Dorian into a 'monstrous' creature that he comes to hate. The moral dimension disturbs the 'romance of art' and its claim for independence and self-containment. The 'moral aesthetic', as Halliwell puts it, is 'theoretically possible'<sup>282</sup>, but is never realized in the novel; Dorian demonstrates the impossibility 'to burn always with this hard, gem-like flame', and to 'maintain his ecstasy', as he is more and more tormented by the portrait- 'the living death of his soul'.

Dorian's unhappiness is expressed by the inner struggle he goes through, and the different moments of weeping, interestingly grouped together by George C. Schoolfield as follows:

For all the apparent glory of his eternal youth, Dorian has not been happy. A sign of his unhappiness has been, everywhere, his lachrymosity: he weeps on at least seven occasions in the novel. The first outburst comes when he realizes he will grow old, in chapter 2: it occurs immediately before he expresses the fateful wish "I would give my soul [to be always young]," which is then fulfilled. He weeps again as he thinks he will stab the canvas whose eternal youth he envies. He weeps when, in the conversation with Basil which leads to the latter's murder, Basil tries to get him to pray, quoting from Isaiah: " 'Though your sins be as scarlet, yet I will make them white as snow.'" He weeps at Selby Royal after James Vane has looked through the window at him, and he thinks "of the image of his sin again," "swathed in scarlet." He weeps when he "knows" he is "safe", after the death of Vane. He weeps when, on the final evening of his life, he thinks of "the monstrous moment of pride and passion [in which] he had prayed that the portrait should bear the burden of his days", and then, one last time, he resolves "to be good."<sup>283</sup>

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<sup>281</sup> Halliwell, Martin. *Transatlantic Modernism: Moral Dilemmas in Modernist Fiction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001. p38

<sup>282</sup> Ibid. P34

<sup>283</sup> Schoolfield, George.C. Op. Cit. P68

The moments of unhappiness are too frequent for a supposedly aesthetic-decadent novel, which calls for self-fulfillment, and the happiness it would bring to the individual. The aesthetic, decadent theories Wilde professes concerning the New Hedonism, where the individual has just to follow his senses and enjoy different kinds of pleasure; the moral aesthetic, where man has to cultivate an innate sense of beauty in order to distinguish the good from the bad; the preaching of sin, as a spur towards progress, and the rejection of conscience, as a cause of stagnation; all these theories, all central to the Decadent-Aesthetic movement, are put into question in the novel. We discover with horror, at the end of the novel, that man cannot supersede conscience, which must remain the only true guide in life. Man is not, and cannot be an animalized sensory creature, but has a spiritual nature that cannot be repressed.

*'The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a holy legend, or an unholy legend, of decadence, not its breviary, as A Rebours was'<sup>284</sup>. Contrary to the latter, Wilde's novel preaches Decadent theories only to show their weakness and inconsistencies.

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<sup>284</sup> Ibid. p70

## Chapter Four: Heart of Darkness

### 1) Conrad: between Pessimism and Faith

Oscar Wilde and Joseph Conrad have many points in common despite their different attitudes about life and art: whereas Wilde wore the mask of the decadent “flâneur” who cares only for material and superficial matters, Conrad wore the veil of ambiguity, even pessimism. The two writers lived through and witnessed the dramatic changes that marked the fin-de-siècle period, and attempted to come to terms with them in their work.

The works of Joseph Conrad are characterized by a disorienting inconclusiveness and a dominant brooding ambiguity. In the following quotation, the critic Douglas Brown comments on this aspect of Conrad’s works:

Reading, we lack orientation. Nobody is thoroughly understood, no situation is perfectly clear. And the skepticism tapers off- is it the sardonic manner? or the elliptical method? -into the enigmatic?<sup>285</sup>

Indeed, we notice these aspects in *Heart of Darkness*, which leaves in the readers an impression of disorientation and ambiguity; the meaning that Conrad wants to convey is obscure, the tone it adopts is cynical and mocking. Typical of the modernist works of the time, it is a novel that seems to raise more questions than to provide answers. Michael Levenson also comments on this sense of disorientation in Conrad’s work:

The fragility of identity, the barriers to knowledge, the groundlessness of value- these great Conradian (and modern) motifs appear most often in terms of a sensory derangement that casts the individual into unarticulated space, a space with no markers and no boundaries, with nothing behind, nothing above, nothing below.<sup>286</sup>

The confusion that Conrad’s work provokes is symptomatic of the cultural crisis that characterized the end of the nineteenth century: The rejection of traditional moral and social conventions, the difficulty to substitute alternatives for them, and the resulting sense of loss and chaos. Taking this view into consideration, we would easily accept Hillis Miller’s argument that Conrad is a ‘nihilist in his basic vision of reality’<sup>287</sup>. There are indeed a lot of elements that sustain this argument: E.M. Forster attributes Conrad’s works’ lack of clarity to a lack of creed: ‘Misty in the middle as well as at the edges, the secret cask of his genius

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<sup>285</sup> Douglas Brown in: Ford Boris. Ed. From James to Eliot: *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature*. UK: Penguin Books,1982. P132

<sup>286</sup> Levenson, Michael. *Modernism and the Fate of Individuality: character and Novelistic Form From Conrad to Woolf*. UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991. P5

<sup>287</sup> Qt. In: Watt, Ian. *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*. London: Chatto and Windus,1980. P252

contains vapour rather than a jewel...No creed, in fact'<sup>288</sup>. This lack of creed is suggested through the pessimism about man and the universe he lives in, made so evident in the novel we are concerned with.

In the following quotation, Cedric Watts draws a comparison between Conrad and Hardy, and attributes the reason for their pessimism to their background:

[There] are clearly some common features in their pessimism which point to causes extending beyond private experience to the general background. In both writers, there is a strong sense that the heavens, once thought to be benevolent to humans, are empty or even hostile. In both, there is a keen post-Darwinian sense that man and his struggles are but part of a 'Nature, red in tooth and claw'. In both, there is a strong element of anti-rational primitivism: the feeling that 'Where ignorance is bliss/ 'Tis folly to be wise.' And in both, we often hear the plangent tones of the disillusioned romantic.<sup>289</sup>

Cedric Watts refers here to the decline of religious faith, to the advances of science which made of the world a cold and indifferent one, and to the growing belief that a reversal to primitivism is the only exit from the suffering caused by the impact of these dubious revolutions. In some of his letters, Conrad clearly expresses his pessimism: here is a letter he wrote to his friend Cunningham Graham, where he cries out his loss of faith in man:

You are a most hopeless idealist- your aspirations are unrealisable. You want from men faith, honor, fidelity to truth in themselves and others. You want them to have all this, to show it every day, to make out of these words their rule of life. [...] What makes you dangerous is your unwarrantable belief that your desire may be realized. This is the only point of difference between us. I do not believe.<sup>290</sup>

Conrad here accuses his friend of being an idealist who believes in the good nature of man, while he strongly declares his disbelief in human decency and morality. In the following passage, Conrad expresses the despairing sense of impotence he feels vis-à-vis a world which has grown materialistic, and has discarded human values, through the use of his famous metaphor of the 'knitting machine':

There is a- let us say- a machine. It evolved itself out of a chaos of scraps of iron and behold!- it knits. I am horrified at the horrible work and stand appalled. I feel it ought to embroider- but it goes on knitting. [...] and the most withering thought is that the infamous thing has made itself; made itself without thought, without foresight, without eyes, without heart. It is a tragic accident- and it has happened. You can't interfere with it. [...] It knits us in and it knits us out, it has knitted time, space, pain, death, corruption, despair and the illusions- and nothing matters.<sup>291</sup>

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<sup>288</sup> E. M. Forster in: Bloom, Harold. Ed. *Modern Critical Interpretations*. New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2008. P3

<sup>289</sup> Watts, Cedric. *A Preface to Conrad*. U.S.: Longman, 1982. P46

<sup>290</sup> Karl, Frederick R. and Laurence Davies. Ed. *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*. Volume I (1861-1897). Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1983. P425

<sup>291</sup> Ibid.

The knitting machine is a representation of the modern world which has made itself as the result of man's loss of spirituality and adoption of materialism; this new world order has no conscience and no foresight, and made man's actions, good or bad, utterly insignificant. This letter is a clear expression of Conrad's pessimism.

On the other hand, this pessimism is counterbalanced by a strong desire to cling to the last remnants of faith in man. Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan tackles this point in his book: *Joseph Conrad and the Modern Temper*, where he argues that while Conrad feels doomed in a world deprived of meaning, he also revolts against it. He highlights the inner struggle

Conrad goes through between nihilism and faith, pessimism and hope, in a godless universe:

I believe that Conrad, a 'homo duplex' as he defined himself, has predicated the best of his work on a purging of his own temperament, a rejection of the Nietzschean outlook. He could neither accept its celebration of ethical and epistemological relativism, nor endorse its view of the role of art as the supreme lie. His moral heritage, and his desperate personal need for a stable frame of reference, impelled him into a heroic (and foredoomed) struggle with the modern temper.<sup>292</sup>

We understand that Conrad's response to the modern world is not a simple rejection nor endorsement of it, as he neither falls completely into pessimism, nor clearly affirms his faith.

Conrad goes through an inner conflict which results from the fact that he has a 'desperate personal need for a stable frame of reference' in the face of the moral vacuum that surrounds him, and that he cannot deny. In a letter to C. Graham he writes:

You who devote your talents and enthusiasm to the cause of humanity, you must understand no doubt why I must – I need to – keep my thinking inviolate as a final act of fidelity to a lost cause. It's all I can do.<sup>293</sup>

We clearly witness here the inner tension Conrad experiences in trying to keep his thinking free from what he considers the modern moral disintegration, and the efforts he makes to cling to faith, which he already recognizes as 'a lost cause'. This tension is expressed in his writing through the ambivalence and inconclusiveness it inspires. Moreover, as Erdinast-Vulcan puts it, 'Conrad's work is not merely a reflection of the modern temper: It is an active revolt against it', and adds that Conrad 'set out on a foredoomed quest for the 'sovereign power enthroned in a fixed standard of conduct'<sup>294</sup>.

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<sup>292</sup> Erdinast-Vulcan, Daphna. *Joseph Conrad and the Modern Temper*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991. PP3-4

<sup>293</sup> Karl, Frederick R. and Laurence Davies. Ed. Op. Cit. p161.

<sup>294</sup> Erdinast-Vulcan, Daphna. Op. Cit. p19

Conrad's views on art are expressive of this revolt against modern degeneration; in *Notes on Life and Letters*, while he ponders on the freedom of the writer to express himself, Conrad carefully adds:

It must not be supposed that I claim for the artist the freedom of moral Nihilism. I would require from him many acts of faith of which the first would be the cherishing of an undying hope; and hope, it will not be contested, implies all the piety of effort and renunciation.<sup>295</sup>

So, what Conrad proposes for the artist is the appropriate state of mind when writing: The cherishing of a hope. He is against moral nihilism, and requires from the artist 'acts of faith'. He then explains hope through declaring that to be 'hopeful in an artistic sense is not necessarily to think that the world is good'<sup>296</sup>, which can be called naïve and be immediately rejected by a skeptical, materialistic society; hope, for Conrad, is the belief that 'there is no impossibility of [the world] being made so'<sup>297</sup>. Conrad thus calls for the artist in general and the novelist in particular, to keep faith in art and its capacity to make the world better. In the following quotation, Conrad further expresses his belief in art and its role as he says:

All creative art is magic, is evocation of the unseen in forms persuasive, enlightening, familiar and surprising, for the edification of mankind, pinned down by the conditions of its existence to the earnest consideration of the most insignificant tides of reality.<sup>298</sup>

Conrad believes that the role of art is the moral uplift and intellectual improvement of mankind, mostly needed in an age that has sacrificed the spiritual for the material. We notice that this view on art is rather traditional, and does not fit into the generally pessimistic atmosphere of the fin de siècle. Erdinast-Vulcan attributes this optimism to Conrad's desire to 'recover the mythical idiom', which entrusts the story-teller, the novelist, with 'the sacred task of transmitting an ethical code'<sup>299</sup>. Conrad's aim is to restore the sacred status of the story-teller as a moral educator, and thus 'to rescue art from its captivity in the realm of entertainment'<sup>300</sup>. Regarding Conrad's views on the role of art, it would seem impossible to find in it any reference or acknowledgment of the Decadent-Aesthetic movement dominating the late 80s. Yet, regarding Conrad's janiformity, it would not be surprising to find out that Conrad adopts the movement's major aspects.

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<sup>295</sup> Conrad, Joseph. *Notes on Life and Letters* (1921). The Project Gutenberg Ebook, 2005. <[www.gutenberg.net](http://www.gutenberg.net)>

<sup>296</sup> Ibid.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid.

<sup>299</sup> Erdinast-Vulcan, Daphna. Op. Cit. p34.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid.

Ian Watt declares that Conrad 'apparently disliked being tarred with the decadent brush'<sup>301</sup>. Taking into consideration Conrad's inner struggle between nihilism and faith, and the attempt to restore the traditional role of the artist as a moral educator, it is natural on the part of Conrad to reject the Aesthetic belief in *l'art pour l'art*. Aestheticism is in fact the representation, or expression of the modern temper that Conrad strives to fight. However, Conrad could not help being himself influenced by it. In fact, this inner struggle is an attempt to reject the main tenets of Aestheticism, and at the same time, the inevitable adoption of them. In what follows, we try to highlight the different ways Conrad used to cope with the malaise of the fin-de-siècle, and the alternatives he proposes to substitute for the modern loss of spiritual wholeness. We start with Conrad's Impressionism, then we move to degeneration, and finally try to cover the different 'alternatives' we detect in the novel.

## 2) Conrad's Impressionism

The movement of Impressionism started with the French painters who, in the face of a modernizing Paris, its wider boulevards, growing traffic of consumerism, and its expanding fashions of public life, sought to adapt their art to the dramatic changes taking place in the environment: "Not only was their subject matter new, but the way they portrayed this reality was unique as well. Intuitive feeling and the essence of spontaneity of the moment, was impressed upon the canvas"<sup>302</sup>. Instead of dealing with traditional subjects, such as history and myth, painters turned to scenes from common everyday life. Their concern turned away from the abstract religious and mythical themes to the concrete 'physical' world; their interest was "to capture the immediate effect of a scene-the impression it made on the eye in a fleeting instant"<sup>303</sup>. The movement was named after Claude Monet's famous painting entitled: "Impression, Sunrise" (1873). The representational style of the movement was not necessarily realistic; In fact, the movement reflects the scientific developments of the time which proved that "what the eye perceived and what the brain understood were two different things"<sup>304</sup>. The concern of the Impressionists was to capture "the impact of a scene"- in other words, the impression it leaves on the individual in a

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<sup>301</sup> Watt, Ian. Op. Cit. p184

<sup>302</sup> Michael, Zurakhinsky. "Impressionism". *Your Guide to Modern Art*. [www.Theartstory.org](http://www.Theartstory.org) (2013)

<sup>303</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*

particular space, at a particular time. Subjectivity is a central key element in this movement, as it is related to how the individual sees something, and not how it appears to everybody. The philosopher David Hume played an important role in establishing the importance of impression as a source of knowledge. Hume opened his *Treatise in Human Nature* with the following sentence: 'All the perceptions of the human mind resolve themselves into two distinct kinds, which I shall call *Impressions* and *Ideas*'<sup>305</sup>, and then, he emphasized the importance of impressions over ideas regarding the fact that ideas are mere reflections of 'our original sense-impressions'<sup>306</sup>. This emphasis on the senses gained popularity in the fin de siècle period, where the individual is to believe only in what he sees- an attitude well articulated in the words of the French painter Courbet who, when asked to paint angels replied: "Show me an angel and I will paint one"<sup>307</sup>, denoting thus an age of empiricism where the abstract, idealistic aspects of life are rejected in favour for the concrete, the materialistic.

Conrad reflects this modernist concern with sense-impressions in his work, which is often called 'Impressionistic' by critics. Peter Childs, for example, argues that:

Conrad thus aspired in his writing more to painting than to music, often considered the purest of arts. He has inherited the Flaubertian ideals of precision and verisimilitude, but transmuted these principles into a more symbolic and impressionistic form of writing.<sup>308</sup>

Conrad's concern was with the depiction of reality; yet, contrary to the Realists, who try to represent it objectively, he stresses the vivid impressions the reality effects on an individual mind. Conrad himself confirms his impressionism in the Preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus* where he declares:

All art [...] appeals primarily to the senses, and the artistic aim when expressing itself in written words must also make its appeal through the senses, if its high desire is to reach the secret spring of responsive emotions. [...] My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel- it is, before all, to make you see.<sup>309</sup>

Here Conrad clearly foregrounds the realm of the senses in the way the Impressionistic painters did. Furthermore, he sets above the other senses the visual one when he defines his task as a writer to make the reader "see". Ian Watt confirms this through stressing the

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<sup>305</sup> Qt.In. Watt, Ian. Op. Cit. p171.

<sup>306</sup> Ibid.

<sup>307</sup> Michael, Zurakhinsky. Op. Cit.

<sup>308</sup> Childs, Peter. *Modernist Literature: A Guide for the Perplexed*. London and New York: Continuum, 2011. P7

<sup>309</sup> Conrad, Joseph. *The Nigger of the Narcissus* (1897) The Project Gutenberg EBOOK, 2006. <www.gutenberg.org>

‘strong visual sense’ of Conrad’s writing, which he considers as ‘wholly consistent with impressionist doctrine’<sup>310</sup>.

However, Conrad’s attitude towards this movement is surprisingly negative; indeed, Conrad considers it as ‘shallow’, and said that Stephen Crane was ‘the only impressionist and only an impressionist’<sup>311</sup>. We would logically attribute this apparent contradiction to the janiformity so typical of Conrad; yet, this time, the explanation is not that Conrad adopts an ambivalent attitude towards Impressionism, but that he takes it further. Ian Watt explains this point in the following passage:

Conrad wanted today as much attention to the inside as to the outside, to the meaning as to the appearance; and this is one of the reasons why, in the last analysis, he is so different from the French Impressionists and from Pater, Crane, or Ford.<sup>312</sup>

With the impressionistic techniques he uses, Conrad does not merely represent sensual impressions, but rather concentrates on how these latter affect the inner being of the individual; hence, he is not concerned solely with shallow visions, but with their deep meaning, conveyed to the mind of the “seer”. Therefore, he presents to his readers vivid visual scenes addressed to the senses, and beyond that, to their minds. This is suggested in the quotation where Conrad insists that art makes its ‘appeal through the senses [...] to reach the secret spring of responsive emotions’<sup>313</sup>, and it is largely agreed that the emotional part of the individual plays an important role in his moral life.

In the novel, there is a direct reference to the impressionistic technique:

The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted), and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine.<sup>314</sup>

There is in this metaphor about the yarns of seamen a ‘sensory quality’<sup>315</sup> expressed through the mist and haze, which announces the book’s heavy use of impressionistic techniques. Indeed, we are presented with descriptions of specific scenes which assault the senses and make the reader share with the narrator even the physical impressions he goes

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<sup>310</sup> Watt, Ian. Op. Cit. p174

<sup>311</sup> Watts, Cedric. Op. Cit. p114

<sup>312</sup> Watt, Ian. Op. Cit. p179

<sup>313</sup> Conrad, Joseph. *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. Op. Cit.

<sup>314</sup> Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness* (1902). London: Penguin Books, 1994. P8 (all references to this work are taken from the same source)

<sup>315</sup> Watt, Ian. Op. Cit. p169

through. In what follows, we try to account for the impressionistic techniques Conrad uses through exploring the contrast between light and darkness, between surface and depth, and finally we will analyze how Conrad renders sensual perception.

a) Light Vs Darkness:

There is a marked contrast in the novel drawn between light and darkness- a contrast upon which the whole novel is built. The setting is presented by the frame narrator as being dark and gloomy- he, in fact, repeats the word 'gloom' at least four times in the same passage. Generally speaking, darkness entails the difficulty for the physical eye to see, which engenders confusion, a sense of loss and lack of understanding. Taking these associations further, darkness refers to ignorance, and by contrast, light refers to knowledge. The darkness pervading the setting at the beginning foreshadows the ambiguity and confusing quality of the narrative that is about to open.

Moreover, this darkness is described in contrast with light, with which it seems to struggle:

The water shone pacifically; the sky, without a speck, was a benign immensity of unstained light; the very mist on the Essex marsh was like a gauzy and radiant fabric, hung from the wooded rises inland, and draping the low shores in diaphanous folds. Only the gloom to the west, brooding over the upper reaches, became more sombre every minute, as if angered by the approach of the sun.P6

This impressionistic description makes us visualize the struggle between light and darkness, and thus, between knowledge and ignorance. This gloom is 'brooding', and seems to grow darker, and, in fact, wins over the sunlight which is 'stricken to death' by its 'touch'(P6). This darkness is said to be 'brooding over a crowd of men'. The audience of Marlow has not heard the narrative yet, and thus, we can say, has not been enlightened. Up to now, the contrast between light and darkness, and what each stands for, seems to be maintained, but not for long: a few pages later, at the opening of his narrative, Marlow states:

"I don't want to bother you much with what happened to me personally," he began, showing in this remark the weakness of many tellers of tales who seem so often unaware of what their audience would like best to hear; "yet to understand the effect of it on me you ought to know how I got out there, what I saw, how I went up that river to the place where I first met the poor chap. It was the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience. It seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me-- and into my thoughts. It was sombre enough, too-- and pitiful-- not extraordinary in any way--not very clear either. No, not very clear. And yet it seemed to throw a kind of light." P11

In this passage, Marlow offers the audience his own judgment on the experience he is about to tell: A judgment that proves to be confusing, and reveals the complexity of the meaning implied. Marlow says that his experience enlightens him, on the one hand, but it is 'sombre

enough' and 'not very clear', on the other hand. Light and darkness here are taken beyond their impressionistic qualities as they now address the "mental eye". In this case, Marlow blurs the boundaries between the two concepts as light enlightens, but does not make things clear as we would expect in a normal, "physical" sensation. This suggests that the aim of the author is not to stop at physical matters, but to dig in, and call for the reader's imagination and sense of reflection. Through blurring this contrast, Conrad prepares the reader for a narrative that won't disclose its meaning easily, but will challenge the reader's capacity for *seeing* and *understanding*.

Light and darkness are again brought into dialogue in the oil-painting Kurtz made, described by Marlow as following:

[...]I noticed a small sketch in oils, on a panel, representing a woman, draped and blindfolded, carrying a lighted torch. The background was sombre--almost black. The movement of the woman was stately, and the effect of the torchlight on the face was sinister.<sup>P36</sup>

The contrast between light and darkness is drawn through the fact that whereas the background of the painting is dark, the woman carries a torch. The torch, however, does not seem to throw light around her- it does not enlighten her path. The description, thus, cancels the normal effect light has on darkness. Besides, Marlow describes the effect that the torch has on the woman's face as 'sinister'- a word which has negative connotations, such as: ominous, evil. So, what Marlow sees has an impact on him, because he translates the effects of the torch in words which pertain to the abstract emotional realm. This leads us to wonder why the painting has such a sinister effect: Is it because it is too feeble, or is it because the face it enlightens is sinister? Critics argue that the woman stands for the imperialist enterprise which, instead of bringing forth the light of civilization, brings darkness, and is, itself, blind-folded, which means devoid of moral values. Taking into consideration this interpretation, we can accept both views about the meaning of the painting: the sinister effect can be attributed to the light itself, as it represents the distorted light imperialism brings to Africa, and to the Imperialist enterprise itself which is shown its dark and evil reality. Here again, we see that Conrad does not stop at painting mere physical sensations, but goes beyond to provoke the imagination of the reader, his inner being. The last episode of the novel, where Marlow recounts his encounter with the Intended, is presented as a canvas painted in terms of light and darkness. Marlow tells his impressions as follows:

She came forward, all in black, with a pale head, floating towards me in the dusk. [...] The room seemed to have grown darker, as if all the sad light of the cloudy evening had taken refuge on her forehead. This fair hair, this pale visage, this pure brow, seemed surrounded by an ashy halo from which the dark eyes looked out at me. P106

The intended is painted in a sharp contrast with the setting: being surrounded by darkness and wearing black, Marlow has the impression that she is floating, not walking. This description calls for interesting interpretations: The whiteness of the Intended's visage, surrounded by a gloomy darkness, suggests purity and innocence in the midst of evil. The fact that she seems floating suggests a conscience free from guilt or any other kind of pressure. We do not forget that this description is an impression that Marlow has after his return from his journey- a journey which has put into question his beliefs and way of thinking. Marlow projects his thoughts on the Intended whom he sees as innocent, because she does not know the things he knew, and free from a guilty conscience from which he has been suffering from the beginning of his experience.

A few lines after, Marlow explains why the Intended retains light in the surrounding darkness:

But with every word spoken the room was growing darker, and only her forehead, smooth and white, remained illumined by the inextinguishable light of belief and love.p107

"Belief" and "love", according to Marlow, have an "inextinguishable light". The darkness Marlow sees invading the setting is in fact a reflection of his own mind, which is being progressively pervaded by gloomy thoughts and confusion. The association between belief and light suggests, or rather confirms, that Marlow is losing his faith, because he is in darkness. Moreover, the fact that the Intended's visage retains light, contrary to the people Marlow sees and despises after his return, suggests the admiration Marlow has for her faith, and the urge he feels to keep that light from being put out. Moreover, we have the impression that Marlow has some regrets about the loss of faith in the modern world, which we detect in the following quotation:

"Yes, I know," I said with something like despair in my heart, but bowing my head before the faith that was in her, before that great and saving illusion that shone with an unearthly glow in the darkness, in the triumphant darkness from which I could not have defended her- from which I could not even defend myself." PP108-109

Marlow bows his head before the Intended's faith, a gesture of acknowledgement, respect, and even worship; faith is only an 'illusion', but is 'great' and 'saving', and 'shines with an earthly glow in the darkness'. Even if Marlow declares that darkness is 'triumphant', the

words he uses to refer to faith are awe-inspiring- they are not the words of a skeptic, but of a man who still struggles with the 'darkness'. This might help us bring additional explanations to the passage where Marlow comments on the effects of his experience on him: The realities Marlow discovers about human nature have strongly, or rather irreversibly, shaken his faith; besides, he came to realize the importance and value of faith, and the saving role it plays in man's mind in struggle with the dark forces. Yet, Marlow offers no clear cut conclusion: He neither approves of the deep faith of the Intended, which emanates from lack of experience and naiveté, nor of its complete rejection. The tension between light and darkness expresses the need to find a new faith, based on knowledge and experience that would enable the individual to face the harsh realities of the modern world. Furthermore, the novel does not seem to close on a positive note, as it ends with a description of a menacing darkness:

The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed somber under an overcast sky-seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness. P111

The darkness which pervades the setting points out the realism of Conrad who suggests that it is 'darkness' which is triumphant in the modern world- a suggestion which, through the experience of Marlow and the inner conflicts he goes through, is backed up by the call for the individual to stand up in the face of darkness, and find out the saving faith that would enlighten his world. The closing darkness does not thus entail mere pessimism; it is in fact a warning against the dangers of moral nihilism.

b) Surface Vs depth:

There is in the novel a contrast drawn between the surface and what is found beneath. Traditionally speaking, the surface, the appearance, is equated with lack of depth and superficiality; depth constitutes the essence of things, and is thus, more valuable. However, this contrast is blurred in the novel: Marlow does not directly reverse these opposites, but rather confuses the reader about which side to choose. One of the important allusions to this point is made when Marlow, at the beginning of his journey, says:

The idleness of a passenger, my isolation amongst all these men with whom I had no point of contact, the oily and languid sea, the uniform somberness of the coast, seemed to keep me away from the truth of things, within the toil of a mournful and senseless delusion. P19

Marlow declares that he is kept away from 'the truth of things' by the external world that presents itself to him- the world that addresses the senses. In other words, the sensual perception of the external world prevents the individual from perceiving the truth, which is hidden beneath the surface. However, Marlow, commenting on the group of natives paddling a boat, declares: "They were a great comfort to look at. For a time I would feel I belonged still to a world of straight-forward facts"(P20). Marlow here attributes a positive feeling, that of comfort, when attending to the incidents of the surface, and it is only with a feeling of disappointment that this feeling of belonging to the "surface" 'would not last long'(P20).

Experiencing the world only with the senses is not possible- or rather, cannot be sustained for long. Marlow suggests that there is something in the truth that he needs to keep away, and that the surface reality represents a brief relief from the pain it causes. In the following passage, Marlow elaborates this point as follows:

I watched the sunken stones; I was learning to clap my teeth smartly before my heart flew out, when I shaved by a fluke some infernal sly old snag that would have ripped the life out of the tin-pot steamboat and drowned all the pilgrims; I had to keep a look-out for the signs of the dead wood we could cut up in the night for next day's steaming. When you have to attend to things of that sort, to the mere incidents of the surface, the reality- the reality, I tell you- fades. The inner truth is hidden- luckily, luckily. But I felt all the same; I felt often its mysterious stillness watching me at my monkey tricks, just as it watches you fellows performing on your respective tight-ropes for-what is it? Half-a-crown a tumble. P49

Marlow clearly declares that attending to the 'mere incidents of the surface', being a mere recipient of physical sensations coming from the external world, is a relief; the 'inner truth' is hidden, and it is good this way. We have the impression that Marlow struggles to keep his attention to the surface, but it is difficult for him to do so, as he is caught up by the unavoidable 'inner truth'. The events of the surface prevent the mind from thinking, and keep it concentrated on the physical impression it receives. However, it is constantly called to reflection, and driven inside, to look at the essence of things. Moreover, the closing lines of the quotation are very interesting, as they refer to a mysterious stillness that watches Marlow as well as the audience onboard the *Nellie*. For the critic Bernard J. Paris, this stillness is a representation of the cosmic order, where 'human activities' are set 'against the backdrop of a vast, uncaring, intelligible universe', and adds that Marlow's 'previous values, concern, and beliefs seem unreal, with no grounding in the larger universe; and

human activities seem futile and pointless'<sup>316</sup>. Indeed, as we have seen, the brooding stillness is not watching only Marlow- it is not a mere subjective impression he got on his journey in the Congo, but it watches also the listeners onboard the Nellie, and thus its perspective is enlarged till it reaches cosmic proportions. This is one aspect of the truth that Marlow seeks to deny by avoiding introspection: The futility of human actions and aspirations in a cold and indifferent universe.

Beyond the apparent pessimism, Conrad suggests through the struggle of Marlow to keep to the surface and ignore the truth that man is not a mere receiver of sensual information, and that he has a mind which compels him to reflect on his situation, on the meaning of his existence. Even if the truth is bitter, he suggests, man must face it in order to come up with solutions- and this is what Marlow has gone through. This strikes a rather positive note on the part of Conrad, because he revolts against the rational empiricism of his time, and calls for subjectivity. Conrad does not offer direct solutions to the problem posed, yet he affirms, in a heroic revolting gesture against the superficiality of the Aesthetic movement, that man is not a mere, sensual creature.

c) Sensual perception:

In the second part of the novel, Marlow declares that the "earth for us is a place to live in, where we must put up with sights, with sounds, with smells"(P71). Through Marlow, Conrad says that existence amounts to trying to cope with, to understand physical impressions transmitted to the mind through different sensual perceptions, a passage that places the novel within the Aesthetic movement of the time. Marlow recounts an event that occurred on his journey that refers to this process of putting up with different sensual perceptions:

When the sun rose there was a white fog, very warm and clammy, and more blinding than the night. It did not shift or drive; it was just there, standing all around you like something solid. P56

Marlow and his companions on the boat are caught in this blinding fog: They are unable to move because they cannot see anything. The senses seem to be useless and paralyzed; the sense that Conrad mentions as the target of his art, sight, is obscured. By paralyzing the sensual perception, Conrad suggests that the things he wants to show to the reader to see are not in the concrete, physical realm, but in the abstract realm, where reflection is called

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<sup>316</sup> Bloom, Harold. Ed. Op. Cit. p138-139

into exercise. Physical perceptions are not the main, reliable means for coping with the surrounding environment.

Moreover, as G. Peters puts it, the fog does more than merely obscure the scenery; in many ways, it actually clarifies certain issues for Marlow and his listeners: 'the fog in fact uncovers- rather than obscures- issues concerning Western civilization and Western world view'<sup>317</sup>, and human existence in general. How does he achieve that? He creates 'a microcosm of human existence'<sup>318</sup> on the boat, and isolates it from familiar surroundings- more specifically, from the facilities of human civilization, to test their inner fortitude- the test reveals, as we shall see, that the pilgrims succumb to fear and panic, and thus lack the 'inner strength' that Marlow mentions. Indeed, the pilgrims onboard the steamer are not only blinded, but deafened as well, as we notice an absolute silence surrounding them.

Silence is repeatedly mentioned by Marlow in his descriptions of the setting. For example, in part one he says:

We stopped, and the silence driven away by the stamping of our feet flowed back again from the recesses of the land. The great wall of vegetation, an exuberant and entangled mass of trunks, branches, leaves, bough, festoons, motionless in the moonlight, was like a rioting invasion of soundless life, a rolling wave of plants, piled up, crested, ready to topple over the creek, to sweep every little man of us out of his little existence. P43

We see here that silence is associated with the mysterious, unknown world the pilgrims find themselves in. Silence suggests solitude and a sense of extreme isolation, and highlights the alienation the pilgrims experience when cut off from the familiar world. Later, Marlow highlights the devastating effect it has on man: addressing himself to his audience onboard the Nellie, he asks:

You can't understand, how could you?- with solid pavement under your feet, surrounded by kind neighbours ready to cheer you or to fall on you, step in delicately between the butcher and the policeman, in the holy terror of scandal and gallows and lunatic asylums- how can you imagine what particular region of the first ages a man's untrammelled feet may take him into by the way of solitude-utter solitude without a policeman-by the way of silence-utter silence, where no warning voice of a kind neighbor can be heard whispering of public opinion? These little things make all the great difference. When they are gone you must fall back upon your innate strength, upon your own capacity for faithfulness. P70

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<sup>317</sup> Bloom, Harold. Ed. Op. Cit. p38

<sup>318</sup> Ibid.

We see here that Marlow presents silence as the test of inner fortitude, because the individual does not rely on external factors as guidance, but is asked to rely on his inner voice to deal with the challenges of the reality.

This silence is interrupted by a strange cry that seems to emanate from nowhere. One of the pilgrims stammers: "What is the meaning?", and to emphasize the dumb-fondness of the others, Marlow says: "Two others remained open-mouthed a whole minute, then darbed into the little cabin, to rush out incontinently and stand darting stared glances, with Winchesters at "ready" in their hands" (P57). Marlow shows that the pilgrims are completely lost and terrified, unable to cope with the unexpected, which is the ultimate test of inner fortitude. Conrad offers to the Westerners, on board the steam-boat, and on the Nellie, a different world which is not built on solid foundations, as J. G. Peters says:

[...]Marlow instead presents images of unexpectedness, absurdity, mystery, and chaos that serve to uncover shifting and relative foundation for their world view. [...] Image after image disorients Marlow and his listeners, forcing them to look at the possibility of a world of disorder and indifference[...].<sup>319</sup>

This world of indifference, mystery, chaos, and unexpectedness is presented as being hidden behind the veneer of civilization, which is supposed to be built on order and logic. Through canceling the sensual perception of the whites on the 'boats', which serve to keep them in touch with the ordered civilized world, Conrad reveals to them a mysterious, disordered world to denounce the superficiality and falsehood of civilization. It is not, however, to express a mere pessimistic message about the Western world, but it is a call for the individual to face the hidden reality with his own inner strength, and struggle to cope with the chaos and disorientation it presents.

Another instance where the senses are called into play is the attack the pilgrims go through from the natives hidden in the bush:

"I was looking down at the sounding-pole, and feeling much annoyed to see at each try a little more of it stick out of that river, when I saw my poleman give up on the business suddenly, and stretch himself flat on the deck, without even taking the trouble to haul his pole in. He kept hold on it though, and it trailed in the water. At the same time the fireman, whom I could also see below me, sat down abruptly before his furnace and ducked his head. I was amazed. Then I had to look at the river mighty quick, because there was a snag in the fairway. Sticks, little sticks, were flying about-- thick: they were whizzing before my nose, dropping below me, striking behind me against my pilot-house. All this time the river, the shore, the woods, were very quiet-- perfectly quiet. I could only

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<sup>319</sup> J. G. Peters in: Bloom, Harold. Ed. Op. Cit. p38

hear the heavy splashing thump of the stern-wheel and the patter of these things. We cleared the snag clumsily. Arrows, by Jove! We were being shot at! P64

This passage points out an important technique Conrad uses in order to reveal the gap between what the mind perceives through the senses and what it understands. Ian Watt argues that the impressionism of *Heart of Darkness* lies in its rendering of visual description, and its innovation of a technical narrative that is “the verbal equivalent of the impressionist painter’s attempt to render visual sensation directly”<sup>320</sup>- a technique that aims at ‘giving direct expression to the way in which the consciousness elicits meaning from its perceptions’<sup>321</sup>- In other words, this narrative technique reveals the interplay between perception and understanding, and Ian Watt adds, ‘as readers we witness every step by which the gap between the individual perception and its cause is belatedly closed within the consciousness of the protagonist’<sup>322</sup>- that’s why Watt names it ‘delayed decoding’. We clearly witness this process in the consciousness of Marlow: He first sees what is happening around him, without really giving it a moment of reflection, because he is busy attending to the events of the surface. It takes him a moment to realize that the sticks are, in fact, arrows, and that they are being attacked. It is only at this moment that he realizes that the “poleman” is killed.

Through this technique, Conrad suggests the disparity between sensual perception and reflection; besides, he emphasizes the shallowness of the former and the need for the latter to make out meaning from the surrounding external world. This technique, as Ian Watt puts it, foregrounds ‘the precarious nature of the process of interpretation’<sup>323</sup>. With this technique, Conrad joins the Impressionist movement of the late 80s, and consequently, aims ‘to transcribe the process of individual perception’<sup>324</sup>. However, he differentiates himself from the Impressionists of his time through his interest in ‘the inside as to the outside, to the meaning as to the appearance’<sup>325</sup>. What Conrad seeks to do is to make the individual use his senses, and transcend them to find out meaning through reflection and

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<sup>320</sup> Watt, Ian. Op. Cit. p176

<sup>321</sup> Ibid. p176

<sup>322</sup> Ibid.

<sup>323</sup> Ibid. p179

<sup>324</sup> Ibid.

<sup>325</sup> Ibid.

moral debate. We can refer to Conrad's own comments on the role of art to detect this interest:

To arrest, for the space of a breath, the hands busy about the work of the earth, and compel men entranced by the sight of distant goals to glance for a moment at the surrounding vision of form and colour, of sunshine and shadows; to make them pause for a look, for a sigh, for a smile- such is the aim, difficult and evanescent, and reserved only for a few to achieve. But sometimes, by the deserving and the fortunate, even that task is accomplished. And when it is accomplished- behold- all the truth of life is there: a moment of vision, a sigh, a smile- and the return to an eternal rest.<sup>326</sup>

Conrad states that the aim of the artist is to make the reader pause for a moment in front of a vision, and thus, albeit briefly, see 'all the truth of life'. The moment of sensual perception is transformed into a moment of reflection and realization of the meaning of life. Conrad insists on the importance of this moment of contemplation even if it is short-lived because of his awareness of the modern temper: The materialism and superficiality of the modern mind. Yet, he is enthusiastic over the possibility to arrest and make the individual think and realize, narrowing the gap between sensual perception and understanding.

### 3) Degeneration:

As we have seen in the introduction to this part, degeneration constitutes one of the major aspects which characterize the cultural atmosphere of the late 19th century. With its suggestion of deterioration and decline, it expresses the belief that culture has attained its peak, and that now it is falling back to a less developed, even primitive stage. *Heart of Darkness* articulates this modern spirit as it presents a tale that deals with 'atavism and decadence, at a time when these topics had been given currency [...] by Cesare Lombroso (the Criminologist) and Max Nordau (author of *Degeneration*), and by the controversies over the Aesthetic Movement'<sup>327</sup>. Indeed, the novel explores the fate of a white man cut off from the comfort and safety provided by the modern Western civilization, and faced with the different challenges of a wild environment. Edward Garnett comments on these issues:

[The novel] caught (infinite shades of deterioration in the white man's morale when he is freed from European restraint and planted down in the tropics to make trade profits out of black subject races. The masterly picture of the fantastic relations of civilization with the primitive barbarism of Africa is conveyed in a sustained narrative of the most somber hues. [...] and we feel the mental isolation of the degenerating unnerved whites everyday facing the Heart of Darkness which threatens their own creed and conceptions [...].<sup>328</sup>

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<sup>326</sup> Conrad, Joseph. *Notes on Life and Letters*. Op. Cit.

<sup>327</sup> Bloom, Harold. Op. Cit. p20

<sup>328</sup> Garnett, Edward. And David Garnet. Ed. *Conrad's Prefaces to his works*. New York: Haskell House Publishers LTD, 1937. PP13-14.

Conrad expresses through the tale the 'widespread interest in the political, moral, and psychological challenges afforded to Europeans by African colonization'<sup>329</sup>. Besides, the issue is given a more general dimension, as it transcends the boundaries of the context where it is presented, the evil of imperialism, to deal with human nature in general. In contrast to the notion of progress and improvement celebrated by Victorians, there was a marked fear of a return, a falling back, into a repressed, 'earlier' and 'primitive' state of mind<sup>330</sup>- a notion put forward by Freud who declared that human civilization is threatened by antagonistic psychic forces, and that its survival depends upon the repression of man's natural, instinctual drives. The question is, does Conrad present this 'degeneration' as the only, inescapable end of civilization, or does he afford other alternatives? We will try to bring forth answers to these interrogations through exploring the different angles Conrad uses to approach this subject.

a) The dream-like sensation:

Degeneration is expressed through the specific qualifications Marlow gives to his narrative. He mentions one of these qualities when he addresses his listeners onboard the Nellie saying:

"Do you see [Kurtz]? Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream- making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is of the very essence of dreams..." p39

Marlow here likens his experience in the Congo to a dream, and insists on the difficulty to describe a dream because of the different subjective sensations it provides. Later on, Marlow reminds the reader of the "dream-sensation that pervaded all [his] days at that time"(P59). Through this emphasis on the dream-sensation of Marlow, Conrad refers to the interest of his time in dreams; as we have seen, dreaming represents a relapse, 'a reversion to a primitive infantile type of psychosis'<sup>331</sup>. Dreams were regarded as a regression to a primitive state of being, as the mind gives vent to the subconscious, hence repressed, instinctual drives. In addition, as Ritchie Robertson puts it, 'in dreaming the dreamer regresses not only to his own childhood but to the childhood of the human race'<sup>332</sup>. Through

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<sup>329</sup> Bloom, Harold. Op. Cit. p20

<sup>330</sup> Adams, James Eli. Op. Cit. p378

<sup>331</sup> Marshall, Gail. Ed. Op. Cit. p25

<sup>332</sup> Collier, Peter. and Judy Davies. Ed. *Modernism and the European Unconscious*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990. P82

Marlow's dream-like sensation, Conrad announces the journey to be a reversal into the recesses of the human mind, and explores the repressed side of human psyche, which is guided by dark, wild, primitive forces. The journey thus, in itself, is a degeneration process.

b) The Wilderness:

Atavism is further suggested by Marlow when he refers to his journey as a return to an earlier period of time in the history of human nature:

"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 air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish. There was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine. The long stretches of the waterway ran on, deserted, into the gloom of overshadowed distances. On silvery sand-banks hippos and alligators sunned themselves side by side. The broadening waters flowed through a mob of wooded islands; you lost your way on that river as you would in a desert, and butted all day long against shoals, trying to find the channel, till you thought yourself bewitched and cut off for ever from everything you had known once--somewhere--far away--in another existence perhaps."P48

So, Marlow travels back to the beginning of the world dominated by a wild nature, which serves as a contrast to the modern, artificial and sophisticated modern world he left behind. This world is dominated by untamed vegetation and animals; It is not presented as a hospitable world that man would easily identify with- it is, on contrary, awe-inspiring- a feeling suggested by Marlow when he used the words "big" and "kings", and alienating, as it makes Marlow detached forever from the existence he had before. Moreover, it is a tenebrous world where the sunshine provides no joy- a world pervaded by darkness. Besides, Marlow provides us with other different accounts of the wilderness: it is 'something great and invincible, like evil or truth, waiting for the passing away of this fantastic invasion'(P31). From this description we infer that the wilderness is a presence that is given the capacity to think, since it waits *patiently*; still, Marlow is not able to definitely qualify the nature of the wild world: it is great and invincible, but hesitates between 'evil' and 'truth'. The mystery of the wilderness is further dwelt upon by Marlow as follows:

All this was great, expectant, mute [...]. I wondered whether the stillness on the face of the immensity looking at us [...] were meant as an appeal or as a menace. What were we who had strayed in here? Could we handle that dumb thing, or would it handle us? I felt how big, how confoundedly big, was that thing that couldn't talk, and perhaps was deaf as well. What was in there? P38

Marlow is confronted with a wild world which is great, invincible and threatening. Yet, he adds an aspect here that may prove to be significant: He wonders whether the immense

stillness is appealing or menacing. The fact that Marlow feels some kind of 'appeal' in the stillness, some kind of attraction, suggests that there is a faint trace of recognition within himself of the wild world he entered, which is nothing else but the representation, the embodiment of man's untamed, wild nature with which he can identify. Thus, man's wild nature is great, invincible, and menacing, because unexplored and untamed, and Marlow is on a process of degeneration as he starts identifying with the wild, primitive nature.

Moreover, Marlow adds that the stillness is interrupted by the drums he hears in the bush:

A great silence around and above. Perhaps on some quiet night the tremor of far-off drums, sinking, swelling, a tremor vast, faint; a sound weird, appealing, suggestive, and wild--and perhaps with as profound a meaning as the sound of bells in a Christian country. PP28-29

The different adjectives Marlow uses leads us to think that the drums stand for the natural impulses of man: They are described as attractive and suggestive; he feels attracted by them, and discovers that he can distinguish a meaning, although he cannot articulate it, since he discerns they are suggestive of something. This is another indication that Marlow is regressing into a more primitive state, and here, he even starts to hear his repressed wild natural drives echoed in the wilderness.

Moreover, Marlow tells us about Kurtz and the very special relationship the latter entertained with the wilderness:

And the lofty frontal bone of Mr. Kurtz! They say the hair goes on growing sometimes, but this-- ah--specimen, was impressively bald. The wilderness had patted him on the head, and, behold, it was like a ball-- an ivory ball; it had caressed him, and--lo!--he had withered; it had taken him, loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation. He was its spoiled and pampered favourite.P69

We see here that Marlow uses stronger and more personifying words to refer to the silent wilderness. For Kurtz, the wilderness is not just a brooding presence, as it is for Marlow, but has fused with his mind and body, mingled with his mental and physical being. This physical transformation seems to come more from the inside- in other words, it resembles an awakening of another being, another personality, that was in a sleeping, half-present state, and which is now in control. The degeneration Kurtz goes through is thus effected through the awakening of his instinctive drives- and this degeneration proves to be mental as well as physical. Mental, because of the greed, insatiability and boundless violence Kurtz falls into, and physical, because he has grown bald and emaciated. This is a reference to the theory of Lombroso who believed that there are 'stigmata', outward physical manifestations of the

'atavistic process whereby the criminal or insane reverted to primitive forms'<sup>333</sup>; physically, Kurtz seems to have gone through the same process.

Moreover, Marlow adds that the wilderness "had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took council with this great solitude- and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating"(P83). We wonder what the wilderness whispered to Kurtz. Similarly to Lord Henry Wotton who makes Dorian Gray discover 'things about himself', it is here the wilderness, solitude and the awakening of brutal instincts that make the whisper audible and fascinating for Kurtz. James Eli Adams comments that the wilderness revealed to Kurtz things about himself:

'Much as Lord Henry had aroused Dorian Gray- but here the initiation into forbidden experience signals a thoroughgoing atavism, exposing the ravaging aggression, one more heart of darkness, at the core of human experience generally'<sup>334</sup>.

The wilderness whispered to Kurtz's atavism, something he had in his keeping, and that needed just to be awakened. Conrad suggests that in every individual there is a dark, repressed side, and that it needs to be known in order to be kept in check. Kurtz fatally yields to it, because he was in utter solitude and silence- he was away from the external checks of a well-ordered society and left on his own. On one hand, Conrad suggests that individual alienation is dangerous, and that man needs to keep within the bonds of human society to escape the terrible degeneration; on the other hand, he affirms that the individual has to find out his inner strength in order to fight the dark inner impulses.

#### c) Conscience Vs Primitivism:

Interest in primitivism has grown up from the artificiality and oppressing demands of the modern, capitalist society, and betrays the modern man's longing for a simpler and freer life. Freud explains that technological development and progress have not made modern man happy, because they have repressed his instinctive nature. The life of the primitive, allowed to indulge freely his natural drives, is idealized and looked forward to as an escape from a repressing, artificial modern culture. Cedric Watts argues that 'in every era, it seems, people have intermittently yearned for a release from the burdens of consciousness; in all civilizations, there has been some degree of nostalgia for the bygone simplicity of the imagined Golden Age'<sup>335</sup>. This Golden Age is the idealized version of primitive culture.

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<sup>333</sup> Marshall, Gail. Ed. Op. Cit. p14

<sup>334</sup> Adams, James Eli. Op. Cit. p426

<sup>335</sup> Watt, Cedric. Op. Cit. P74

Moreover, Cedric Watts argues that this yearning is particularly marked in the period between the middle and the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, where scientific and technological advances shattered 'faith in God and in a benevolent universe'<sup>336</sup>. Simplicity and freedom equate, in the modern mind, with a life free from oppression and the demands of conscience, and the consequent indulging of the senses, hence, primitivism.

Conrad himself has an ambivalent attitude towards conscience and the role it plays in the life of the individual. In a letter to C. Graham, a response to the latter's complaint about the ignorance of Singleton, the single-minded character of *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, which is very well expressed through his name, Conrad declares:

You say: 'Singleton with an education'... But first of all- what education? If it is the knowledge how to live my man essentially possessed it. He was in perfect accord with his life. If by education you mean scientific knowledge then the question arises- what knowledge, how much of it- in what direction? Is it to stop a plane trigonometry or at conic section? Or is he to study Platonism or Pyrrhonism or the philosophy of the gentle Emerson? Or do you mean the kind of knowledge which would enable him to scheme, and lie, and intrigue his way to the forefront of a crowd no better than himself? Would you seriously, of malice prepense cultivate in that unconscious man the power to think. Then he would become conscious- and much smaller- and very unhappy. Now he is simple and great like an elemental force. Nothing can touch him but the curse of decay- the eternal decree that will extinguish the sun, the stars one by one, and in another instant shall spread a frozen darkness over the whole universe. Nothing else can touch him- he does not think. Would you seriously wish to tell such a man: 'Know thyself'. Understand that thou art nothing, less than a shadow, more insignificant than a drop of water in the ocean, more fleeting than the illusion of a dream. Would you?<sup>337</sup>

We notice that Conrad vehemently responds to Graham's remark about educating Singleton, as he clearly cries out that the life of the ignorant, conscience-free primitive, is better than that of a conscious, knowledgeable, cultivated man. In another letter to Graham, Conrad declares:

Systems could be built, and rules could be made- if we could only get rid of consciousness. What makes mankind tragic is not that they are the victims of nature, it is that they are conscious of it. To be part of the animal kingdom under the conditions of this earth is very well- but as soon as you know of your slavery the pain, the anger, the strife- the tragedy begins.<sup>338</sup>

Conrad affirms here that man belongs to the animal kingdom on one hand, but is alienated from it on the other hand, because while there is something in him which supposedly elevates him above the animals, it makes his tragedy as well: the ability to think.

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<sup>336</sup> Ibid.

<sup>337</sup> Davies, Laurence. Ed. *The Selected Letters of Joseph Conrad*. UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983. P80

<sup>338</sup> Ibid. P93

Conscience, Conrad argues, makes the tragedy of man- it makes him suffer because it makes him aware of the insignificance and nothingness of existence. Thus, Primitivism seems to be the only escape as far as it is equated with the absence of conscience. The primitive man is happier because he has not cultivated the thinking ability, but instead, developed a physical consciousness- his senses constitute the main source of guidance in his life. Apparently, Conrad calls for immorality through the rejection of conscience, which entails the absence of moral judgment, and the free indulgence of the senses; yet, this is not the message we get in the novel.

Conrad explores this issue in the novel through the elaboration of the concept of hollowness. Cedric Watts argues that Freudian theory of conflict in human nature is inspired from Darwinism which foregrounds the animal nature of man; hence, Freud logically infers that in every man there is an internal conflict between 'the anarchic drives from the id and the controlling endeavours of the more prudent and civilized ego'<sup>339</sup>. However, in *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad demonstrates the non-existence of such a conflict through the different characters we encounter, who are essentially presented as being hollow; In fact, hollowness refers to the mindlessness he called for in his letters. Among the characters Marlow meets on his journey is the manager whom he represents as follows:

He originated nothing, he could keep the routine going--that's all. But he was great. He was great by this little thing that it was impossible to tell what could control such a man. He never gave that secret away. Perhaps there was nothing within him. Such a suspicion made one pause--for out there were no external checks. Once when various tropical diseases had laid low almost every 'agent' in the station, he was heard to say, 'Men who come out here should have no entrails.' He sealed the utterance with that smile of his, as though it had been a door opening into a darkness he had in his keeping.P31

Marlow presents the manager as being 'great' because he was able to survive in a hostile tropical environment, and Marlow suggests that he did so because there was nothing within him- he survived because he was hollow. Later on, Marlow confirms this: "[...]it seemed to me that if I tried I could poke my forefinger through him, and would find nothing inside but a little loose dirt, maybe"(P37). Hollowness refers thus to the complete absence of inner conflict, the absence of conscience, and thus primitivism. However, the manager does not inspire the happiness such mindlessness would raise as Conrad suggested about Singleton; instead, the manager inspires 'uneasiness':

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<sup>339</sup> Watts, Cedric. Op. Cit. p89

He was a common trader, from his youth up employed in these parts--nothing more. He was obeyed, yet he inspired neither love nor fear, nor even respect. He inspired uneasiness. That was it! Uneasiness. Not a definite mistrust--just uneasiness--nothing more. You have no idea how effective such a . . . a . . . faculty can be. He had no genius for organizing, for initiative, or for order even. That was evident in such things as the deplorable state of the station. He had no learning, and no intelligence. P31

The fact that the manager has no 'learning' and no 'intelligence', and that he could neither take initiatives nor give orders suggests his inability to think; the manager survives in the hostile wilderness because he is not conscious of it.

However, this kind of survival is not presented by Conrad as the alternative that modern man would take in order to avoid suffering. The other character Marlow encounters is the one around whom the whole narrative turns:

But the wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude--and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating. It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core.P83

Marlow says that the wilderness, by way of solitude, whispered to Kurtz things about himself, which mainly turn around atavism. This proved to be irresistibly fascinating for Kurtz because he was "hollow at the core". Kurtz represents the epitome of the hollow man--free from inner conflict, because the atavism that the wilderness whispered to him was countered by no real, substantial consciousness, or ability to think. The solitude Kurtz went through awakened the repressed existing natural drives, and there was no opposing force within him to counter them. Here again, we do not have the impression of liberation or happiness that supposedly results from the rejection of conscience and the yielding to the senses. On the contrary, we are confronted with a man who has faced his repressed instinctual impulses, and is doomed to suffering, sickness, and death. Marlow says: "Being alone in the wilderness, [his soul] had looked within itself, and, by heavens! I tell you, it had gone mad"(P95). Marlow clearly says that Kurtz has grown mad because he has indulged his instinctual drives; Kurtz has opened the gates for the dark forces within him, and does not seem able to control himself anymore.

Yet, despite the hollowness that Marlow attributes to Kurtz, the latter seems to go through an inner struggle just before his death as he cries at the wilderness: "Oh, but I will wring your heart yet!"(P98). The wilderness Kurtz addresses is invisible to Marlow, because it stands for the repressed wild nature inside Kurtz against which he seems to struggle, but in

vain. We wonder how a man who has completely yielded to his animal nature finally comes to revolt against it like this? Clearly, Kurtz's conscience has not been completely silenced, as it still torments him and causes him much suffering. Through Kurtz, Conrad suggests that the individual can never reverse to complete animalism, because he is naturally endowed with a conscience, which is the absolute moral guide in life. Moreover, Kurtz has attained the point of no return- he is not permitted to leave the wilderness, literally and figuratively speaking. Kurtz cannot leave the wilderness, the inner dark repressed nature, in order to join again the world of the ego, and of civilization; in other words, he cannot re-emerge as a member of society- which suggests that he has undergone a complete degeneration which disables him from recovering a normal life among fellow humans. Yet, his impact remains strong, and haunts Marlow's memory:

I thought his memory was like the other memories of the dead that accumulate in every man's life--a vague impress on the brain of shadows that had fallen on it in their swift and final passage; but before the high and ponderous door, between the tall houses of a street as still and decorous as a well-kept alley in a cemetery, I had a vision of him on the stretcher, opening his mouth voraciously, as if to devour all the earth with all its mankind. He lived then before me; he lived as much as he had ever lived--a shadow insatiable of splendid appearances, of frightful realities; a shadow darker than the shadow of the night, and draped nobly in the folds of a gorgeous eloquence. The vision seemed to enter the house with me--the stretcher, the phantom-bearers, the wild crowd of obedient worshippers, the gloom of the forests, the glitter of the reach between the murky bends, the beat of the drum, regular and muffled like the beating of a heart--the heart of a conquering darkness. P105

Marlow reveals to us the disturbing discovery he makes about Kurtz: Being dead, he is not like the other dead men, who survive in the memory of the living just like shadows; Marlow has a 'living' vision of Kurtz as a monster that would devour anything on its passage- an insatiable shadow. The animal drives awakened in the wilderness have proved to be uncontrollable in life and even beyond. The fact that Marlow sees Kurtz's shadow in the modern world suggests the presence of a threat to that world- the threat of man's animal nature which haunts human civilization. The free gratification of natural instinctive passions, without any reference to a code of behavior, does not lead to satiety, but on the contrary, to a greater hunger- the ferocious aspect of Kurtz even after his death is an indication of this. In addition, the indulgence of the senses starts a process of degeneration that even leads to denaturalization, since Kurtz is referred to as a mere monster.

Through the manager and Kurtz, Conrad negates the theory about consciousness and primitivism he calls for in his letters. Primitivism is not, as Conrad imagines, or rather idealizes, the process by which man gets rid of the burdens of consciousness, and attains

self-fulfillment and happiness. The absence of inner conflict, which suggests the absence of consciousness, is epitomized in the concept of the hollow man: In the case of the manager, it makes of him a being who inspires nothing but 'uneasiness'; indeed, it enables him to survive in the surrounding chaos, but it is not the kind of survival Conrad has in mind when he longs for a conscience-free mind, unaware of an indifferent and cold world. In the case of Kurtz, when it is taken to its extreme, hollowness transforms man into an insatiable, voracious monster. In both cases, the absence of conscience leads to dehumanization.

#### 4) Alternatives?

The moral ambivalence the novel impresses upon the readers emanates from the fact that Conrad does not provide clear solutions to the moral problems he poses- a characteristic which aligns the novel with the modernist works, as it articulates the loss of faith and growing materialism of modern life. However, contrary to the apparent immorality the novel impresses on the readers, Conrad indirectly offers alternatives to the moral issues he raises; it is in Marlow and his 'inconclusive tales' where we must seek for hints for such solutions. Indeed, Marlow plays an important role in relation to Conrad, as he is the 'unveiling agent' through which he can express himself. Ian Watt argues that Conrad uses Marlow as 'the voice of retrospection, and that he can thus combine 'old and new narrative methods':

Marlow's memories of his lonely experiences in the Congo, and his sense of the impossibility of fully communicating their meaning, would in themselves assign *Heart of Darkness* to the literature of modernist solipsism; but the fact that Marlow, like Conrad, is speaking to a particular audience makes all the difference; it enacts the process whereby the solitary individual discovers a way out into the world of others. One can surmise that Conrad found the narrative posture of moral and social neutrality intolerable; and so under cover of Marlow's probing of the meaning of the past, Conrad smuggles in the ancient privilege of the narrator by the backdoor, and surreptitiously reclaims some of the omniscient author's ancient rights to the direct expression of the wisdom of hindsight.<sup>340</sup>

This constitutes another instance of Conrad's resistance to the demands of the modern world, and attempt to restore, despite the difficulties, some of the old conventions. Even if Marlow is atypical, he is a story teller who imparts to his listeners the memories of the past, and shares with them the knowledge he gained from his journey. Moreover, Conrad uses Marlow to express his deep concern with morality, and the attempt to find ways out from the reigning faithlessness and pessimism.

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<sup>340</sup> Watt, Ian. Op. Cit. p212

Ian Watt argues that Conrad and Freud shared many points in common: both faced the modern loss of faith, and experienced the fear of man's hidden, unconscious drives which oppose human civilization. Besides, both 'shared much the same vision of how they should direct their moral energies':

They saw that culture was insecurely based on repression and restraint, and yet what seemed most worth their effort was to promote a greater understanding of man's destructive tendencies, and at the same time support the modest countertruths on which civilization depends. As against the more absolute negations of Rimbaud and Nietzsche, or the equally absolute transcendental affirmations of Dostoevsky or Yeats, both Freud and Conrad defend a practical social ethic based on their fairly similar reformulations of the Victorian trinity of work, duty, and restraint.<sup>341</sup>

Indeed, here lies the moral alternatives Conrad proposes through Marlow: work and restraint. We shall begin exploring the two first points, and then focus on the quest dimension of Marlow's journey, and the kind of knowledge he brings back to civilization.

a) Work

In part one, after his arrival in the central station and his bewilderment at the absurdity of the surrounding he finds himself in, Marlow says: "I went to work the next day, turning, so to speak, my back on that station. In that way only it seemed to me I could keep my hold on the redeeming facts of life" (P33). Marlow presents work as an escape from the station, and the sham Western ideals it represents. Marlow affirms that work enables him to keep his hold on the redeeming, beautiful and saving facts of life. This might be taken as an invitation on the part of Marlow, and hence Conrad, to concentrate on the events of the 'surface', and deny the essence-as we have already discussed. However, a close look at the diction used in this passage suggests something else: Marlow does not present work as a constant 'relief' from the inner truth, but only as a temporary one. Indeed, we clearly see that work did not prevent him from reflection and questioning; in fact, Marlow adds a comment that supports this point: "Still, one must look about sometimes" and "I asked myself what it all meant". We notice that Marlow uses the word 'sometimes' twice, suggesting that introspection is inevitable, and even points out its necessity through using the word 'must'. Marlow does not call for the complete reliance on the world of the surface, and the abandonment of what lies inside- he in fact proposes a balance between the two.

In another passage, Marlow refers again to work by saying:

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<sup>341</sup> Ibid. p167

It was a great comfort to turn from that chap to my influential friend, the battered, twisted, ruined, tin-pot steamboat. I clambered on board. She rang under my feet like an empty Huntley & Palmer biscuit-tin kicked along a gutter; she was nothing so solid in make, and rather less pretty in shape, but I had expended enough hard work on her to make me love her. No influential friend would have served me better. She had given me a chance to come out a bit--to find out what I could do. No, I don't like work. I had rather laze about and think of all the fine things that can be done. I don't like work--no man does--but I like what is in the work-- the chance to find yourself. Your own reality--for yourself, not for others--what no other man can ever know. They can only see the mere show, and never can tell what it really means. P41

Once again, Marlow escapes from the ugly reality that surrounds him to find comfort in the world of the surface represented here through work. The relief Marlow finds in work is not physical, but spiritual, since he recognizes the physical efforts work requires, and that no man likes. He personifies the steam-boat, and even refers to it as 'an influential friend'. Marlow does not only define the boat as a life-companion with whom he can share many things, and which, most importantly, has the ability to influence him in a positive manner. According to Marlow, work leads the individual to find his own reality. This points out that Marlow gives work a spiritual dimension- it is not limited to the mere events of the surface, as it leads man to discover himself- a discovery that makes man able to face the hardships of a shattering modern reality.

Moreover, Marlow insists on the fact that the individual makes this discovery "not for others- what no other man can ever know". This affirmation expresses Conrad's influence by Solipsism that pervaded the fin-de-siècle period. In the words of Cedric Watts, Solipsism is 'the belief that the individual self constitutes the sole reality. On the one hand, each person is the puppet of the universe and its causal laws; on the other, each person is a flame of awareness glowing in the lists of a dark flux of the unknown'<sup>342</sup>. Contrary to Empiricism, Solipsism is the awareness of one's existence and of nothing beyond, and involves the distrust of the senses which link the individual with the outer, concrete world. We have seen cases where Conrad refers to Solipsism, especially when he imparts the narrative a highly subjective dream-like quality. However, here, Conrad seems to contradict himself: the subjective reality of the individual, that which no other individual can know, is discovered not through introspection, but through contact with the solid reality that work represents. Thus, Conrad's 'janiformity' implies the fact that he adheres to some aspects of Solipsism, and that he refutes others. Through pointing out the importance of work and the hold it

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<sup>342</sup> Watts, Cedric. Op. Cit. p79

keeps on the 'redeeming facts of life', Conrad warns against the dangers of an exaggerated subjectivity, and the moral loss it leads to; Kurtz yields easily to his animal drives because his soul, by way of solitude, has looked into itself and has gone astray, losing contact with the outside world.

In another passage Marlow, addressing his audience on the *Nellie*, presents work as insignificant, purposeless, 'monkey tricks'; however, he insists on the importance of the 'tricks' being well done':

You do your tricks very well. And I didn't do badly either, since I managed not to sink that steamboat on my first trip. It's a wonder to me yet. Imagine a blindfolded man set to drive a van over a bad road. I sweated and shivered over that business considerably, I can tell you. After all, for a seaman, to scrape the bottom of the thing that's supposed to float all the time under his care is the unpardonable sin. No one may know of it, but you never forget the thump--eh? A blow on the very heart. You remember it, you dream of it, you wake up at night and think of it--years after--and go hot and cold all over.<sup>P49</sup>

Marlow affirms that if the tricks are not well done, it causes pain and suffering for the individual, even if no one else knows about it; Why? Because it might reveal things about oneself which may prove disagreeable to live with, such as carelessness, selfishness, or, broadly speaking, lack of a sense of responsibility towards oneself and towards the others--which contradicts the basic principle of work that entails care for other human beings as is the case of Marlow and the pilgrims he has onboard. Thus, Marlow seems to associate failure in work with lack of social responsibility, which constitutes one of the most important pillars of morality. The suffering such failure causes to the individual reveals his moral commitment towards others, and the presence of a terrible conscience which equates 'good work' with moral comfort, and 'bad work' with suffering. Thus, moral responsibility for the well being of others is acted out in the external world, and represents, as Marlow says, one of 'the redeeming facts of life'.

Through work, Marlow articulates an ethical code which responds to the demands of a modern society which has grown tired of theoretical moral precepts. As we have seen, work involves a direct link with the outer, concrete environment, offering a shelter from the disturbing inner truth. Moreover, work enables the individual to work out his ethical judgment, as it entails responsibility towards others. In addition, Conrad makes it clear that man is essentially a moral creature regarding the suffering he goes through when he fails to realize a good work which involves the moral drive of care towards others, and has a conscience which determines good and bad behavior. Marlow, as Ian Watt puts it,

'immunizes himself against both barbarism and the ugliness of progress through work'<sup>343</sup>; in other words, work saves him from the dark, inner impulses, and from the ugly modern world represented through the pilgrims.

#### b) Restraint

In the passage where Marlow speaks about the cannibals onboard the steam-boat, he wonders at their restraint from jumping on the pilgrims, who represent for them fresh food:

Why in the name of all the gnawing devils of hunger they didn't go for us--they were thirty to five--and have a good tuck-in for once, amazes me now when I think of it. They were big powerful men, with not much capacity to weigh the consequences, with courage, with strength, even yet, though their skins were no longer glossy and their muscles no longer hard. And I saw that something restraining, one of those human secrets that baffle probability, had come into play there.[...] 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 honour? No fear can stand up to hunger, no patience can wear it out, disgust simply does not exist where hunger is; and as to superstition, beliefs, and what you may call principles, they are less than chaff in a breeze. Don't you know the devilry of lingering starvation, its exasperating torment, its black thoughts, its sombre and brooding ferocity? Well, I do. It takes a man all his inborn strength to fight hunger properly. It's really easier to face bereavement, dishonour, and the perdition of one's soul--than this kind of prolonged hunger. Sad, but true. And these chaps, too, had no earthly reason for any kind of scruple. Restraint! I would just as soon have expected restraint from a hyena prowling amongst the corpses of a battlefield. But there was the fact facing me--the fact dazzling, to be seen, like the foam on the depths of the sea, like a ripple on an unfathomable enigma[...]. P59-60

Marlow is amazed at the fact that the cannibals, extremely hungry, courageous, strong and careless about ethics, have not attacked them; indeed, Marlow points out that they are "deprived of the capacity to weigh the consequences"- which makes of them savages, who are more akin to the animal world than to the human one. Yet, Marlow sees that there is something restraining which prevents them from eating the pilgrims, and which Marlow presents as one of those "human secrets that baffles probability" (P59). Then, Marlow goes on explaining that this restraining power has nothing to do with any kind of abstract notion, such as superstition, patience or fear, and presents that affair as an enigma for which he has not found the solution. However, the reflections Marlow provides about restraint allows the reader to gather the pieces and make out a picture: It is clear that restraint is a feature which is known, or perhaps just forgotten by the civilized man, and that it has survived in the primitives, because they still need it in the wilderness. Ian Watt refers to this point, presenting restraint as 'tangentially related to the atavism-civilization duality because it is a

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<sup>343</sup> Watt, Ian. Op. Cit. p226

duality which is not usually needed in modern society where all necessary sanctions on conduct are supplied externally<sup>344</sup>. In other words, the reliance of civilized man on the 'external checks' in his conduct has made him forget this aspect of his nature, which constitutes his "inborn strength", and indeed, this is what Kurtz, according to Marlow lacks: Kurtz is a slave to every natural, instinctual impulses once he finds himself alone in the wilderness.

When Marlow reflects on Kurtz's lack of restraint when he sees the cut human heads on the poles surrounding his house:

[...]I want you clearly to understand that there was nothing exactly profitable in these heads being there. They only showed that Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts, that there was something wanting in him-- some small matter which, when the pressing need arose, could not be found under his magnificent eloquence.P83

Marlow draws a contrast between the apparent surface eloquence of Kurtz and the modern world he represents, and the void inside, which is translated here in terms of lack of restraint. Kurtz lacks the inborn strength to fend off the moral dangers of the wilderness.

Restraint is another instance where Marlow does not present us with an abstract moral code to follow, but affirms that we have to look inside our own nature and retrieve the repressed natural power. Michael Levenson explains this point as follows:

[Marlow] need not struggle any longer to apply transcendent ethical concepts to refractory experience; now he can locate moral value *within* individual experience. A notion such as restraint suggests the possibility of a natural basis for ethics, a non-moral ground for morality [...].<sup>345</sup>

The alternative to the lost moral principles of the civilized world has to be sought inside. C.

G. Jung ponders on this point in the following quotation:

The problem still remains: how to overcome or escape our anxiety, bad conscience, guilt, compulsion, unconsciousness, and instinctuality. If we cannot do this from the bright, idealistic side, then perhaps we shall have better luck by approaching the problem from the dark, biological side.<sup>346</sup>

Jung is aware that the modern world has lost, irrevocably, its faith in abstract rules of conduct, represented either through general ethics or religion; yet, he realizes that modern man has not got rid of his moral nature, which expresses itself through 'guilt', and declares that the solution is not to be found in idealistic moral precepts, but is to be sought inward:

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<sup>344</sup> Watt, Ian. Op. Cit. p227

<sup>345</sup> Levenson, Michael. Op. Cit. P54

<sup>346</sup> Jung, C. G. *Memories, Dreams and Reflections*. Trans. and edited by Jaffé, Aniela. ED. Winston, Richard. and Clara Winston. London: Fontana Press, 1995. P175

the biological side. Our human nature is devalued in a materialistic modern world, and Conrad makes us look into it to exploit it, and combat the modern moral decadence. He thus affirms that we are naturally moral beings, endowed with a natural quality, restraint, which enables us to affront a tempting modern world.

### c) The Quest

Marlow's journey to the Congo is attributed a mythical dimension whose basic structure corresponds to the conventional story of a hero who, unsatisfied with his present situation, and elevated above common people either with physical strength or a heightened moral awareness, is summoned to embark on a journey which, through different obstacles and challenges, is given a reward by the end: Eternal life, unfathomable treasures, and a final reconciliation and re-adaptation with the society he left. Despite the fact that Marlow's journey follows the stages of the mythical quest, he is introduced to us as being atypical. The descriptions Marlow provided about the city before the journey is significant; he depicts a "narrow and deserted street in deep shadow, high houses, innumerable windows with Venetian blinds, a dead silence". Then, Marlow adds that the city resembles "a whited sepulcher"(P14). The words used in this passage depict a death-like atmosphere: Shadow, dead, silence, sepulcher. D. Erdinast-Vulcan attributes the morbidity and gloom of this description of the city to Marlow's own 'state of ennui, a spiritual coma', and affirms that it expresses 'the cultural pessimism that generated the notion of the decline of the West'<sup>347</sup>. Marlow's journey is a highly subjective one, as we see the events only through his own eyes; hence, the description of the death-like city is in fact a reflection of his own ennui and dissatisfaction with the modern world which, through stasis and coma, generated the 'intellectual unease of the fin-de-siècle'<sup>348</sup>. Marlow's ennui points out his awareness of the cultural decline of the West- which makes him feel different. This awareness urges him to leave on his quest for the 'lost vitality, the essential wholeness man has lost in the course of the material progress'<sup>349</sup>. In other words, Marlow is in search of solutions, alternatives for the stand-still position the modern world has reached, especially in the realm of the inner world. Marlow declares that "he could not shake off the idea" of leaving, and felt that he "must get there by hook or by crook" (P12). Even if unable to explain it himself, Marlow

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<sup>347</sup> Erdinast-Vulcan, Daphna. Op. Cit. p92

<sup>348</sup> Ibid.

<sup>349</sup> Ibid

feels an irresistible urge to leave and look for knowledge or spiritual wholeness lost in the modern world. So, the quest he embarks on is more psychological than physical: Marlow does go to the Congo, but the challenges he is going to face and the change he is about to encounter concern the inner world. This can be summed up in the ominous words spoken by the doctor that Marlow sees before he leaves: “the changes take place inside” (P7).

In the following passage, Marlow clearly imparts to his journey the dimension of a quest:

Odd thing that I, who used to clear out for any part of the world at twenty-four hours' notice, with less thought than most men give to the crossing of a street, had a moment--I won't say of hesitation, but of startled pause, before this commonplace affair. The best way I can explain it to you is by saying that, for a second or two, I felt as though, instead of going to the centre of a continent, I were about to set off for the centre of the earth.P18

Marlow makes it clear that this specific journey he embarks on is not a common one; he has a moment of pause where he realizes its importance, which is moved from the subjective individual realm to broader perspectives: The centre is a reference to depth or spirituality, whereas the earth is an affirmation that the quest has a universal, human dimension.

Moreover, Marlow discovers the object of his quest; indeed, the different puzzling accounts he hears about Kurtz: An emissary of light, pity, and progress- the man equipped with moral ideals, and the one who has gathered the most important amount of ivory; these accounts raise the interest of Marlow, who, in need to find a direction to his “weary pilgrimage” in “darkness”, hopes to find in Kurtz, as Erdinast-Vulcan argues, the object of his quest<sup>350</sup>.

Towards the end of part two, Marlow gives a hint to the kind of interest Kurtz raises in him:

I wasn't very interested in him. No. Still, I was curious to see whether this man, who had come out equipped with moral ideas of some sort, would climb to the top after all and how he would set about his work when there.P44

Marlow is interested in the experience of Kurtz because it represents a test of the moral ideas promulgated by the Western culture he represents, and wonders whether these ideals would be of any help for Kurtz to accomplish his work and survive in the wilderness- Marlow's interest in Kurtz, thus, has a moral import, and thus, the knowledge he came to seek is in the moral realm.

This interest is heightened and broadened until it is given the dimension of fate or destiny.

Marlow discovers this when he is told that Kurtz might be dead: “I couldn't have felt more of lonely desolation somehow, had I been robbed of a belief or had missed my destiny in

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<sup>350</sup> Erdinast-Vulcan, Daphna. Op. Cit. p98

life..."(P68). Marlow is surprised at the extreme disappointment he feels at this moment, which in fact, depicts a moment of realization that all his journey has the sole purpose of talking with Kurtz, or more precisely, listening to Kurtz. Marlow believes that Kurtz, and the experience he went through, is the one to give him the knowledge he looks for. Finally, Marlow's "destiny" is realized when he meets him, and a strong connection is established between the two. Marlow says: "This initiated wraith from the back of Nowhere honoured me with its amazing confidence before it vanished altogether"(P68). Yet, Kurtz raises more doubts and questions than he gives answers. The first puzzle Marlow confronts is the origin of Kurtz. On one hand, he says:

The original Kurtz had been educated partly in England, and--as he was good enough to say himself--his sympathies were in the right place. His mother was half-English, his father was half-French. All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz [...].P71

Clearly, Marlow presents Kurtz as the product of European civilization, and its representative. On the other hand, he says that, as we have already cited, he comes from "Nowhere". Marlow suggests that Kurtz belongs to nowhere now because he has already been "initiated"- Kurtz's experience in the wilderness has cut off every connection with the world he came from. This is confirmed in the following passage:

You should have heard him say, 'My ivory'. Oh, yes, I heard him. 'My Intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my--' everything belonged to him. It made me hold my breath in expectation of hearing the wilderness burst into a prodigious peal of laughter that would shake the fixed stars in their places. Everything belonged to him-- but that was a trifle. The thing was to know what he belonged to, how many powers of darkness claimed him for their own. That was the reflection that made you creepy all over. It was impossible--it was not good for one either--trying to imagine. He had taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land-- I mean literally.P70

By way of solitude, by way of silence, Kurtz detached himself completely from his origins, and is now in the procession of the powers of darkness he yields to in the jungle- which are the natural, instinctual drives that lurk in the darkness he keeps in his being.

The report he writes about the "Suppression of Savage Customs" expresses very well this transformation from "the original" Kurtz to the "initiated wraith". At first, Marlow is amazed at the eloquence of the report, where Kurtz mentions the ability of the White to "exert a power for good practically unbounded" (P72). Marlow says about the report that it "gave me the notion of an exotic Immensity ruled by an august Benevolence. It made me tingle with enthusiasm"(P72). The report shows the idealistic man who has come out to Africa equipped with moral ideals, and which raised the interest of Marlow. Kurtz expresses

through the report his belief in the humanitarian aspect of the European conquest of Africa- the belief in the White's mission to bring there the light of civilization, and make of the 'savages' better people. However, Marlow suggests the superficiality and hollowness of these words when he says that the report is "too high-strung"- too beautiful and idealistic to be true; Marlow reminds us that Kurtz wrote the report "before his -let us say- nerves went wrong, and caused him to preside at certain midnight dances ending with unspeakable rites"(P71). The transformation of Kurtz is expressed in the postscript he adds at the end of the report, and about which he seems to forget: "Exterminate all the brutes" (P72)- these are the words of the "initiated wraith" who rejects all the ideals he used to hold and defend. The passage where Marlow depicts the episode when he discovers that Kurtz has left his couch to run through the jungle, and where he has to follow him to bring him back, is charged with significant images. Here, Marlow presents Kurtz as "a shadow", a "wandering and tormented thing"(P94). Kurtz is presented as a man who suffers, not only physically, but psychologically as well. He has become a shadow, in the sense that he is not himself any more, and has lost any kind of direction or purpose in life. He is tormented, which suggests that his conscience is still alive, and that it torments him for the sinful life he's laid. Moreover, Marlow tells us that he, himself, fought against the powers that have seized Kurtz:

I tried to break the spell--the heavy, mute spell of the wilderness-- that seemed to draw him to its pitiless breast by the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts, by the memory of gratified and monstrous passions. This alone, I was convinced, had driven him out to the edge of the forest, to the bush, towards the gleam of fires, the throb of drums, the drone of weird incantations; this alone had beguiled his unlawful soul beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations. PP94-95

Marlow is aware of the force of the 'awakened' forgotten instincts and the danger they represent, because they transform a man to a beast. Kurt's soul is subject to no law, and has gone beyond the limits of "permitted aspirations". Marlow adds:

And, don't you see, the terror of the position was not in being knocked on the head-- though I had a very lively sense of that danger, too--but in this, that I had to deal with a being to whom I could not appeal in the name of anything high or low. I had, even like the niggers, to invoke him--himself--his own exalted and incredible degradation. There was nothing either above or below him, and I knew it. He had kicked himself loose of the earth. Confound the man! he had kicked the very earth to pieces. P95

The danger Marlow feels at this very moment is not merely physical, but rather psychological; at this point, Marlow calls Kurtz "a being" to suggest that, since his soul has transcended the boundaries of human conventions, he is not human now. Moreover, the

danger he describes resides also in the fact that Kurtz now is beyond good and evil- a wandering spirit that has no attachment of any kind to the human community. This is further suggested through the image Marlow draws of Kurtz as floating in the air, with nothing *above* nor *below*.

Besides, Marlow depicts an intimacy that has grown between him and Kurtz- an intimacy that involves a confrontation between their respective souls:

Soul! If anybody ever struggled with a soul, I am the man. And I wasn't arguing with a lunatic either. [...]But his soul was mad. Being alone in the wilderness, it had looked within itself, and, by heavens! I tell you, it had gone mad. I had--for my sins, I suppose--to go through the ordeal of looking into it myself. P95

Marlow suggests that he was under the obligation to look into the soul of Kurtz because 'it had gone mad', and that Kurtz could not do the task himself. So, very ambiguously, Marlow tells us that he went through the 'ordeal' of looking into Kurtz's soul himself. Marlow's journey seems to have reached its 'culminating point': Going to the centre of the earth, then to the wilderness, and finally, to the heart of Kurtz. At this point, Marlow reaches the knowledge he was looking for; two discoveries are involved: The first one concerns the final cry Kurtz utters before he dies, and the second one concerns the inner struggle Marlow witnesses in Kurtz:

No eloquence could have been so withering to one's belief in mankind as his final burst of sincerity. He struggled with himself, too. I saw it--I heard it. I saw the inconceivable mystery of a soul that knew no restraint, no faith, and no fear, yet struggling blindly with itself. PP95-96

Marlow prefers to leave his comment on Kurtz's last cry for later, and so do we. We shall, for now, concentrate on the second discovery Marlow makes: Marlow says that he has witnessed a soul that has transcended "restraint", "faith", and "fear"- the three elements that, put together, regulate the individual's moral behaviour. We have seen the importance Marlow gives to restraint, and which he seems to deplore its absence from the modern world, and the fact that he places with it "faith" suggests its importance as well. By definition, faith is the ability to believe in the abstract, in something not based on empirical proof- what the modern world so vehemently rejects.

Conrad is aware of the death of faith, and denounces it in *A Personal Record* as follows:

Faith is a myth and beliefs shift like mists on the shore; thoughts vanish; words, once pronounced, die; ... [...] I have come to suspect that the aim of creation cannot be ethical at all, I would fondly believe that its object is purely spectacular.<sup>351</sup>

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<sup>351</sup> Conrad, Joseph. *A Personal Record* (1912). The Project Gutenberg Ebook, 2006.

There is a marked pessimistic tone in this passage, where Conrad just announces the loss of faith, and then comes to suspect the aim of creation to have nothing to do with ethics.

However, as Erdinast-Vulcan puts it, Conrad does not surrender, but revolts against this loss of faith; as we have seen, he refuses the artist 'the freedom of moral nihilism', and requires of him 'many acts of faith'. The tone of Marlow is condemning, aiming at denouncing moral nihilism, and the danger it leads to. Yet, we wonder what kind of faith Marlow, and thus Conrad, refers to here? We can infer it from Conrad's preface to *The Nigger of the*

*Narcissus*:

The artist speaks... to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation- and to the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts.<sup>352</sup>

Conrad has the 'invincible conviction', despite the dominant skepticism of his age, of the existence of 'human solidarity'- he believes in fellowship among human beings- a fellowship that brings together innumerable lonely hearts. So, the faith he refers to is not in religion, or in any abstract moral code, but in humanity itself; and, indeed, this is what is hinted at by Marlow's unexplained loyalty to Kurtz, and even the final lie he tells the intended, as we shall see later.

Despite the horrible discoveries Marlow makes about Kurtz: The heads on the poles, the terrible postscript, the devilish rites, Marlow repeatedly hints to his intimacy with Kurtz and his loyalty to him: "I did not betray Mr. Kurtz--it was ordered I should never betray him-- it was written I should be loyal to the nightmare of my choice" (P92). This "unforeseen partnership" is more strongly established in the fact Marlow nearly dies after Kurtz's death. Kurtz dies on this journey back- which confirms that he does not belong to the world he left anymore. After the burial of Kurtz, Marlow declares: "And then they very nearly buried me"(P100). Marlow comments on his experience as follows:

Since I had peeped over the edge myself, I understand better the meaning of his stare, that could not see the flame of the candle, but was wide enough to embrace the whole universe, piercing enough to penetrate all the hearts that beat in the darkness.[...] And it is not my own extremity I remember best-- a vision of greyness without form filled with physical pain, and a careless contempt for the evanescence of all things--even of this pain itself. No! It is his extremity that I seem to have lived through. True, he had made that last stride, he had stepped over the edge, while I had been permitted to draw back my hesitating foot.P101

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<[www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org)>

<sup>352</sup> Conrad, Joseph. *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. Op. Cit.

So, Marlow peeped over the edge himself, he approached his death very nearly; yet, he declares that it is not his own “extremity” that he remembers best, but Kurtz’s- Marlow has lived through the extremity of Kurtz, which suggests that he has sensed death. Marlow’s soul has accompanied Kurtz’s into the extremity, and thus, was able to see what Kurtz sees: A stare that was “wide enough to embrace the whole universe, piercing enough to penetrate all the hearts that beat in the darkness”. Kurtz could not see the flame of the candle because it belongs to the physical world, but could see the hearts of human beings- in the spiritual world. C. G. Jung declares the existence of ‘a collective unconscious’ where all human beings belong together: ‘the collective unconscious is common to all; it is the foundation of what the ancients called the “sympathy of all things”<sup>353</sup>. The partnership of Kurtz and Marlow transcends the boundaries of the physical world, because it goes beyond death; they are in fact connected through this realm of the collective unconscious where they can both see the hearts, the unconscious, of other human beings. This notion of collectivity, adopted by Conrad here, is optimistic as it reinforces the belief in human brotherhood, and constitutes a rejection of the modern solipsism and alienation.

We come now to the words Kurtz pronounced just before his death, “that supreme moment of complete knowledge”. Marlow comments on it as follows:

After all, this was the expression of some sort of belief; it had candour, it had conviction, it had a vibrating note of revolt in its whisper, it had the appalling face of a glimpsed truth--the strange commingling of desire and hate. [...] I like to think my summing-up would not have been a word of careless contempt. Better his cry--much better. It was an affirmation, a moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats, by abominable terrors, by abominable satisfactions. But it was a victory! That is why I have remained loyal to Kurtz to the last, and even beyond [...]. P101

In this passage, Marlow explains the reason for his admiration for Kurtz and his loyalty to him; he considers Kurtz’s last cry, “The horror!”, as a “moral victory”, and affirms that it has “candour” and “conviction”. Instead of “a word of careless contempt”, of mere surrender, Kurtz’s words are the expression of a revolt against the terrors he has been through.

Erdinast-Vulcan considers that Marlow’s interpretation of the last cry is a misconstruction- he explains that Marlow calls it a moral victory ‘against all the evidence to the contrary’<sup>354</sup>.

However, this is not the impression meant to be made on the readers: Marlow insists on the fact that Kurtz is able to pronounce “a judgment upon the adventures of his soul on this

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<sup>353</sup> Jaffé, Aniela. ED. Op. Cit. p160

<sup>354</sup> Erdinast-Vulcan, Daphna. Op. Cit. p105

earth”, whereas he, when he finds himself near death, thought that he could say nothing: “I was within a hair’s breadth of the last opportunity for pronouncement, and I found with humiliation that probably I could have nothing to say”(P101). The fact that Kurtz did find something to say in that last moment when he stepped over “the threshold of the invisible”, is an expression of his moral strength; his cry is a complete break with ‘the note of consolatory serenity which is traditional for deathbed utterances in fiction’<sup>355</sup>, as Ian Watt puts it. It suggests that he does not avoid the truth, but confronts it. This ability for moral judgment makes of Kurtz a “remarkable man”; James Eli Adams comments on this point as follows:

Kurtz’s insight into the depth of human depravity gives him in Marlow’s eyes a moral authenticity that explodes the polite evasions of bureaucratic rationality, the temporizing, the evasive habit of mind that would veil “monstrous passions” and “brutal instincts” with the euphemism “unsound”.<sup>356</sup>

Kurtz differentiates himself at this moment from the superficial and hypocritical white pilgrims who content themselves with veiling the truth when it is too brutal. Kurtz, on the contrary, goes to the heart of the matter and confronts it. Moreover, the judgment represents a condemnation of the Western hypocrisy, and a warning against the modern glorification of individual freedom. Kurtz, as we have discussed, has fulfilled every passion, and satisfied every desire, but the last words are not that of satisfaction and plenitude, but of horror. These words reveal the truth that lurks behind the veneer of the attractive doctrines of the fin-de-siècle, and the promises of self-fulfillment and happiness. Marlow remains loyal to Kurtz because the latter’s last words are a “moral victory”, and because they reveal the ugly destiny that the modern doctrine of individual freedom leads to.

We said at the beginning of our discussion of this point that the object of Marlow’s quest is the knowledge he could get from Kurtz. This knowledge, as we have seen, constitutes a warning against the modern, dominant individual tendencies, and a reaffirmation of human brotherhood. Now, we attempt to investigate the effects of this knowledge on Marlow through his behavior in the modern world. In the following passage Marlow narrates his return to the ‘sepulchral city’ and his thoughts at that moment:

I found myself back in the sepulchral city resenting the sight of people hurrying through the streets to filch a little money from each other, to devour their infamous cookery, to gulp their unwholesome beer, to dream their insignificant and silly dreams. They trespassed upon my thoughts. They were intruders whose knowledge of life was to me an irritating pretence, because I felt so sure they could

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<sup>355</sup> Watt, Ian. Op. Cit. p236

<sup>356</sup> Adams, James Eli. Op. Cit. p426

not possibly know the things I knew. Their bearing, which was simply the bearing of commonplace individuals going about their business in the assurance of perfect safety, was offensive to me like the outrageous flauntings of folly in the face of a danger it is unable to comprehend. I had no particular desire to enlighten them, but I had some difficulty in restraining myself from laughing in their faces so full of stupid importance. I dare say I was not very well at that time. I tottered about the streets--there were various affairs to settle--grinning bitterly at perfectly respectable persons. I admit my behaviour was inexcusable, but then my temperature was seldom normal in these days. My dear aunt's endeavours to `nurse up my strength' seemed altogether beside the mark. It was not my strength that wanted nursing, it was my imagination that wanted soothing. P102

Marlow returns a changed man; he develops a resentment against the common people he sees on the streets, who do not know the things he knew- in fact, he resents their superficiality and materialism. As James Morgan puts it, '[Having] glimpsed the Truth, Marlow thus returns to find [...] the materialistic life of the senses to be trivial and therefore spiritually unsatisfying'<sup>357</sup>. However, Marlow does not remain for long in this alienated state, as he presents it only as transitory, his "temperature [being] seldom normal in these days". Indeed, we see Marlow as a man 'able to take his place in the tribe or community represented by the men in the Company to whom he tells his story aboard the *Nellie*'<sup>358</sup>. Marlow shares the knowledge he gained from his experience with his fellow men- the knowledge is indeed dark and gloomy, and reveals the dark nature of man, the evil he is capable of doing. Yet, the telling itself is a sign of hope as it suggests sharing and solidarity; as Ian Watt puts it, Marlow is 'a persuasive fictional voice for that movement towards human solidarity Conrad had affirmed as his essential authorial purpose'<sup>359</sup>.

The lie to the Intended has often been interpreted as a pessimistic suggestion that Marlow does not share his knowledge, and thus change cannot be effected in the modern society. Yet, we venture to say that the lie is in fact a revolt against the darkness, and a reassertion of Marlow's belief in human solidarity. Ian Watt argues that Marlow 'can hardly be blamed for'<sup>360</sup> the lie, because of the different pressures exercised on him during his interview with the Intended. Indeed, the latter's innocence and blind belief in Kurtz and his goodness impress Marlow:

`He was a remarkable man,' I said, unsteadily. Then before the appealing fixity of her gaze, that seemed to watch for more words on my lips, I went on, `It was impossible not to--'

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<sup>357</sup> James Morgan in: Bloom, Harold. Ed. Op. Cit. p99

<sup>358</sup> Ibid.

<sup>359</sup> Watt, Ian, Op. Cit. p214

<sup>360</sup> Ibid. p143

'Love him,' she finished eagerly, silencing me into an appalled dumbness. 'How true! how true! But when you think that no one knew him so well as I! I had all his noble confidence. I knew him best'.P107

Marlow discovers that the Intended, after one year of mourning, is stuck to the image of the idealistic, eloquent emissary of light, and deeply believes that she knew him best- words that Marlow repeats in amazement. Marlow understands that the Intended's reason for living now is her belief and faith in the goodness of Kurtz, and in the comforting notion that she knew him best; consequently, Marlow finds it hard to reveal to her the true nature of Kurtz and his degeneration, and the fact that his last words were not her name, but a horrible judgment on the life he had. Marlow is ready to renounce his principles and lie in order to protect the Intended from a truth that would prove destructive for her. This act of protection can be put under the broader concept of human solidarity. The lie that closes Marlow's narrative is an expression of the necessity for the individuals to come closer together in a society that causes alienation and despair. The responsibility Marlow feels for Kurtz and for his Intended is an emphasis on human brotherhood, which is more important than the dark reality about Kurtz; this recognition of human brotherhood is, in the words of Erdinast-Vulcan, 'perhaps the only valid ethical code left to a society which has lost its belief in the "vertical", metaphysical order'<sup>361</sup>.

The code of conduct that Conrad seems to propose through the experience of Marlow is based on three important pillars: *work* and the link it allows to establish with the external world, the balance it helps keep between the internal and the external world, and the 'chance to find one's own reality'; *restraint*, presented as a human natural aspect that just needs to be retrieved; and *human solidarity*, which combats individualism and alienation. Conrad is aware of the empirical tendency of the modern temper and its distrust of abstract notions of moral principles and value- he thus proposes a code of conduct that involves the external world, which helps the individual get his place in society and, in his turn, help consolidate a healthy one; it also involves human nature that does not hold only negative, dark forces, but offers a quality that can help the individual counter the attractions of the affluent modern, industrial world; and finally, *sociability*, that protects the human civilization from falling apart. Conrad thus proposes a moral code which can be adapted to the demands of a superficial, materialistic and solipsistic modern age.

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<sup>361</sup> Erdinast-Vulcan, Daphna. Op. Cit. p105

As a novelist writing in the fin de siècle, Conrad witnesses the loss of faith and the dominance of materialism and artificiality. He is aware of the scientific advances of the time which diminished the role of man in a cold and indifferent universe; man is no more a rational being, but is prey to the dark forces he has in his keeping. Despite all this, Conrad does not surrender to mere pessimism; on the contrary, he manages to counter these modern assaults through his work- he detaches himself from the Impressionists through addressing the senses and, through them, reaching the inner world of the individual, and incite him to work his capacity for moral judgment. The experience of Kurtz, his degeneration and final destruction is a warning against the danger of the free indulgence of the senses, so strongly called for by the decadent Aesthetes. Moreover, he reaffirms the importance of conscience, this noble human faculty, which has the ability to counter the destructive instinctual drives, and preserves the humanity of the individual- in other words, it protects him from falling into animalism. Finally, he presents through Marlow moral codes of conduct as alternatives to the modern call for immorality- they are not abstract nor theoretical, but rather involve practicality.

As said at the beginning, the ambiguity of the novel, and the pessimism it seems to engender are not an expression of the moral nihilism of the author, but of his inner tension, resulting from his striving to combat the decadent tendencies of the period; we conclude with the words of Erdinast-Vulcan who argues: [The] power of the novella and its enduring position as a twentieth-century classic are derived from its defiance of, rather than concession to eternal negativity or 'éternellité'<sup>362</sup>.

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<sup>362</sup> Erdinast-Vulcan, Daphna. Op. Cit. P97



Concluding remarks:

The novels we have treated so far are representatives of the cultural tensions of the 'fin de siècle' ; both explore issues concerning the moral life of the individual and the role art can have in it- issues that were, as we have discussed, a matter of debate in their time.

Throughout the experiences of the protagonists, we learn that man cannot just silence his conscience, which is presented as an important moral guide that helps the individual face the moral dilemmas he might encounter. Indeed, for Dorian, conscience is 'the divinest thing' in man, and for Kurtz, it confronts him with the 'horror' of the life he has had; for both protagonists, conscience becomes a source of torment the moment they start denying it. Moreover, both novels testify that the free indulgence of the senses does not lead to happiness and individual fulfillment, but rather to degeneration and even bestiality so that guilty individuals end up revising their attitudes and expressing remorse. Dorian and Kurtz do not prosper, but instead discover the horror of an immoral life, and finally die loathing themselves. Besides, individualism is presented as one of the main factors that lead to the protagonists' final destruction, and thus, both novels call for social integration.

The novels thus present us with the popular tendencies of their period, notably aestheticism, primitivism, and individualism only to foreground their weaknesses, and warn against the danger they represent for human civilization. Moreover, it is important to note that the novels have an experimental quality, in the sense that the modernist theories about man and art are tested out throughout the experiences of the protagonists; indeed, we see this experimentation in Lord Henry Wotton who is repeatedly said never to put into practice the amoral-aesthetic theories he professes, but finds a morbid pleasure in putting them to test through Dorian. Marlow, on his part, sees these theories realized through the experience of Kurtz. These experimental novels enable the readers, as Annah Arendt puts it, to participate and to develop 'virtuosity'<sup>363</sup>- a concept defined by the latter as the ethical judgmental ability that would enable the individual to deal with the practical life and the different situations it may offer. Instead of giving the readers definite moral codes of behavior, they are instead given the opportunity to take an active role, as they have the freedom to judge and evaluate by themselves the experiences of the protagonists. Thus, we deduce that aestheticism is not sustained: The novels do not have an overt moral role, since

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<sup>363</sup> Halliwell, Martin. Op. Cit. p22

they do not dictate moral codes, but rather, they aim to improve the judgmental capacity of the readers- a most needed quality in a materialistic modern world that has lost faith in the abstract. Moreover, throughout the novels, the authors do not proclaim overtly their opinions- quite the contrary, we have the impression that they are experimenting without a prior knowledge of the results, which explains the ambiguities and contradictions of these two modernist works.

Part Three:  
The Committed Writer in  
Bessie Head's *Maru*  
and  
Ngugi Wa Thiong'o 's *A Grain of Wheat*

Preamble:

In the previous chapters, we discussed the intricate and complex relation between literature and morality; through the works we have studied so far, we have come to identify certain standards that seem to fit the spirit of modernity, namely, that a good piece of literature is one capable of involving the reader into moral reflection, of making him an active participant, rather than a passive receiver, and thus appealing to a moral awareness. We have seen that complexity and ambiguity are favored over didacticism: i.e.: the more the work straightforwardly imparts moral messages, the less it is likely to attract interest and assent. Didacticism, a former characteristic of Western classical literature, from the oral tradition that focused on heroes and legends, to the writings of Plato for whom true art is moral art, is considered an obsolete means of communication. The advent of modernity, the rejection of religious faith, the parallel rise of individualism and materialism are factors that no longer made it possible for such didactic art to exist. The writers we have discussed prefer to adopt ambiguity, humor, aestheticism and skepticism; they seem to display unwillingness, a hesitation to use their art as a tool or a medium to achieve a purpose that goes beyond the aesthetic concern. This unwillingness is associated with the confusion they experience in their social milieu, which results from that rejection of tradition and conventions, and also with the fear that their work wouldn't suit the tastes of a sophisticated and disenfranchised modern society. In the following chapters, we turn to African literature, in which we shall explore the way this complex relation between literature and morality operates through significant literary works. The novels to be discussed, *Maru* and *A Grain of Wheat*, are written by two famous authors, Bessie Head and Ngugi Wa'Thiongo, respectively. Yet, before we deal with the contents of these works, we shall first attempt to situate modern African literature and its relation to traditional African literature as well as to Western literature, which shall allow us to explore the traces and even evolution of this intricate relationship between literature and morality.

Abiola Irele provides a clear definition of traditional African literature as opposed to modern African literature as follows:

I should like to begin my discussion of the criticism of modern African literature by making a very general observation about the kind of distinction we tend to make between what we call 'traditional' African literature, and 'modern' African literature; a distinction which is probably useful in the sense that traditional African literature is something which exists in our indigenous languages and which is related to our traditional societies and cultures, while modern African literature has grown out of

the rupture created within our indigenous history and way of life by the colonial experience, which is naturally expressed in the tongue of our former colonial rulers.<sup>364</sup>

According to Irele, traditional African literature is the one that existed before the advent of colonialism, is expressed in indigenous languages, and is related to a pure African traditional society and culture. On the other hand, modern African literature is born out of the encounter with the colonial West, and is written in the colonial languages. The two literatures are evidently different, since they relate to two different historical phases: The pre-colonial phase and the post-colonial phase. Irele's choice of the word "rupture" signals a break with the past, and the creation of what he refers to as "a new mental universe". Indeed, the coming of the whites to the African continent had devastating effects on local societies, which they considered savage; they created a deeply ingrained sense of inferiority in the colonized subjects, who became the recipients to all kinds of oppression and denigration. Obviously, the literatures that relate to these two periods must be different in form as well as in content.

The pre-colonial, traditional literature dealt with legends and myths that were perpetuated mainly through skillful orators at social gatherings; its aim was to educate the young generations through imparting the essential moral as well as religious precepts that define their traditional culture and identity, which helped maintain social order and harmony. In an interesting article entitled "The Nature and Function of Oral Literature", G. N. Appell summarizes the main characteristics of oral literature in general as follows:

Oral literature is the repository of the critical knowledge, philosophy, and wisdom for non-literate societies. This literature through narrative, poetry, song, dance, myths and fables, and texts for religious rituals provides a portrait of the meaning of life as experienced by the society at its particular time and place with unique existential challenges. [...] This literature portrays how one is to live a moral life and explains the nature of one's relationship to divinity. [...] It provides a guide to human behaviour and how to live one's life.<sup>365</sup>

Oral literature was indeed deeply ingrained in the lives of people as it kept them together, taught them how to lead moral lives through imparting moral messages, and worked to preserve social harmony. It had thus a strong and evident moral dimension; we have discussed the importance it played in Greek society, as poetry, mainly expressed through

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<sup>364</sup> Irele, Abiola. *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology*. U.S.: Indiana University Press, 1981. P27

<sup>365</sup> Appell, G. N. "The Nature and Function of Oral Literature", Firebird Foundation for Anthropological Research (2016). <Firebirdfellowships.org.>

drama or by orators at social gatherings, was regarded as a source of ethical wisdom and practical guidance for living. In the African context, oral literature had the same social and moral dimensions. In contrast, modern African literature cannot avoid dealing with the trauma resulting from colonialism, and cannot but be an expression of revolt against the oppressing powers. However, this clear-cut separation between pre-colonial and post-colonial literatures is not easy to maintain since, as Irele recognizes, we cannot deny the influence of the former on the latter. In the following quotation, he explains the former's enduring presence in the mind of the "peoples":

In a sense, the oral literature represents our classical tradition- i.e. that body of texts which lies behind us as a complete and enduring literature, though constantly being renewed, and which most profoundly informs the world views of our peoples, and is thus at the same time the foundation and expressive channel of a fundamental African modern universe.<sup>366</sup>

We deduce that the modern African writer cannot discard this traditional literature, since it represents the basic foundation of the African mental universe. Thus, notions such as "rupture" and "break" gain less credit, in favor of "continuation" and "development". Modern African literature is post-colonial, is new, but directly or indirectly recognizes the presence of the former traditional literature, and thus inherits its moral and ethical dimension. In the face of colonialism, modernity and the challenges they bring, modern African writers need this oral tradition in order to reassert people's traditional identity, and to present them with the necessary moral guides to lead harmonious individual and social lives.

In *Towards African Literary Independence*, Phanuel Akubueze Egejuru identifies three phases in the development of modern African literature, that can help us explore the different themes tackled by these writers: The first phase consists in the glorification of the pre-colonial past, such as the poetry of Senghor, Bernard Dadié and his famous novel *Climbié*, and the novel of Camara Laye, *The Dark Child*. Here, writers are eager to idealize the past as a lost happiness and stability as a reaction to the traumatic disruption caused by colonialism. The second phase explores the colonial situation after the definitive settlement of the whites, and treats the theme of cultural conflict, as the new white culture impinges upon the local indigenous one. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* are good examples among others. Finally, the third phase is an examination of the societies after

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<sup>366</sup> Ibid. p12

independence, where writers question their countries' rulers, and often denounce corruption and bribery; a new partnership is established between the African rulers and the former white masters, who indirectly control the politics and economy of the supposedly independent countries- entering in what came to be called neo-colonialism. For example, Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* and Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*, denounce this new state of affairs<sup>367</sup>. In its development, we notice the continual reference back to a pre-colonial traditional culture, which is taken as a basis of reference. Although in the last phase, the concerns of writers is more focused on the present and is rather future-oriented, they keep referring back to a past tradition they are unwilling to part with. In other words, the moral and social orientation of the past African traditional literature is essential, and continues to shape modern works and to adapt to the changing socio-historical circumstances.

What we see in these modern works, throughout the different phases mentioned, is a glorification of social harmony and a strong rejection of any kind of individual behaviour susceptible to put it in danger- a major aspect of oral traditional culture. Moreover, the individual is warned against the different luring materialistic aspects of modern life, and is incessantly reminded of the past African culture from which to adopt proper moral conduct. The poetry of Senghor, for example, insists on the grandeur of the African past; he portrays past warriors who created big empires in "*The Africa of Empires*", and keeps referring back to these ancestors who are considered the repository of spirituality and moral wisdom, as he does in "*Prayer to the Masks*". In *No Longer at Ease*, Achebe paints the portrait of a young man who is steeped in Western culture, and is no longer at ease in a modern African society that has kept, more or less, its traditional identity, demonstrated through the importance of social solidarity and a rejection of individualistic aspirations. Modern African works are full of such examples that aim to promote a good moral conduct in individuals through referring back to a past tradition which has been the main target of the colonial forces. On the other hand, this modern African literature is mostly written in the colonial languages, a point which takes our definition of the latter to a more complex level, since African writers have been inspired by the so-called Western literary tradition.

Modern African literature, because of its use of colonial languages and thus adhering to Western literary conventions, has often been labelled as imitative, "half-nature", lacking in

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<sup>367</sup> Egejuru, Phaniel Akubueze. *Towards African Literary Independence: a Dialogue with contemporary African Writers*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980. PP5-6

originality. Indeed, most African writers were educated in European schools and universities, and were thus directly exposed to Western thought and literary tradition; inevitably, most were influenced by Western writers. However, it is rather simplistic to categorize them as mere imitators of their Western counterparts because, despite the question of influence and language used, their African originality is proven. This originality is realized at different levels: Language, literary conventions, and the conception of art in general. The main issue that relates to our focus of study is the difference between African and Western literature as far as the relationship between literature and society is concerned, as it allows us to explore the moral and social functionality of literature in African societies.

In an article entitled “Literature and Society”, Ngugi Wa’Thiongo argues:

Literature results from conscious acts of men in society. At the level of the individual artist, the very act of writing implies a social relationship: one is writing about somebody for somebody. At the collective level, literature, as a product of men’s intellectual and imaginative activity, embodies in words and images, the tensions, conflicts, contradictions at the heart of a community’s being and process of becoming.<sup>368</sup>

Ngugi here emphasizes the social and practical character of literature: It is not produced by isolated individuals, living an alienated life, but by individuals living in society; hence, in his writing, the writer reflects, in “words and images”, his community as a whole. Ngugi later adds that the writer is “a product of an actual social process”<sup>369</sup>; in other words, he is a direct product of his environment. This view comes somehow in contradiction with the Western one that considers the artist as an isolated marginal figure. This notion is very well captured by Chinua Achebe in *Hopes and Impediments* as follows:

We have learnt from Europe that a writer or an artist lives on the fringe of society- wearing a beard and a peculiar dress and generally behaving in a strange, unpredictable way. He is in revolt against society, which in turn looks on him with suspicion if not hostility. The last thing society would dream of doing is to put him in charge of anything.<sup>370</sup>

In the western world, the artist lives on the fringe of his society: The more he is isolated from social affairs and withdraws into higher realms of the spirit, the more he is considered a true artist, often to be valued after his death. This view is mostly celebrated in the

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<sup>368</sup> Killam, G. D. ed. *Critical Perspectives on Ngugi Wa Thiong’o*. Washington D. C.: Three Continents Press, 1984. P19

<sup>369</sup> Ibid. p20

<sup>370</sup> Achebe, Chinua. *Hopes and Impediments*. U.S.: Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1988. PP40-41

Western Romantic tradition, epitomized by J.J. Rousseau's assertion that society is corrupt, and that for the individual to retrieve his innate goodness and pure spirituality, he must withdraw from it. It is this romantic conception of the artist that Achebe refers to, and that has become a well established convention, despite the changes it might have encountered. In fact, it has developed into the famous modernist stance already mentioned earlier, "Art for Art's sake", which implies the detachment necessary of the art work from any kind of responsibility.

K. Indrarena Reddy speaks about this notion of functionality that differentiates Western literature from the African one as follows:

African fiction is very much seized with the traumatic experiences the scars of which are left behind by colonialism. Like all other art-forms in Africa, African fiction has a functional value. Unlike his European counterpart who suffers from an alienated image, the African novelist is part of the mainstream of his society. African novel has been able to establish a tradition and an aesthetic of its own in a short span of time. It is in a position to debunk many schools of criticism, the school of "art for art's sake" in particular. The functional role of African fiction is to drawing and involving its people in a nation building activity.<sup>371</sup>

Social functionality is an important feature of African literature, which definitely makes for its specificity, i.e., originality. The figure of the artist in the African context is different: He becomes the committed artist who is aware of his social responsibility.

African traditional art, as we have seen, is social by nature; Tanure Ojaide argues that the modern African writer cannot simply deny this utilitarian aspect of African art, and just "embrace art for art's sake"<sup>372</sup>. This notion of commitment seems to have become a convention, even an imperative in postcolonial writing. One of the strongest expressions of this commitment comes in the words of Ken Saro-Wiwa, as follows:

"[L]iterature must serve society by steeping itself in politics! By intervention! And writers must not merely write to amuse or to take a bemused, critical look at society. They must play an interventionist role...The writer must be l'homme engagé: the intellectual man of action."<sup>373</sup>

This passage presents a strong appeal to African writers to assume their roles in society- they cannot afford to write just for entertainment, but must constantly have this sense of purpose in mind. They are called upon to adopt a clear socio-political stance and help

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<sup>371</sup> Reddy, K. Indrasena. *The Novels of Achebe and Ngugi: A Study in the Dialectic of Commitment*. New Delhi: Prestige books, 1994. P1

<sup>372</sup> Ojaide, Tanure. *Ordering the African Imagination: Essays on Culture and Literature*. Lagos: Malthouse Press Limited, 2007. P1

<sup>373</sup> Qt in : Larson, Charles R. *The Ordeal of the African Writer*. London: Zed Books, 2001. P115

counter the different issues their modern, changing societies face. The literature of commitment is hence a direct expression of the writer's reaction to the challenges of the postcolonial situation: Corruption, poverty, and most notably, cultural identity.

The effects of colonialism are indeed devastating, and African writers are aware that work needs to be done in order to recover the disrupted sense of integrity, as it is necessary to move forward and build a better future. This is the 'original project' that Wile Ogundele has in mind that is at the heart of modern African literature- a project that he defines in terms of "cultural retrieval and assertion"<sup>374</sup>. Indeed, cultural identity was the most sensitive target of the colonialists in their attempts to achieve total control of the colonized population. In the following passage, Ngugi discusses this point as follows:

But to make economic and political control the more complete the colonizing power tries to control cultural environment: education, religion, language, literature, songs, forms of dances, every form of expression, hoping in this way to control a people's values and ultimately their world outlook, their image and definition of self. They would like to have a slave who not only accepts that he is a slave but that he is a slave because he is fated to be nothing else but a slave. Hence he must love and be grateful to the master for his magnimity in enslaving him to higher and nobler civilization.<sup>375</sup>

These cultural assaults represent the greatest dangers effected by colonialism, the aim being the eradication of people's self-image and definition. Furthermore, the most terrible weapon to achieve this goal is art. Ngugi presents literature as a "subtle weapon" that works, he says, "through influencing emotions, the imagination, the consciousness of a people in a certain way; to make the colonized see the world as seen, analyzed, and defined by the artists and the intellectuals of the Western ruling classes"<sup>376</sup>. Thus, literature has the power to fashion the image that people can have of themselves; we can find myriads of examples of this terrible use in Western literature, where the African race is defined as inferior to the white race, deprived of any sense of history and civilization, and has never been able to achieve anything of its own whether in action or in thought. The black man is depicted as a savage who, animal like, lives wildly in his natural environment, follows his senses and bestial instincts, and is incapable of any kind of initiative. The white race is presented as a savior that succors the African from this perpetual state of animal unconsciousness- a superior race who originated thought, built a civilization, and thus must

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<sup>374</sup> Okafor, Dubem. *Meditations on African Literature*. U.S.: Greenwood Press, 2001. P17

<sup>375</sup>Qt. In.: Killam, G. D. Ed. *Critical Perspectives on Ngugi Wa Thiong'o*. Op. Cit. P26

<sup>376</sup> Ibid. p28

be respected, and whose presence must be accepted with gratitude. All this is expressed through well crafted images found in Western literature- images that express this deformed reality, which apparently cannot be questioned nor denied. It is this reality that African students, seeking to be part of the African elite that would lead independent nations, are presented with. It is against this cultural genocide that modern African writers react and seek to counter- the original project of modern African literature. This is well summed up in the words of Chinua Achebe:

Here then is an adequate revolution for me to espouse- to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of years of denigration and self-abasement. [...] Here, I think, my aims, and the deepest aspirations of society meet. For no thinking African can escape the pain of the wound in our soul. You have all heard of the "African personality"; of African democracy, of the African way to socialism, of negritude, and so on. They are all props we have fashioned at different times to help get on our feet again. Once we are up we shan't need any of them anymore.<sup>377</sup>

We can safely assume that this is a position adopted by almost all modern African writers, as no one can ignore the devastating psychological effects of colonialism. Different movements were developed for this purpose: "African personality", "Negritude", "Socialism", props, as Achebe calls them, that suited different periods of time, but at the core are the same in their aim to "fight back".

Commitment seems thus to be inevitable for any thinking African writer, to the extent that it became a fundamental critical standard, according to which art forms are evaluated. It is in fact presented as an alternative to the Western aesthetic criteria, which are imposed by the West as being universal. Wole Ogundele explains why these criteria were rejected by African critics:

The idea of universal aesthetic criteria was seen by African critics as yet another attempt to impose specifically Eurocentric literary conventions and critical norms on modern African literature and criticism. Such norms were resented on the grounds that they were reminiscent of the racial-cultural arrogance at the root of colonialism, and also that they were incompatible with the inherent aims, functions and nature of African literature. [...] the controversy spurred African and Africanist critics to search for African aesthetic practices, conventions, and social values, in oral literatures and in other art forms, by which the new literature could be interpreted and judged. Hence, ideas of the public-orientedness and functionality of African literature became stressed, along with its search for its roots and origins in indigenous traditions. "Commitment" became a recurrent term of critical praise; writers who were deemed to be individualistic or not practicing functional (or, as used by Achebe, "applied") art were dismissed as indulging the decadent (Western) art for art's sake.<sup>378</sup>

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<sup>377</sup> Achebe, Chinua. Op. Cit. P44-45

<sup>378</sup> Qt. In: Okafor, Dubem. Op. Cit. PP21-22

So, there are two main reasons why these universal aesthetic conventions were rejected by African writers and critics; the first one is because they are “Eurocentric”, and that they emerged and developed along a specifically Western literary tradition- a fact that imposes, once again, Western cultural superiority. The second reason leads us back to reflecting on the very nature of African art which is functional and socially oriented. Commitment is thus considered as a specifically African convention par excellence; any art work that fails to respect this convention is dismissed as Western oriented.

This utilitarian nature of African art is strongly marked, and cannot be put aside by universalized Western aesthetic conventions. However, African writers and critics are growing more and more impatient with this position, as they consider it falsifying and restrictive to their work. African art is social by nature, meant to serve society; yet, this has led to the development of a tendency to regard African art as merely concerned with the social context it emanates from, i.e.: limited. Kadiatu Kanneh reflects on this point and indicates the fallacy of this tendency to read African texts as simple social documentation, “as windows directly into social reality, needing no artistic or imaginative mediation”<sup>379</sup>.

Abiola Irele, for his part, reflects on this issue by first recognizing that African literature does have a specific character, then, in a warning tone, stating that it should not be considered as having “a unique essence” of its own, for it “has a significance for human experience beyond our continent”<sup>380</sup>. Indeed, through this tendency to focus on the social nature of African art, its human dimension is often neglected. African literary works should not be seen merely as social documents, but must also be appreciated for their broader human implications. This is the “universal” contribution of African art that is most of the time marginalized by Western criticism. In the following quotation, Abiola Irele reflects on this reductionist interpretation of African literary works:

We have had too many commentaries concerned with tracing and elucidating cultural references, and not criticism of the works qua literature: the charge here is against what is called a certain anthropologism, and one might remark that some of our writers have called for this kind of treatment of their work- but these have not been the best and most significant. The need then today is towards formal analysis, having as its declared purpose a consideration of those features of the modern literature that make for aesthetic appeal.<sup>381</sup>

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<sup>379</sup> Qt. In.: Msiska, Mpalive-Hangson and Paul Hyland. Ed. *Writing and Africa*. London and New York: Longman, 1997. P73

<sup>380</sup> Irele, Abiola. Op. Cit. P9

<sup>381</sup> Ibid. p22

So, according to Irele, the focus on the social nature of African art led to “anthropologism”- the tendency to read the African literary works just for “elucidating cultural references”, and consequently denying the aesthetic values of the works in question. Thus, reading African works as mere social documents is a reductionist fallacy that denies their human, universal as well as aesthetic dimensions. African writers are socially committed, but they are also artists that bring their own contributions to human thought as well as art in general.

The social orientedness of modern African literature is, as we have seen, inscribed in the movement of “writing back” in the attempt to restore a cultural identity devastated by a denigrating colonial and postcolonial system; moreover, it is not a totally new criterion since it is inherited from a past oral tradition that helped maintain a social harmonious order through guiding individuals to adopt the right kind of behaviour. In modern works, we have this same concern with the moral conduct of the individual that must constantly be directed towards a respect of social norms and a preservation of social harmony. Contrary to the West, society in the African world is considered more important than the individual, and hence any deviation from social norms is severely reprimanded. However, this does not make these works simplistic in any way, since the protagonists are often involved in complex situations where they have to face hard moral dilemmas and make difficult choices. The focus is thus put on the inner worlds of these individuals as we come to witness their torments, motives, strengths and weaknesses in their daily struggle with a changing external environment. The works we have selected so far for this part of our study are Bessie Head’s *Maru* and Ngugi Wa’ Thiong’o *A Grain of Wheat*; our purpose is to highlight the concern of the authors with the individual morality of their characters, and the different ways this morality corresponds or not with the social norms imposed. Contrary to their Western counterparts, these African authors are willing to find out the proper moral codes of conduct that would enable their characters to live in harmony within their respective societies. Furthermore, as we shall see, they achieve this through engaging the readers with their psychological investigation of the motives of moral or immoral conduct. This implies that they do not simply enunciate the proper moral values to espouse, but also lead readers to understand these values as they come to discover them and to recognize their importance through the protagonists’ behaviours; in other words, the reader is invited to the ethical discourse of the novels. Through the analysis of the novels, we shall subscribe to

bring to light this notion of “Commitment” as it is conveyed by the novelists, and its significance as far as morality and society are concerned.

## **Chapter 5 : MARU**

### 1) Bessie Head: Between Alienation and Belonging

A writer is the product of his/her time and society, and Bessie Head comes from a very complex and challenging Southern African context, especially at the time of apartheid, which imposed inhuman laws that sought to classify individuals according to their race. This controversial policy left traumatic effects on people's consciousness, and impacted greatly on the kind of literature produced then. In fact, South African writers adopted the one and only direction in their writing: Commitment, a point explained by Njabulo Nbedele as follows:

In societies such as South Africa, where social, economic and political oppression is most stark, such conditions tend to enforce, almost with the power of natural law, overt tendentiousness in the artists' choice of subject-matter and handling of subject-matter. It is such tendentiousness which, because it can most easily be interpreted as "taking a position", earns a work of art displaying it, the title of "commitment" or "engagement". Clearly then, according to this attitude, artistic merit or relevance, is determined ... by the work's displaying a high level of explicit political preoccupation.<sup>382</sup>

Njabulo Nbedele argues that the oppression exercised in the Southern African context drives the writers, almost instinctively, to adopt a position of revolt and protest, and thus inscribes their writings in the literature of commitment. In fact, works of art are to be evaluated according to the extent to which they display this commitment, which determines their "artistic merit or relevance". The Southern African writer is thus morally drawn to adopt a clear stand, and to explicitly express it in his/her work. Otherwise, if the writer fails to comply with this criterion, his/her work is doomed to be rejected. However, the work of the writer we are about to explore does not clearly express this "overt tendentiousness" - a particularity that differentiates Bessie Head from her contemporaries and makes her work even more interesting.

One particular aspect of Bessie Head's work is that it was generally unacknowledged by African critics and readers, because they considered it "uncommitted" and too akin to Western literature. There are different reasons that contributed to this apparent "uncommitment"-one of them goes back to her origins.

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<sup>382</sup> Qt. In : Lewis, Desiree. *Living on a Horizon: Bessie Head and the Politics of Imagining*. Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc, 2007. P1-2

Bessie Head stands out among African writers with the particularity of her origins which impacted greatly on her literary production. She is the fruit of an illicit relationship between a black stable man and a white woman of South African descent. The reaction of the woman's family was so strong that they claimed her mental instability and shut her in a mental institution, where Bessie Head was born. These mixed origins gave Bessie Head the status of a coloured- a source of her troubled and unstable life. Indeed, from her early childhood, she was torn among several adopting families and institutions. She comments on the kind of torture and suffering she went through as a child in the following quotation:

What was particularly painful for me was the repetitious kind of propaganda statement that would bore its way into me, so that there are things you can never undo or forget. It was my appearance: there was something about a Coloured that was horrifying. So there would be repetitious things like, "You're a dog. Filth. You're a Coloured dog".<sup>383</sup>

Bessie Head had to live through these repetitious assaults since her childhood, and she grew up with a strong sense of rejection and alienation. In the following quotation, she talks about this feeling of alienation:

I have not a single known relative on earth, no long and ancient family tree to refer to, no links with heredity or sense of having inherited a temperament, a certain emotional instability or the shape of a fingernail from a grandmother or great grandmother.<sup>384</sup>

Head grew up with an extreme sense of loneliness, of non-belonging to a family from which to account for her temperament or even physical appearance. She cannot claim to belong to either race, neither black nor white. S. K. Pathania explains that the "circumstances of her birth had cut her off from her black roots and she also fails to completely identify with her inherited Christian civilization"<sup>385</sup>. This complicated background had devastating effects on Head, as it created in her a tormented consciousness which, combined with the awareness of a possible heredity of her biological mother's mental instability, led to several cycles of depression, which often required her hospitalization. Huma Ibrahim, in *Subversive Identities in Exile*, comments: "Apartheid celebrates the dislocation of primary loyalties and gives rise to the exilic consciousness, even within the borders of one's own country, community, and

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<sup>383</sup> Mackenzie, Graig. and Cherry Clayton. Ed. *Between the Lines: Interview with Bessie Head, Sheila Roberts, Ellen Kuzwayo, Miriam Tlali*. South Africa: The National English Literary Museum, 1989. P25

<sup>384</sup>Pathania, Shivalik Katoch. Op. Cit. 2009. PP9-10

<sup>385</sup> Ibid. P3

peoples”<sup>386</sup>. Indeed, Head lived a kind of psychological exile as she was unable to belong to either part of her mixed origins.

However, despite the alienating effects of her origins, Head developed an attitude that helped her cope with her psychological trouble. Indeed, as Graig Mackenzie puts it, “[t]he most that the young Bessie could salvage from the wreckage of her life was a sense of existential freedom- a freedom tempered by loneliness and rejection, but that nevertheless held out the possibility of fashioning some sort of life for herself”<sup>387</sup>. The mixed origins of Head didn’t only engender feelings of loneliness and non-belonging, but also gave rise to a strong feeling of freedom. Having no loyalty to any particular group, Head found herself free to reflect on a broader level- the human, as she herself states: “a combination such as I of two nations finally establishes the human race”<sup>388</sup>. Humanity was the refuge that Head resorted to in the face of racism and rejection. Writing became for her a kind of cure or, in the words of Percy Mosieleng, “a stabilizing factor”<sup>389</sup>, through which she transcended the social barriers and reached out for humanity. Indeed, according to this same critic, the exile, in general, considers him/herself “a symbol of fundamental humanness”, who has “the privilege to make grand statements about the nature of human experience”<sup>390</sup>.

Consequently, her work raises important reflections on broad philosophical questions pertaining to good and evil, power, suffering and happiness,... She is “a close observer of human life, its manifold miseries, sufferings, evil, the reasons for them and their long lasting impact on generations to come”<sup>391</sup>.

Moreover, there is another factor that, added to Head’s mixed origins, made up for Head’s universalist approach: The external cultural influences. Indeed, her contact with the Eastern and Western traditions made a great impact on her writing. According to S. K. Pathania, Head came in contact with Eastern philosophies in a library for non-whites in Durban. The library, held by a Muslim who was interested in Asian biography and philosophy, introduced Head into “Buddhism” and “reincarnation”<sup>392</sup>. These concepts had an important impact on

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<sup>386</sup> Ibrahim, Huma. *Bessie Head : Subversive Identities in Exile*. U.S.: University Press of Virginia, 1996. P27.

<sup>387</sup> Yousuf, Nahem. Ed. *Apartheid Narratives*. The Netherlands: Radopi. B. V., 2001. PP117-118

<sup>388</sup> Eilersen, Gillian Stead. *Bessie Head: Thunder Behind Her Ears. Her life and Writing*. London: Heinemann, 1995. P103

<sup>389</sup> Ibrahim, Huma. Ed. *Emerging Perspectives on Bessie Head*. Trenton: African World Press Inc., 2004. P54

<sup>390</sup> Ibid.

<sup>391</sup> Pathania, Shivalik Katoch. Op. Cit. P14-15

<sup>392</sup> Ibid. P10-11

Head who became more and more interested in spirituality, transcendence and the soul. Desiree Lewis argues that this fascination with Eastern philosophies came as a reaction to the Western “rationalist and liberal-humanist traditions she was exposed to as a child and student in Natal”<sup>393</sup>. The latter adds that spirituality in the West is often defined by “creed and religious dogma”, and is then seen as “part of, rather than as a challenge to, restrictive thought”<sup>394</sup>. Spirituality, as Head encounters it in the East, is more liberating and all-embracing; contrary to the West, in Hinduism there is no separation between “the spiritual” and “the worldly”<sup>395</sup>, an aspect that broadened Head’s vision of human experience and the world. The soul, according to this tradition, cannot be limited by historical time, race, nor nation, but must be understood in terms of the universal, and is endowed with the capacity to bring change, even if not in the immediate time. This point is explained by Maria Olausson as follows:

Head’s idea of the universal nature of the human soul must be understood through the concept of transmigration. Head combines this with Darwinian concepts of evolution in order to develop a theory of soul-evolution, in which transmigration and reincarnation are seen as something positive because they give the soul the chance to specialize in something over thousands of years.<sup>396</sup>

This is a broad conception of the spiritual that includes the “worldly” as well: The soul, we understand, has a certain role to perform in the world which is not limited by time, as it reincarnates throughout the generations. On one hand, this Eastern conception of spirituality focuses on the universal and the transcendent dimension of the soul, and on the other hand, gives importance to its worldly dimension. Thus, Head’s universalism is not Western oriented, but developed along the lines of Eastern philosophies. Moreover, the fact that the worldly dimension of the soul is emphasized indicates an awareness of the socio-historical dimension- these points are clearly reflected in her work which cannot, thus, be said to neglect social and cultural factors as claimed by critics.

Western influences were also important in shaping Head’s unique mode of writing. Just like other Anglophone writers, Head was exposed to the classics of Western literature. Two writers especially seem to have had an important impact on her, namely: D. H. Lawrence

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<sup>393</sup> Lewis, Desiree. Op. Cit. P12

<sup>394</sup> Ibid. p11

<sup>395</sup> Ibid.

<sup>396</sup> Olausson, Maria. *Forceful Creation in Harsh Terrain: Place and Identity in Three Novels by Bessie Head*. Frankfurt and Main: Peter Lang, 1997. P155

and Bertold Brecht. From Lawrence, Head adopted “the ability to deal with life with its myriad shades and textures”<sup>397</sup>. Head’s concern with life at a broad perspective is inspired from Lawrence’s work where he transcends race, class, or national boundaries. On the other hand, Brecht inspired her by his sense of practicality, and hence immediate concern with the social environment. We might say that Brecht’s realism counter-balances Lawrence’s transcendence to create in Head’s work an interesting mixture of two seemingly contradictory aspects, that she is very well aware of:

There’re two sorts of persons in me. There’s a practical person: I love the everyday world and the things that people do with their hands. Then there’s somebody attracted by the mystery and riddle of life- there’s another person in me like that. The two writers who had the greatest influence on me in my youth were the German playwright Bertolt Brecht, and the English writer D. H. Lawrence. Bertolt Brecht in the sense that he insisted that the writer be practical. [...] Brecht with his insistence on practicality, that the artist is a servant in a very real sense, that the artist concentrates on social problems, influenced my writing. [...] The other writer who had a huge influence on the type of person that I am- because there was a period when I wanted to read nothing else- was the British writer D. H. Lawrence. It was the things Lawrence explored, Lawrence’s huge view of life.<sup>398</sup>

Head was aware of two opposed aspects in her which are present in her writing as well: A sense of practicality and commitment to one’s immediate social environment, and the need for departure beyond borders towards a broader universal platform. These two aspects, merged together, made for her unique conception of commitment in art, different from that espoused by her contemporary African writers.

S. K. Pathania clearly states Head’s main difference from the other African writers, which is in refusing to “classify her work in terms of nation, race, color or class as she had the desire to be accepted globally”<sup>399</sup>. In fact, she directly addresses the African writer as follows: “The African writer ought to look out over the world and see mankind”<sup>400</sup>. Head considers politics, race and nation limiting, and calls for transcending them and reach for mankind. In the following quotation, she completely assumes this non-political commitment as follows:

I think that our only education in South Africa, as black people, is a political one. We learn bitterly, every day, the details of oppression and exploitation so that a writer automatically feels pressured into taking a political stand of some kind or identifying with a camp. It was important for my development to choose a broader platform for my work, so I have avoided political camps and

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<sup>397</sup>Pathania, Shivalik Katoch. Op. Cit. P12

<sup>398</sup>Mackenzie, Graig and Cherry Clayton. Ed. Op. Cit. P8-9

<sup>399</sup>Pathania, Shivalik Katoch. Op. Cit. P2

<sup>400</sup>Lewis, Desiree.Op. Cit. P22

ideologies because I feel that they falsify truth. It was necessary for me to concentrate directly on people [...].<sup>401</sup>

This quotation shows that Head is aware of the socio-political issues that devastate the Southern African context, and feels that it exercises on the writer a kind of oppression, obliging him/her to take sides. She clearly says that “political camps” and “ideologies” are limiting and falsifying the truth, arguing that the true concern must be with people. Hence she opts for the broader platform of universalist humanism, which she considers more authentic.

The human dimension of Head’s work is very well explained in the words of S. K.Pathania who gives an interesting comment on her novel, *Maru*- a comment that can in fact be applied to her work in general:

Head successfully imparts to the novel a universal significance by delineating ordinary people who do extraordinary things. The pain, the agony and the tension Head portrays is common to every man irrespective of nation, class, colour or creed.<sup>402</sup>

So, Head transcends in her work the boundaries of race, class, and creed, and gives it a broader, universal dimension by focusing on the worlds of ordinary people and exploring their humanity. However, this universal dimension is to be ill-received in a postcolonial context that, as we have seen in the introduction, urgently calls for social and political commitment. Doreen Brown comments on this point as follows:

Many Third World critics and writers view the idea of universalism with some misgivings, because they fear that it might eclipse “important social and cultural determinants” of their own national writing. Other critics and writers view the term “universalist” with some suspicion, feeling that when this label is applied to their writing it is a form of Eurocentric appropriation.<sup>403</sup>

According to this critic, two reasons for this fear of universalism are the neglect of social and cultural factors, important to give the work a specific African identity, and the “European appropriation” of it- and indeed, Head’s work was better appreciated in the Western world than in the African. Desiree Lewis argues that these critics rejected Head’s work because of her “deviation from existing political standards”, i. e.: her failure to express a clear socio-political stance. Interesting examples are mentioned by Head herself regarding the

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<sup>401</sup>Mackenzie, Craig. Ed. *Head, Bessie. A Woman Alone: Autobiographical Writings*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1990. P63

<sup>402</sup> Ibid. P56

<sup>403</sup> Brown, Doreen. *The Creative Vision of Bessie Head*. U. S.: Rosenot Publishing & Printing Corp., 2003. P29

reception of her work; she says: “A Lecturer in Nigeria found a coldness and detachment in my writing that was un-African”<sup>404</sup>. The “Coldness” and “detachment” felt by this lecturer might indicate a lack of direct reference to the African context with which he could identify, and a remoteness of the writer- two aspects he deems to be “un-African”. Another example is that of a Zimbabwe student who said to her: “We read Ngugi, Achebe, Ayi Kwei Armah, and we find things that we can identify with. But with you we are disoriented and thrown into Western literature”<sup>405</sup>. This student clearly expresses this lack of identification, and qualifies her work as disorienting and Western oriented. Head is fully aware of this as she clearly gives priority to the human when she declares: “Before one is necessarily black, one is first a storyteller- mankind’s storyteller”<sup>406</sup>. This statement shows that Head, as a writer, does not have a specifically black African audience in mind, but simply addresses humanity in general. Head’s failure to express a purely African nationalist sentiment, and to appeal to a specific black audience are the factors that led to the rejection of her work as “uncommitted”, and worse, akin to Western literature- the literature of the colonizer. Indeed, there are broad universal themes in Head’s work that can be tackled by any author regardless of his/her origins; yet, Head is also concerned with the same issues tackled by her contemporaries as well, such as poverty, oppression, racism and injustice. The solutions she proposes are, however, different, as they are sought, in the words of Cecil A. Abraham, “in the dark recesses of the human soul”, the sole “responsible for good as well as evil”<sup>407</sup>. The Eastern and Western influences, translated into spiritualism, social commitment, and the broad concern with life and humanity in general, together with her social background, differentiated Head from other African writers who were more politically engaged, and sought solutions in immediate action. These factors combined to create Head’s particular, unique sense of commitment. Her work, thus, cannot be deemed simply Western oriented, but seeks a complex treatment of the African character through placing it at a broad human perspective.

Arthur Ravenscroft describes Head’s novels as being:

[S]trange, ambiguous, deeply personal books which initially do not seem to be ‘political’ in any ordinary sense of the word. On the contrary, any reader with either Marxist or Pan-Africanist

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<sup>404</sup> Mackenzie, Graig and Cherry Clayton. Ed. Op. Cit. P12

<sup>405</sup> Ibid.

<sup>406</sup> Ibid.

<sup>407</sup> Abrahams, Cecil. Ed. *The Tragic Life: Bessie Head and Literature in Southern Africa*. Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc., 1990. P8

political affinities is likely to be irritated by the seeming emphasis on the quest for personal contentment, the abdication of political kingship<sup>408</sup>.

So, with Head, we are far from the simplistic view of African works as mere social documents, where the writer just seeks solutions to immediate socio-political problems; Head's novels are complex and challenging, because they have important moral and aesthetic dimensions to explore. This can be explained by Head's own conception of art, as she declares: "I only feel sure that the main function of a writer is to make life magical and to communicate a sense of wonder"<sup>409</sup>. This "magical" effect and "sense of wonder" are indeed what the novel under study communicates.

On the first impression, *Maru* seems to be a beautiful romance and a fairy tale: it tells the story of Margaret Cadmore who settles as a teacher in a remote village in Dilepe, Bostwana. She is brilliant, well read and composed, but she causes much irritation in the village because she happens to be a Masarwa, a Bushman- a designation for the San people, considered an inferior race, and taken as slaves for generations. Maru, the future village chief, immediately decides to marry her the moment he sees her, and the novel ends with this "romantic" marriage, with Maru renouncing all his social privileges to settle with her in a remote house. The magic and wonder Head evokes are achieved through the plot, the noble stature of the characters, and also the imagery. However, these are only surface aspects that are underscored by "the urgent social message, the complex inner conflict, and unresolved ambiguities which form the core of this unusual novel"<sup>410</sup>. In fact, this more immediate and realistic dimension of the novel can also be attributed to Head's other conception of art, as she declares:

Eventually writing begins to seem like any other everyday chore. There is this strong practical side to me, so that the things of the everyday world have high priority in all my works. Everything that is related to the everyday world is much more lovely than anything else. I remember very well saying, because that was one of my attitudes, "Not the special 'lily-white' artist, but somebody who touches the earth".<sup>411</sup>

We clearly see in this novel the mixture of Head's broadness of vision and sense of commitment, her idealism and realism. Yet, these two aspects are not to be considered

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<sup>408</sup> Arthur Ravenscroft in: Heywood, Christopher. Ed. *Aspects of South African Literature*. Heinemann, 1976. P175

<sup>409</sup> Mackenzie, Craig. Ed. Op. Cit. P67

<sup>410</sup> Eilersen, Gillian Stead. Op. Cit. P114

<sup>411</sup> Mackenzie, Graig. And Cherry Clayton. Ed. Op. Cit. P24

separately or in opposition to one another, but in terms of the way they merge and contribute to formulate Head's very personal sense of commitment which, because it is seemingly misunderstood, alienated her from the other African writers. As Virginia Ola puts it, "Head's idealism [...] takes full cognizance of the brutal realism of the world in which it is meant to be realized"<sup>412</sup>.

We will presently analyze the different ways Head's unique commitment is manifested in *Maru* - this balance between the ideal and the practical, the spiritual and the worldly, the immediate and the transcendent is seen in three major points, namely, the soul, art, and the novel's ambiguous ending. We will demonstrate that the morality Head articulates in her work does not consist of simple and straightforward codes of behavior, but rather emanates from the rich and complex inner worlds of the very special characters she creates.

1) *Maru*:

a) Kings and Queens of the Soul: The New Leaders

Throughout our analysis of the two protagonists, Maru and Margaret, as well as the other characters related to them, we shall explore the way Head manages to bring together, in perfect harmony, the spiritual and the practical, the universal and the immediate, and bring to light Head's special conception of commitment. Many African critics and readers were dissatisfied with these characters because they failed to identify with them, being remote from the African reality, too Western-like in their individuality, and even contradictory. We will attempt to demonstrate that these readings are due to a misconception of Head's intent: Unlike other African writers, Head does not create characters through their unique social dimension, but is interested in their inner worlds as well in which, she is convinced, lays the solution of all evils in society.

• Maru:

Maru appears to the readers as an unconventional hero in every sense of the word as defined in the Western and the African traditions. According to Western standards, a hero is an elevated figure, different from and superior to the common people, and hence often misunderstood and alienated from society. The focus is on his inner world which is highly rich and complex, that does not seem to fit in with the external context, but would better prosper in another time. This modern Western hero is not a representative of the values of

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<sup>412</sup>Virginia Ola in: Abrahams, Cecil. Ed. Op. Cit. P62

his society, which in fact he rejects, and advocates instead other standards that can be appreciated only by the few and the enlightened. On the other hand, the African hero is the complete anti-thesis of the former: He is a figure who belongs to his society, who lives in harmony with its values and traditions, and who is, then, its perfect representative and defender. The conventional African hero fits perfectly in his external context which defines his personality. Contrary to the Western hero, the inner world is not highlighted, and is often obscured by his high social stature. Maru is an unconventional hero because he seems to blend together these two seemingly contradictory conceptions: The individualistic Western hero and the social African one.

From the beginning of the novel, Maru emerges before us as an imposing, charismatic leader and a respected village chief; but we are soon presented, besides this external portrayal, with a rich and complex inner world, as the narrator says: "Who else was a born leader of men, yet at the same time acted out his own, strange inner perceptions, independent of the praise or blame of men?"<sup>413</sup>. On one hand, Maru is depicted as a man born with the necessary qualities to be a leader, a village chief, but on the other hand, he possesses a complex subjectivity and individuality which make him rise above any kind of social consideration, in the sense that he does not necessarily comply with social norms or conventions. According to this portrayal, we might assume that Head constructs the character of Maru around the conventional dichotomy between the practical social life and the subjective inner world nourished by ideals and fantasies. However, we cannot hold this assumption for long, as she has the narrator say:

There was so little to disturb his heart in his immediate environment. It was here where he could communicate freely with all the magic and beauty inside him. There had never been a time in his life when he had not thought a thought and felt it immediately bound to the deep center of the earth, then bound back to his heart again- with a reply. P223

We clearly see here that Maru's subjectivity is not disturbed by the external environment; in fact, Head establishes an almost organic link between the immediate environment, represented through "earth", and this abstract inner world of Maru, as every thought he formulates is echoed through the earth. Head shows us that these two worlds, the external and the internal, do not need to be in perpetual conflict, but can be, on the contrary,

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<sup>413</sup> Head, Bessie. *When Rain Clouds Gather and Maru* (1971). United Kingdom: Virago Modern Classics, 2010. PP221-222 (All references to this work are taken from the same source)

brought together in harmony. So, when the narrator declares that Maru has a “vision of a new world”, we understand that it is not just remote and idealistic, but is in constant contact with the actual world around; as S. K. Pathania puts it, Maru has “a vision of a new world which is both spiritual and earth-bound”<sup>414</sup>. This is an instance that shows Head’s attempt to merge the “ideal” and the “practical” for the creation of a new conception of a world order which would be based, we are told, on justice and equality. Moreover, the narrator affirms that there is inside Maru “magic” and “beauty”, words carefully chosen by Head for their significance and appeal; indeed, they are meant to call for the readers’ admiration and respect, as well as for their sense of transcendence. Head exhorts us to broaden our vision, to transcend our conventional understanding of the world in order to understand and appreciate the aspirations and actions of this very particular personality. The new world that Maru dreams about is a world free of racial hatred and discrimination. We understand from the novel that society is the source of this evil called racism. Head offers here a conception of human existence that is very close to that of the Western Romantic thinkers who claimed that man is born good, and that he gets corrupt by society. Racism, in the following passage, is described as an evil that emerges out of any kind of social gathering:

[Wherever] mankind had gathered itself together in a social order, the same things were happening. There was a mass of people with no humanity to whom another mass referred: Why, they are naturally like that. They like to live in such filth. They have been doing it for centuries. P277

Society, we understand, has always been the source of such evil as racism, in any time and place. Head here universalizes racism, presenting it as being peculiar to mankind in general, and not to a specific society. We need to refer to an important quotation where Head brings to light, in a deeply poignant way, this question of racism as created by people regardless of their race or culture:

Before the white man became universally disliked for his mental outlook, it was there. The white man found only too many people who looked different. That was all that outraged the receivers of his discrimination, that he applied the technique of the wild jiggling dance and the rattling tin cans to anyone who was not a white man. And if the white man thought that Asians were a low, filthy nation, Asians could still smile with relief- at least they were not Africans. And if the white man thought Africans were a low, filthy nation, Africans in Southern Africa could still smile- at least they were not bushmen. P226

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<sup>414</sup> Pathania, S. K. Op. Cit. p70

Head clearly states here that racism is not specifically an evil created by the white man against black people, but has always existed, even among black people themselves- it is born out of the necessity of any social group to affirm its superiority, which is possible only through looking down at another social group. As Pathania puts it, “Maru is Head’s attempt to universalize racial hatred, pointing out that victims often seek other victims lower in status and power than themselves”<sup>415</sup>.

The solution to get rid of this evil is to escape from this external world towards the inner world of the human soul, capable of transcending all these social barriers, as is suggested in the following quotation:

There was a world apart from petty human hatreds and petty human social codes and values where the human soul roamed free in all its splendour and glory. No barrier of race or creed or tribe hindered its activity. P276

Head affirms that there exists a world where social codes and values have no importance, and where race and religion are insignificant: The world of the soul, the human soul, with its grandeur and magnificence, is superior to all these barriers. Yet, we understand that what is needed is the key to unlock its door and reach it; Maru found the key to this inner world which enabled him to see the nature of evil and the necessity to end it and free humanity from it. In the following quotation, Maru meditates on racism and the birth of the new world he dreams about:

Should he (Maru) bother to explain to her (Dikeledi) the language of the voices of the gods who spoke of tomorrow? That they were opening doors on all sides, for every living thing on earth, that there would be a day when everyone would be free and no one the slave of another? That people no longer needed chiefs and kings and figure heads who wore dazzling garments and ruled with the philosophy that there was never enough, so those who had had to put their foot down on those who had not? New kings were arising indeed. The stature and majesty would always be there, but the kings who arose now were those of the soul who could never betray their gods of goodness, compassion, justice and truth. The downtrodden were hearing the message of their humanity. Who could contain the fury of centuries of oppression and despising? Certainly not the Morafis of the world. But people like himself, to whom a little bit of goodness was incompatible with a little bit of greed. There had to be perfection. It had to be almost ready-made, for use. PP277-278

This is the new world that Maru dreams about and hopes to reach- a world free of racial prejudice, characterized by equality and freedom; a world where people still needed leaders, “kings” and “chiefs”, but not in the archaic sense, not that kind of leaders who imposed their superiority on their people to oppress and exploit them. What was needed

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<sup>415</sup>Pathania, S. K. Op. Cit. p17

was another kind of “kings”: “those of the soul”- who still maintained their eminence, not through their social or political position, but through their ability to listen to their inner voices, defined as “their gods of goodness, compassion, justice and truth”. The point is that they are kings of the soul because they can hear these voices of goodness in them, and never betray them for evil pursuits. These kings of the soul would help then awaken the humanity of the oppressed, silenced by centuries of racial hatred, and thus effect their liberation and bring into being this ideal new world.

This is the way Head envisions change- a return into the recesses of the soul, and rediscovery of its potential goodness, which she considers innate. This rediscovery starts with a few elect individuals who are naturally endowed with this capacity to hear “the voices” of goodness, and then be able to lead people throughout this journey into their souls to effect the revival of their humanity. Maru is such an individual, “to whom a little bit of goodness was incompatible with a little bit of greed”. With these words, Head asserts that goodness takes an almost complete precedence over evil in Maru, and thus reaching perfection. Then, we feel that Head hastens to defend this point to convince the skeptics by saying; “There had to be perfection. It had to be almost ready-made for use”. The repetition of the word “had” twice suggests that Head feels the necessity to believe in the possibility of the existence of these individuals, without whom change cannot be realized.

Maru is thus a king of the soul who never betrays his voices of goodness, and is endowed with the necessary qualities to lead people towards a better world. However, we do not see him act as such- teaching people and guiding them towards the right way. There are passages in the novel that indicate the kind of personality he has, which does not really correspond to our conception of a leader of this stature; Ranko and Moleka are two close and devout friends of Maru who, the narrator says, “both wanted to protect a personality too original to survive in an unoriginal world” (P260). This description further stresses the superiority of Maru as a king of the soul and a harbinger of change; yet, it suggests also frailty or weakness, hence the need for protection. Maru’s originality is incompatible with the external world, and hence needs protection in order to survive in a world peopled by all kinds of evil. Maru is held up as a precious being that must be handled with care. In the following quotation, we understand why the world is so “unoriginal” for Maru; speaking with his sister he declares:

'When you think of me', he said, 'you think of me as they all do, that I am their public property to be pushed around and directed by what they think is right and good for me. Has it not occurred to you that I might despise, even loathe them? Three quarters of the people in this continent are like Morafi, Seth and Pete- greedy, grasping, back-stabbing, a betrayal of all the good in mankind. I was not born to rule this mess. If I have a place it is to pull down the old structures and create the new. Not for me any sovereignty over my fellow men. I'd remove the blood money, the cruelty and crookery from the top, but that's all. There's a section of my life they will never claim or own.' P277

The world for Maru is unoriginal because of people like Morafi, Seth and Pete who represent all that is bad in humanity, "betrayal of all the good in mankind". It is interesting to explore the contrasting way in which Head builds Maru's personality: On one hand, he is the perfect leader, the creator of an ideal new world, but on the other hand, he does not behave like a prophet who came to heal and redeem the ills of the world through some miracle. Maru's discourse pushes us back to the ugly reality of men, and suggests that there's no magical solution to that. Maru despises these people who are the majority, and asserts that he was not born to rule them. He does not seek sovereignty over people, he just wants to remove the evil, and then withdraw to live his own life. Head portrays thus the personality of a leader that contrasts with the real political leaders of post independent African countries, whose only aim is to seek worldly prestige and wealth.

The originality of the leader Head portrays through Maru is suggested in the interesting play on the words "men" and "people" in the novel: As we have already seen earlier, Maru is described as "a born leader of men", naturally gifted with the qualities to lead "men"; but here, in the following lines, he is presented as being deprived of the necessary qualities to rule people and the masses: "His was not the kind of personality to rule the masses. They knew it and disliked him for never being there on show"(P261). A leader of "masses" and a leader of "men", Head suggests, are completely different: Whereas the former makes us think of that kind of leaders who accumulate large meetings with people in order to manipulate them with beautiful speeches about development and a better future, without necessarily bringing all their promises into being, and taking advantage of their position in every possible way, the latter's task is to guide people in their inner journey to discover their humanity and to exploit for the best their potential goodness. Maru is never "on show", because his aspirations are deeper and bigger than that. This is further stressed in the following lines when the narrator adds: "he was highly popular among ordinary people. His manner towards everyone was of courteous, informal respect. Disciples like Dikeledi

copied him in everything. He set the tone seemingly, for a new world” (P261). Ordinary people like him because of his courtesy and respect, and the people who are close to him, such as Dikeledi, Ranko and Moleka, love him, and are turned into disciples who would copy and follow his doctrine. This is the kind of leadership Head attributes to Maru, articulated in his ability to affect the inner worlds of people around him. The change expected, the one that would lead to the creation of the idyllic new world Maru dreams about, lies in people’s souls: “this is the direction in which the novel has been straining all along: the liberation of the individual soul and the attainment of spiritual perfection”<sup>416</sup>.

Another point in the novel which confirms that Maru is not a political leader in the conventional sense of the word is his final renouncement of power, and decision to leave the village and marry the woman he loves. This is one of the reasons why the novel was so unpopular among African critics and readers, who could not accept what they saw as a leader’s abandonment of his social responsibility for seemingly individualistic reasons. In fact, as one critic points out, this ending gained the approval of Western readers, being close to the individualism celebrated in their societies:

The plot of the story ends with Maru’s rejection of the chieftaincy, a revolutionary act which can only find sympathy in non-tribal cultures. In my view, a Mostwana’s conception of such an abdication would be at odds with the prevailing approval that Maru’s action has received from Western readers. In the main, his abdication is read at the personal level as a celebration of the individual over tyranny of society, and at the political level, it is seen as a symbolic subversion of the chieftaincy institution. Therefore, it can be suggested that Bessie Head’s vision of a better African society can only be built on the ruins of traditional African institutions.<sup>417</sup>

According to this reading, Head, through making Maru reject his position, is celebrating individualism, and is calling for the rejection of traditional African institutions that she considers oppressive. This explains the Western approval of *Maru* at its early publication, and the general African rejection of it. However, if this seems to be the most adequate reading of the novel, it is in fact simplistic, and does not account for the more complex issue Head is concerned with; as Arthur Ravenscroft puts it, “a more transparent imaging of the renouncement of political responsibility and power could hardly be devised. But with Bessie Head things are never so simple”<sup>418</sup>. Indeed, as we have seen, from the beginning, Maru’s complex subjectivity is asserted: Indeed, Head seems to create a veil of mystery over Maru’s

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<sup>416</sup>Gurmah, Abdulrazak. Ed. *Essays on African Writing: a Re-Evaluation*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1993. P120

<sup>417</sup>Ibrahim, Huma. Ed. Op. Cit. P65

<sup>418</sup>Heywood, Christopher. Ed. Op. Cit. P180

inner world which prevents us from taking anything about him or his actions for granted.

This is suggested in the following passage:

If they knew all that he knew, would they not have torn him to shreds some time ago, to keep the world the way it was where secrets and evil bore the same names? It was a vision of a new world that slowly allowed one dream to dominate his life. P223

Maru, we understand, is aware of things unknown to his people: a revolutionary vision of the world that goes against their definition of it as they know it, and this vision is translated into a dream that was to dominate his life: The abdication of power and marriage to a social outcast. However, this is never uttered by Maru, who keeps his ideas and plans for himself until their final execution; they are kept secret and referred to only vaguely as something sacred- too big to be explained in simple words.

Moreover, what makes Maru's ideas even more mysterious is the fact that they are whispered to him by the gods in his heart- a word carefully chosen by Head to suggest the magnificence of Maru and his plans. His abdication of power is thus presented as a mysterious, almost holy inner affair that transcends mere considerations of social position. At the opening of the novel, in the passage we have already quoted, Head prepares the readers for the strangeness of Maru's inner voices, which are described as "strange inner perceptions, independent of the praise or blame of men" (P222). This vague description indicates that his abdication of power, which issues from these "strange inner perceptions", that we can hardly understand, is not to be hastily judged. It can neither be praised by Westerners who acclaim individuality over social conventions, nor by Africans, who denounce it: Head asserts that it is broader than that. To see this abdication as a mere abandonment of responsibility is thus a superficial interpretation, as it must be considered at the spiritual level. Maria Olausson explains this point as follows:

This abdication is not to be seen as a protest against power as such or as an escape from responsibilities. It rather entails the idea of a different kind of power, a different rule with deeper consequences. [...] The purpose of abdication is to change the attitudes of the villagers. This change was to take place on such a deep level that it would put Maru's behaviour totally on the outside of anything that could be conceived of by them. He had to find a way of turning himself into an outcast so as to create a meaning in the minds he wanted to change.<sup>419</sup>

This confirms the stature of Maru as a king of the soul, whose aim is not to bring change at the superficial level of social and political institutions, but to the minds of the people, so

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<sup>419</sup>Olausson, Maria. Op. Cit. PP127-128

that revolution is to be first effected inside, in their souls. The following passage, which shows the reaction of people towards Maru's abdication, further clarifies the kind of change he aimed at:

When people of Dilepe village heard about the marriage of Maru, they began to talk about him as if he had died. A Dilepe diseased prostitute explained their attitude: 'Fancy', she said. 'He has married a Masarwa. They have no standards'. [...] By standards, she meant that Maru would have been better off had he married her. She knew how to serve rich clients their tea, on a snowy-white tablecloth, and she knew how to dress in the height of fashion. A lot of people were like her. They knew nothing about the standards of the soul, and since Maru only lived by those standards they had never been able to make a place for him in their society. They thought he was dead and would trouble them no more. How were they to know that many people shared Maru's overall ideals, that this was not the end of him, but a beginning? P330-331

This passage shows the extreme superficiality of many people of Dilepe who are not able to understand Maru, because they care only for appearances. All their values and endeavours seem petty and meaningless compared to "the standards of the soul" by which Maru lived, and which separated him from them; as M. Olausson puts it, "[in] opposition to their love of superficiality Maru establishes a different kind of kingdom which is not based on absolute equality but which looks at the quality of the person's inner life, the greatness of the soul"<sup>420</sup>. The change aimed at by Maru is spiritual.

In order to reach a fuller appreciation of the significance of Maru's abdication of power, we should take into consideration Head's own understanding of politics, which is explained in the words of Huma Ibrahim as follows:

For Head, the task of politics is to fight in order to procure, in the simplest possible terms, livable human conditions for everyone; and in this way she is political in the most profound sense.<sup>421</sup>

Head's concern with human nature, with the humanity of the individual rather than race, class or gender is political; she considers, the same critic adds, "political struggle as an understanding of humanity rather than race or class, or any other specific interest group"<sup>422</sup>. Maru's abandonment of power and dream to live in a remote place, far from any social group, following the "standards of the soul", is thus a political action "in the most profound sense". Hence, Head establishes in Maru her own understanding of politics, which is not the

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<sup>420</sup> Ibid. P170

<sup>421</sup> Ibrahim. Huma. *Subversive Identities in Exile*. Op. Cit. P153

<sup>422</sup> Ibid.

affirmation of belonging to any specific group, but to humanity in general, through an awakening of natural, innate goodness in the individuals' souls.

The personality of Maru is thus original, and represents Head's ideal conception of a leader. Yet, contrary to what we expect, Maru does not embody true spiritual perfection, which amounts to having a saint-like, untainted goodness manifested in all behaviour and acts. On the contrary, Maru is delineated as a mischievous man, a trickster who does not hesitate to use his power to manipulate people, even the closest to him, to achieve his aims. This is shown in the different plans he uses to get his friend and rival Moleka to marry his sister Dikeledi, and secures Margaret for himself. The narrator exclaims: "Half truths, outright lies, impossible rumours and sudden, explosive events were his stock in trade. He used them as a cover for achieving his goals. People would thwart him otherwise and he never liked to be side-tracked. He never cared about the means towards the end and who got hurt" (P293). This aspect of Maru has left many readers ill-at ease with his character; indeed, we are led to wonder how a visionary, a king of the soul such as Maru, resorts to such low means to realize such a high goal as social revolution. S. K. Pathania declares that Maru "is not really free from contradictions, between his vision of social equality and his means of achieving it"<sup>423</sup>. This ambivalence has been an important source of dissatisfaction for readers, who have found it difficult to account for these two contradictory aspects of Maru. Some critics even describe him as "a visionary" and "a demon"<sup>424</sup>. Having created this ambivalence, Head attempts to justify Maru's tricks and manipulations first in the novel as follows:

He liked his own dreams and visions. They created an atmosphere where not only he but humanity could evolve. They stretched across every barrier and taboo and lovingly embraced the impossible. There was no such thing as a slave or any man as an object of pity. But while he looked ahead to such a world, he was no fool. The vicious, the selfish, the cruel- those too he saw, and their capacity for creating misery. Where he could, he nailed them to the ground, but always alertly with no intention of becoming their victim. And he intended following his own heart without in any way becoming the victim of the stupid, senseless, cruel society into which he had been born. Hence his lies and evasions. P316

In this passage, the narrator first refers to the idealistic world-vision of Maru, one that does not fail to call for our admiration and respect: A world where equality among all men is established. However, in the second part of the passage, the narrator explains that Maru is not just an idealistic dreamer, detached from the brutal reality of the world; on the

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<sup>423</sup> Pathania, S. K. Op. Cit. P70

<sup>424</sup>Abrahams, Cecil. Ed. Op. Cit. P65

contrary, he is aware of the presence and power of evil, as embodied in the “vicious, the selfish, the cruel”. The narrator then finally asserts that in order not to be crushed by evil, Maru must fight back, and use “lies and evasions”. These manipulations and schemes show in Maru a strong sense of the reality; the critic Gillian Stead Eilersen provides an interesting comment on this point- referring to Maru’s tricks and other wrongs he commits in the novel; she says: “Despite extraordinary powers, he is still a human being with human weaknesses”<sup>425</sup>. Indeed, his propensity to lie and misuse people demonstrate that he is not a “messaiah”, devoid of flaws, but a simple human being; Head thus gives him a more realistic dimension.

Furthermore, it is important to note, he is able to control this evil side of his nature, and use it to reach his goal at the end. In fact, we are encouraged throughout the novel to concentrate more on the grandeur and magnificence of his stature as a visionary, a dreamer, rather than on those tricks and manipulations. Indeed, Head further provides a strong defense for Maru against the attacks of the critics as follows:

I want a new attitude towards racialism and so I create a highly vivid and original character. You have no alternative but to come up to his level. Now two things occur: Maru irritates people, and then they attack me. They say: “It’s deceitful, the things he does”. They attack the small things. He *boldly* acknowledges his deceit. He says, “I’m sorry, I’m stealing somebody else’s girl, but I’m *sorry*”. He knows that he is doing something bad. So he uses people- like Dikeledi- and tells her, “I’m sorry”, but she doesn’t understand what he’s sorry for. [...] At least he’s going to give you some new insights into racial prejudice and how he solves it with his gods in his heart. Now people don’t like to be swept away like this with the story. They stay down there and they say irritating things like: “But the dialogue’s dull”, “We don’t like him”, “Isn’t he deceitful”. They try to find some way to get rid of the story. But the story is intended to linger with its lessons and reflections.<sup>426</sup>

Head wants her readers to concentrate on the big issues Maru fights against, instead of what she considers as “the small things” he does. As readers, we need to ‘come up to his level’, in order to understand and hence appreciate this ‘highly vivid and original character’. Here, Head affirms that Maru is elevated above common people but, as we have seen, not through his social position, but through the whispering gods of his heart. Head here established the magnificence of Maru, insisting on his stature as a king of the soul, the realm where the full significance of the novel lies.

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<sup>425</sup>Eilersen, Gillian Stead. Op. Cit. P116

<sup>426</sup>Qt. In: Mackenzie, Graig. and Cherry Clayton. Ed. Op. Cit. P22-23

In sum, Head draws the portrait of an unconventional hero who, in his Western-like delineation, possesses a rich and complex inner world, and is elevated above the common people who fail to understand him. Yet, in his African dimension of a traditional village chief, he is at first respected by his people, and seen as a man who aims to redeem the ills of the society he lives in. Maru aspires to a better world, a world of justice and equality, and intends to bring it into being through effecting change in the inner worlds of the people, and not through some superficial social reform plans, as we would expect from a conventional political leader. The soul is the realm where change has to take effect in order to bring about a radical and permanent transformation of society. As we have seen, Head encourages us to concentrate on the big plans he has, instead of the 'small things' he does to realize them, showing that an idealist such as Maru belongs to the real world, full of cruelty and mishaps, and knows how to deal with it in order not to be crushed; this further differentiates him from the conventional portrayal of an idealist who would be too good, too naïve, and thus would be destroyed by the harsh reality. The morality Head proposes thus, through this very complex character, is unconventional, as she seems to say to the readers: Moral goodness lies within the individual's souls and in the aspirations he/she might have, not in the 'small' actions he/she does in order to realize them. This goes along with the pragmatism of thought according to which "the end justifies the means": Maru manipulates, uses tricks, lies in order to achieve his goals, but Head presents these as mere "small things", suggesting that they are not meant to make any victims, and advises us to look beyond them to appreciate the outcome: The moral betterment of individuals, and thus of society in general.

- Margaret:

Margaret is also a character whose rich, complex, subjective world is emphasized; in fact, at times we feel that she can even dwarf, in the jargon of the novel, Maru's inner kingdom. What makes this interesting is the fact that Head puts this complex subjectivity into a member of an oppressed tribe in Botswana, the Masarwa, raising thus important issues that we are to explore hereafter.

In order to get a better grasp of the situation evoked, a look at the way Head describes the Masarwas in the novel is necessary. The word "Masarwa" connotes racism, as it is 'the equivalent of "nigger", a term of contempt which means, obliquely, a low, filthy nation' (P225). The Masarwas, or Bushmen, are the victims of a demeaning treatment inflicted by

the other populations: considered “an oddity of the human race”, they are treated as animals, or less, and any demeaning act can be done to them because they are not supposed to mind; as is usually said about the oppressed, they cannot think for themselves. After this telling presentation of the Masarwas, the narrator presents Margaret’s origins as follows:

True enough, the woman who gave birth to a child on the outskirts of a remote village had the same thin, Masarwa stick legs and wore the same Masarwa ankle-length, loose shift dress which smelt strongly of urine and the smoke of outdoor fires. She had died during the night but the child was still alive and crying feebly when a passer-by noticed the corpse. P227

Head chooses to provide such a detailed description of Margaret’s biological mother in order to impress upon the readers’ minds her origins. Her deplorable physical condition and the suffering she went through, dying alone during the night of giving birth, and receiving neither medical care nor any kind of human assistance, are pretty shocking, and demonstrate the extent to which the Masarwas are ill-treated by the other communities. Head depicts here the immorality of racism in its ugliest and most terrible aspect, emphasizing the merciless persecution of a population, whose humanity is completely denied. We come then to wonder about the destiny of the child born in such terrible circumstances, simply guessing that it would endure the same harsh treatment by society; yet, a person is going to interfere with the destiny of this child, namely Margaret Cadmore, the wife of a white missionary.

Margaret Cadmore is described as a woman with a strong personality- as one who has “common sense” in “over abundance” (P228). This virtue, the narrator adds, “made her timeless, as though she could belong to any time, but always on the progressive side” (P228). Common sense by definition is “a basic ability to perceive, understand, and judge things that are shared by (“common to”) nearly all people and can reasonably be expected of nearly all people without need for debate”<sup>427</sup>. Cadmore senior has this capacity for discernment that is based on immediate experience, without any reliance on pre-acquired knowledge, be it religious, scientific, or cultural. She has the kind of intelligence that allows one to adapt to any kind of situation in any time- this explains the timelessness of Cadmore. We notice also from this caricature-like description of this character that there is no

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<sup>427</sup> “Common sense”, Wikipedia.  
[en.wikipedia.org]

reference to emotionality; indeed, even her decision to adopt the child does not come out from her compassion for the latter's unfortunate situation, but from her said "common sense". This is shown in the following passage:

As she put the child to bed that night in her own home, her face was aglow. She had a real, living object for her experiment. Who knew what wonder would be created? P230

The child, to whom the white woman gave her name, is just a scientific experiment through which she is about to test one of her favourite theories: "environment everything; heredity nothing". She gives the adopted child an education, and hence the opportunity to change the dreaded destiny that awaits her as "a bushman", and the wonder is indeed created.

Margaret Cadmore junior, to whom we will refer to as Margaret, is thus given the opportunity to go to school and receive an education; however, because of her physical appearance, she is constantly persecuted, from her early childhood until her adulthood: "There was no one in later life who did not hesitate to tell her that she was a Bushman, mixed breed, half breed, low breed, or bastard" (P230). In addition, despite the protection and care of her educator, she did not have the affection provided by a mother, necessary for the healthy development of any child. Yet, despite these difficulties, or thanks to them, Margaret develops a rich and complex subjectivity that allows her to transcend the harshness of the external world; this is pointed out by the narrator as follows:

Her mind and heart were composed of a little bit of everything she had absorbed from Margaret Cadmore. It was hardly African or anything but something new and universal, a type of personality that would be unable to fit into a definition of something as narrow as tribe or race or nation. PP230-231

Margaret thus developed an original type of personality that cannot be defined in terms of tribe, race, or nation, but beyond, reaching a universal dimension. This shows Head's concern with the human potential of the individual, rather than his tribal or racial belonging, that she considers restrictive. Here she explores this potential in an outcast, presenting it as the only, last refuge from oppression. This escape into the inner self is further emphasized by the narrator, who affirms that she learns from her educator the means "to gain control over the only part of life that would be hers, her mind and soul" (P231). This inner universe, we understand, cannot be taken away from her; Huma Ibrahim tackles this point and explains it in terms of survival as follows:

Historically, part of the survivalist identity politics of Black South Africans has been to develop something that could not be taken away. Religion plays that role in Southern Africa- and indeed the same patterns could be traced for Afroamerican spiritual interests and history. The phenomenon of a religious and spiritual identity, where, regardless of external suffering, one can still be human, was a recurring theme for Head.<sup>428</sup>

Indeed, through Margaret, Head emphasizes the importance of keeping this “spiritual identity” intact, despite the difficulties and demands of the external world- a spiritual identity that foregrounds the humanity of the persecuted that is impossible to take away. Head thus presents the soul as a refuge from external blows, as well as an affirmation of one’s humanity in the face of the oppressor whose main goal is to deny it. This is indeed what allows Margaret to survive the oppression and discrimination she daily undergoes in her life. This inner kingdom which contrasts with Margaret’s outward manners, is manifested mainly in the impact she has on the other characters she encounters, such as Moleka, Dikeledi and Maru.

Margaret, despite her high education and inner fortitude, is presented as a shy, passive person, who seems afraid of the external world. Her heart was always “quiet and repressed”, and for whom walking into a shop to buy food is “a bold act”. Her general demeanor expresses fragility and fear, particularly in her habit of raising her hand as if to ward off blows, which pushes the truck driver who takes her to her new home to tell her: “You must not be so afraid of the world, Mistress” he said kindly. ‘People can’t harm you” (P236). This draws an image of Margaret as a frail and sensitive woman who needs protection from the external world; yet this is only an outward appearance: Dikeledi presents it as a veil that hides another, contrastively different personality; she says: “she was a shadow behind which lived another personality of great vigor and vitality... you were never sure whether she was greater than you or inferior, because of this constant flux and interchange between her two images” (PP279-280). In fact, the strength of this strong, hidden personality is shown in her ability to affect the other characters, just like what we have seen with Maru. For example, she instantly generates the respect and friendship of Dikeledi who feels the urge to protect her, and Ranko’s devotion for her. As Annie Gagiano puts it, these instances “are all proof of Margaret’s “hidden power”, and her ability to elicit

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<sup>428</sup> Ibrahim. Huma. *Bessie Head: Subversive Identities in Exile*. Op. Cit. P39

people's finest feelings"<sup>429</sup>. Yet, the greatest impact Margaret seems to have made is on Moleka.

Moleka is the son of a chief whose arrogance is exemplified in his driving, which is careless, "making goats and people jump" (P242) on his way. He is also a man who has developed the reputation of a womanizer who, "at the end of a love affair, [...] would smile in the way he smiled when he made people and goats jump out of his path, outrage in their eyes" (P247). Yet, behind this façade of ruthlessness, there is depth and spirituality- in fact, Moleka has an inner kingdom of his own, which makes of him "the only person who was [ Maru's ] equal" (P247). The narrator juxtaposes the two characters' kingdoms as follows:

They were kings of opposing kingdoms. It was Moleka's kingdom that was unfathomable, as though shut behind a heavy iron door. There had been no such door for Maru. He dwelt everywhere. [...] They alone loved each other, but they were opposed because they were kings. [...] There was no knowing what was behind the closed door of Moleka's kingdom. Maru had no key to it, but he knew of its existence because if he touched Moleka's heart with some word or gesture a cloud would lift and he would see a rainbow of dazzling light. P247

Moleka has a kingdom of his own, which is described as opposed to Maru's. However, Moleka's kingdom is said to be hidden behind "a heavy iron door", to which no one seems to have found the key. Its richness, strength and beauty are represented through the "rainbow of dazzling light" that Maru is given to see when he reaches it only occasionally. Yet, Margaret instantly succeeds to find this precious key: Indeed, on their very first meeting, Margaret is able to see directly through Moleka, and perceive the latter's inner kingdom; this is carefully narrated as follows:

A moment ago he had been a hateful, arrogant man. Now, he had another face which made him seem the most beautiful man on earth. It was only his eyes, as though a stormy sky had cleared. What was behind was a rainbow of dazzling light. Though unaware of any feeling, something inside her chest went 'bang!' Her mouth silently shaped the word 'Oh'; and she raised her hand towards her heart. P243

Margaret is thus able to go instantly beyond Moleka's surface appearance of arrogance and ruthlessness, and perceive the beauty of his inner kingdom, exactly as his closest friend Maru does, but only on rare occasions. This ability denotes a hidden power which can even be bigger than Maru's. The latter, as we have seen, lifts the cloud that hides Moleka's kingdom through some word or gesture, but Margaret just sees it without any effort.

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<sup>429</sup> Gagliano, Annie. *Achebe, Head, Marechera: On Power and Change in Africa*. London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000. P150

Moleka's kingdom impacts greatly on Margaret who immediately falls in love with him; after this encounter, the narrator says that "she was no longer lonely" (P244). However, it is the impact made on Moleka that is emphasized as it is repeatedly referred to throughout the novel. In the following passage he compares her to Dikeledi, with whom he has often entertained an unstable relationship:

With Dikeledi it was always distractions. She was too beautiful, physically. With the woman there were no distractions at all. He had communicated directly with her heart. It was that which was a new experience and which had so unbalanced him. P245

The spiritual depth of Margaret thus goes beyond any possible physical distraction; the encounter with her inner world completely amazes him, as if, finally, he has found his true equal, as far as women are concerned. In the following passage, Moleka interestingly compares Margaret to someone else:

All the force of her life was directed to her eyes, as though that were the only living part of her. Something killed the old Moleka in a flash and out of one death arose, in a flash a new Moleka. It was the first time he had spoken to a woman in humility, but not the first time he had felt humbled by some quality in another living being. He screwed up his eyes, puzzled. Some other person prepared him for his encounter with the woman. There was something eluding him and he could not immediately remember the other person. There was someone like her, someone who walked into a room and made no impact but, when you turned around again, they owned your whole life. P245

In the first part of the passage, the narrator says that Margaret's inner force killed in a flash the old Moleka, achieving a complete transformation which is presented as a rebirth- a new coming to life. At this stage we do not know exactly what the new Moleka is like, but what is striking in this passage is the powerful diction Head uses to describe Moleka's transformation: Killing; death, rebirth, words that impress upon the readers the strength and violence of the impact. In the remaining part of the passage, Moleka goes on to compare Margaret with someone he knows but is not able to identify. This other person has the same humbling quality, and is the one who prepared him for such an encounter. This person who is just "like" Margaret is, we easily guess, Maru; Head carefully prepared the readers to be able to identify this other person Moleka refers to- for who else in the novel possesses such inner depth? Hence, Margaret is presented, even before the meeting with Maru, as his equal, who has an inner kingdom of her own, and is capable of affecting other people's lives: she is, in the words of the novel, a "queen of the soul".

The transformation that Moleka undergoes is not only felt by himself, but is also perceived by Maru who, as we have seen, can see through people; this is described in the following passage where, listening as usual to the gods in his heart, who pushed him to “move blindly into something”, Maru ascended the stairs to his office to find Moleka seated there:

Moleka looked up. At first Maru blinked, thinking he saw almost a replica of himself before him. The savage, arrogant Moleka was no longer there, but some other person like himself- humbled and defeated before the beauty of the living world. P267

The first reaction of Maru is that of extreme astonishment: Looking at Moleka is like looking at his own reflection on a mirror. Moleka is now humbled, just like Maru. Furthermore, Maru ponders on this change and the cause of it, further articulating its nature: “How was it that nothing sealed my doors? I always knew who I was. Moleka had to wait until his door was opened by another hand” (P268). Moleka’s transformation is thus presented in terms of a confrontation with his inner world and a kind of recognition and acceptance of it; “the Moleka who found it too dangerous to allow his mind to soar off the ground” is forced, after the encounter with Margaret, to look deep into his soul.

The impact Margaret made on Moleka is much dwelt on in the novel- it is presented as a rebirth, a dive into the depth, which led to the emergence of another “king of the soul”. For a person to have such an impact is a mark of superiority, for, as Maru says, “who else made a god overnight but a goddess?”(P276). Moreover, at the first encounter, what is suggested is that Margaret is even superior to Maru:

Almost everyone groveled before him, because of his position. But she had looked down at him, indifferently, from a great height, where she was more than his equal. It had nothing to do with the little bit of education she acquired from a missionary. P273

Margaret’s superiority is strongly marked here: On one hand, she does not know Maru and his status of a future village chief, which partly explains her casual attitude towards him; on the other hand, the narrator seems to suggest that she is spiritually superior to him when he adds that her attitude does not emanate from her upbringing. This last statement serves to diminish in our minds the impact of Margaret Cadmore Senior in the development of Margaret’s personality, and to concentrate on the latter’s fortitude as being particular to her.

Thus, Margaret turns out to have a rich spiritual universe, forged out of pain and suffering from her Masarwa origin which lowered her, in the eyes of the society, to the level of non-

human. The education she received from the white woman helped her to get a better life than her fellow Masarwas and, more importantly, to have control over the only part of her life that cannot be affected by external assaults: “her mind and soul”. This delve inside the self allowed her to survive the harsh environment and to develop a very strong “inner” personality, which is reflected in her impact on the other characters.

Maru, Moleka and Margaret are the only characters in the novel that are placed equally on the same level of superiority above the common people; they are elevated through their possession of a spiritual depth that goes beyond any shallow definition of tribe or social position: We almost forget that Margaret is a Masarwa, or that Maru and Moleka are “royalty”. The realm of the soul takes precedence over the external world. Craig Mackenzie tackles this point as follows:

The psychic plane- or in the terms used in the novel, the realm of the soul- is accessible only to Maru, Moleka and Margaret. The novel therefore becomes a three-sided struggle in the realm of the soul. All of these characters have dual identities, one applying to the real world, and the other a ‘soul-identity’. The dynamic of alienation and commitment which is at work in all three novels is given fresh direction in Maru. The movement of characters from alienation to commitment is a journey of the soul [...] Head’s contention is that socially ascribed identities are false, misleading, degrading to the true inner person.<sup>430</sup>

This dynamic of alienation and commitment that we see in the novel is thus a journey into the soul where the three characters achieve “wholeness” and well-being. In the case of Maru, it is the realm where he can live his dreams as a king of heaven, and where Margaret discards her position of the rejected outcast to retrieve her true status as a “queen of the soul”. Moleka’s case is similar, and his journey into the soul is lived as a rebirth. In the three cases, the identity ascribed by society is no longer important- it is the inner self which is the true self, not the social one. What is demonstrated clearly here is Head’s dislike of any boundaries concerning race, tribe or nation; for her, the true commitment is the spiritual one, presented as the ability of the individual to study his soul and discover the goodness and beauty that lie in it, so as to eradicate all evils in the world. The soul, for Head, is a refuge as well as a weapon- a refuge from external assaults and a weapon against all social evils. The characters, thus, are not individualistic and alienated- they are unique, superior and admirable, and have the responsibility to bring about change in society at large. Head is disenchanted with politics, which always calls out for the well-being of a specific social

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<sup>430</sup> Craig Mackenzie in: Gurmah, Abdulrazak. Ed. Op. Cit. P118

group, and is often corrupt; she says: “the politicians first jump on the band wagon of past suffering. They’re African nationalists and sweep the crowds away with weeping and wailing about the past. Then why do they steal and cheat people once they get into government.... Any heaven, like a black-power heaven, that existed for a few individuals was pointless and useless”<sup>431</sup>. The unpopularity of her position is the fact that she does not stand for the black cause, or for a specific marginalized social group, as is the use of postcolonial writers; she considers that “the goal of political struggle” must be “an understanding of humanity rather than race, or any other specific group”<sup>432</sup>, and that “it is only the human soul which, acting as a torch, can keep the forces of evil in check”<sup>433</sup>.

b) The role of art:

Reflections on the role of art in the novel are effected through Margaret’s paintings; as Colette Guldemann puts it, “[it] seems vital [...] to locate any discussion of the paintings within the role of art, and how it is used, in *Maru*”<sup>434</sup>. There are clear autobiographical elements that enable a safe identification of Margaret with Head, especially the status of the outcast, of non-belonging, among the dominant Botswana people. In addition, we can take the figure of Margaret the painter as a reflection of Head the writer who, after being alienated from her roots and rejected by society, finds the freedom to observe people and human nature- as S. K. Pathania puts it, “Margaret the artist is clearly Head the writer”<sup>435</sup>. Hence, an exploration of Margaret’s art in the novel enables an interesting reflection of Head’s views on art and the role it can perform.

Margaret learned the skill of drawing and painting from her foster mother, the white missionary, who used to carry with her a sketch pad and a pencil to reproduce anything that caught her attention. The gift that Margaret inherits is presented as an unexplored one, discovered unpredictably, or even unconsciously, while she watches her friend Dikeledi absorbed in agreeable thoughts in the following passage:

And while [Dikeledi] dwelt on these earthly things, a very spiritual look of divine happiness appeared on her face. Her companion, sitting opposite her watched this pretty communication in silence. She had an unexplored gift. Half consciously, her hand moved to a sheet of paper and pencil and, without any faltering, concentrated on capturing that lovely expression. P294

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<sup>431</sup> Ibrahim. Hima. *Subversive Identities in Exile*. Op. Cit. P153

<sup>432</sup> Ibid.

<sup>433</sup> Abrahams, Cecil. Ed. Op. Cit. P111

<sup>434</sup> Sample, Maxine. Ed. *Critical Essay on Bessie Head*. U.S.: Library of congress Cataloging-In-Publication Data, 2003.P54

<sup>435</sup> Pathania, Shivalik Katoch. Op. Cit. P79

On the spur of the moment, just as her foster mother used to do, Margaret felt the urge to reproduce the expression that appeared on Dikeledi's face; the fact that she did this "half-consciously" suggests a romantic conception of the artist who is guided by natural, innate impulses for production. This romantic conception is further emphasized through presenting Margaret as the typical romantic artist at odds with society: Settling on the outskirts of the village with "the experience of being permanently unwanted by society in general" (P302). This state of loneliness and social alienation prepared her for an unprecedented flow of artistic production, experienced as an uncontrolled inner urge:

Life was totally disrupted and another rhythm replaced it which made day and nights merge into a restless fever. It had a beginning like the slow build-up of a powerful machine but once it had started the pitch and tautness of its energy allowed for no relaxation; the images and forms, the flow and movement of their life imposed themselves with such demanding ruthlessness that there was no escape from the tremendous pressure. It was as though, subconsciously, everything had been arranged especially for that time and for those days when it did not matter if she could not eat for two or three days, or if she ate at four o'clock in the morning. There was a part of her mind that had saturated itself with things of such startling beauty and they pressed, in determined panorama, to take on living form. P308

Artistic production is experienced by Margaret as an irresistible inner urge that, once launched, cannot be stopped; it is experienced as a sub-conscious drive that must be fulfilled, regardless of the earthly demands of sleeping and eating: It is an intense spiritual activity that attempts to give form to things of startling beauty- the basic aim of aesthetic production. Head thus sees art as a spiritual activity that transcends the physical and the earthly existence, propelling the artist into a mysterious and magical world that knows no boundaries.

Furthermore, Head articulates the inner processes of artistic production when she has Margaret reflect on her artistic experience as follows: "I drew all the pictures from pictures from my mind. I first see something as it looks but it looks better when it reappears again as a picture in my mind" (P311). Margaret attempts to explain to Dikeledi her artistic experience as a process of seeing, sketching and then making things reappear again- in other words, giving the reality she sees another meaning. In fact, we can trace this power of reinterpretation of the outside world back to Margaret Cadmore Senior, who drew a sketch of Margaret's dead biological mother and, looking again at the sketch, she renames her as "goddess", modifying thus the socially established description of her as a Masarwa; she sees

her differently from the others because she is a stranger, free from the dominating social prejudice against her.

Head shows here the power of art to disrupt the natural or established order of meaning, and open up other possibilities: It is clear that this sketch affects Margaret deeply and makes her proud of her origin; besides, the sketch seems to affect Dikeledi too, who “glanced at it with that strange, wide stare, then looked away into the distance, an almost smoky haze clouding her lovely eyes” (P238). The impact made on Dikeledi is so strong that it is not described in words, but is expressed through her look into the distance as if, in an instant, it started a process of rethinking, of revising pre-acquired knowledge. Cadmore Senior thus made the Masarwa woman “reappear”. Artistic production is for Head a process of re-interpretation of the outside reality, and thus an invitation to revise received knowledge and bring about change in the minds of people.

Margaret thus inherits this skill from her adoptive mother. Their sketches in fact are almost identical; Dikeledi, in the following passage, compares them:

She compared the two. The styles of both artists were almost identical, almost near that of a comic-strip artist in their simplicity, except that the younger disciple appeared greater than the master. It was a difference of temperament. The older Margaret Cadmore had been essentially a cold and unemotional woman, insensitive to the depths and heights of life, and the young girl highlighted these latter qualities, at the same time emulating her skill for rapid reproduction of life, on the spot. P294-295

The sketches are similar in their simplicity and in the rapidity of their making, but they are different in essentials: The disciple exceeds the master in her concern with the more spiritual aspects of life, “the depths and heights”; spirituality thus makes art superior. These are then the two aspects of Margaret’s art that we should bear in mind: Her ability to disrupt the natural order of things and spiritual depth.

The output of this tremendous overflow of production is a number of interesting paintings that can be divided into two parts: The first group of paintings is concerned with the immediate environment where we see the village, the goat and Dikeledi- all that Margaret can observe with her physical eyes. This, however, does not make of them the least interesting as their importance is suggested in the following quotation:

She chose her themes from ordinary, common happenings in the village as though those themes were the best expression of her own vitality. The women carried water buckets up and down the hill but the eye was thrown, almost by force, towards the powerful curve of a leg muscle, resilience in the back and neck, and the animated expressions and gestures of water-carriers as they stopped to gossip. P314

Margaret here is inspired by scenes from everyday life; in her isolation from the daily events of the village, she found the leisure to observe the routine of common people and to be fascinated by them. She then chooses to focus on such details as “the powerful curve of a leg muscle” and “resilience in the back and neck”- details that suggest strength and vitality. This reminds us of Head’s own reverence for the common people when, as she says: “The immense suffering black people experience in South Africa had created in me a reverence for ordinary people”<sup>436</sup>. Besides, this reverence for the common lot conveys a larger message, as Head suggests that it is in these people that lay the solution and means to create a better world. This is conveyed through the impact these paintings made on Maru: “They carried a message to his own heart: ‘Look! Don’t you see! We are the people who have the strength to build a new world””(P314). Margaret thus makes these women “reappear” as the harbingers of the new world that Maru dreams about- a world free from racism. It is interesting to note here that Head does not specifically refer by the pronoun “we” to the oppressed Masarwas. As Desiree Lewis points out, Margaret’s paintings “celebrate the energy, inventiveness and productivity of village women’s everyday agricultural work, and portray the dignity and power of lives and figures which are usually ignored or disparaged”<sup>437</sup>. This absence of specification is a hint that Head is concerned with the oppressed people in general, regardless of their race, or tribe- another instance of Head’s attempt at universalizing the theme of racism. This group of paintings thus reflects a direct concern with the immediate environment and carries an important message: The contribution of the common people in the reshaping of the world.

When Dikeledi observed the finished work of Margaret, she “separated three of them. They were not of Dilepe village, the queen of Sheba, or of herself. A theme ran through them. There was a pulsating glow of yellow light dominating pitch black objects” (P309). These paintings are direct expressions of Margaret’s mysterious visions, which she explains as follows: “I had a strange experience’, she said slowly. ‘Each time I closed my eyes these pictures used to fill all the space inside my head” (P310). Those pictures are those of a house, a field of daisies and an embracing couple. Margaret experienced this artistic production as “a strange experience”, something that cannot be explained rationally; the

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<sup>436</sup> Mackenzie, Craig. Ed.Op. Cit. P63

<sup>437</sup> Lewis, Desiree.Op. Cit.P185

source for inspiration of these pictures does not come from the immediate environment, but from her own mind. In fact, they strangely reproduce Maru's dream as described at the beginning of the novel: A lonely house, a field of daisies, and his union with Margaret. We wonder how Margaret knew about this dream that she does not even seem to understand; indeed, as Desiree Lewis puts it, "Margaret does not ascribe a clear meaning or intention to her painting"<sup>438</sup>. Head stresses here this aspect of the artist as a visionary, as someone who has the gift to see things that cannot be perceived by the common lot, and suggests that sometimes the artist does not realize the full potential of his/her creativity. This aspect reminds us of Head's comment on the role of the writer, saying: "The main function of a writer is to make life magical and to communicate a sense of wonder"; indeed, the magic and wonder are what these pictures inspire- effects created through their complexity and ambiguity.

Many critics consider *Maru* as a romance, a fairy tale that sought to provide an easy solution to centuries of racism through romantic love. However, a deep study of the novel soon shakes off this interpretation. The best instance that such a study can take is Margaret's paintings; indeed, on the surface, the fact that Margaret paints Maru's dream seems to support this romantic reading of the novel- she finely portrays the house, the field of daisies and their union as he sees them in his mind, suggesting thus their complementarity and reciprocal love. Maru himself, when he sees the paintings, claims that he expected them, and that they confirm what the gods in his heart bade him to do. However, Margaret's paintings are far from being so naively romantic; in fact, what Margaret does is deconstructing Maru's dream, and presenting it in three separate pictures. As Colette Guldemann puts it, "Margaret does *not* offer Maru a unified "mirror" image or reflection of his dream"<sup>439</sup>. By splitting it into three paintings, Margaret denies the unity of the dream, and hence disrupts its very realization. Moreover, it suggests that Margaret is able to paint her own resistance to Maru's plans, even if unaware of it, through insisting on pitch black darkness, as the house, the clouds and the couple are black. Black has conventionally negative connotations, and is the least adequate for representing Maru's idyllic vision of their union. In addition, there is a mysterious yellow light that runs through the three paintings contrasting with the darkness. In the first picture, the house and its surroundings

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<sup>438</sup> Lewis, Desiree. Op. Cit. P180

<sup>439</sup> Maxine, Sample. Ed. Op. Cit. P59

are black, “but out of the windows shone a queer light. It did not look like lamplight and it revolved gently” (P310). In the second picture, the yellow light emanates from the movement of daisies. And finally, the embracing couple is surrounded by this yellow light. Yellow light is generally associated with the sun which is used in the novel to represent the power and energy of Moleka’s inner world: “Moleka was a sun around which spun a billion satellites” (P268). This association is further suggested through Maru’s vision of Moleka’s eyes as “two yellow orbs of light” (P268). Through painting this yellow light, the representative of Moleka, Margaret undermines Maru’s dream, suggesting the constant presence of his rival in their married life. So, Margaret does paint Maru’s dream, but it is far from being a romantic confirmation, as “she also paints her own resistance and desire into it”<sup>440</sup>. The paintings do not confer direct meaning, but are complex, calling for a careful reading “between the lines”. The spiritual dimension of these paintings, their broadness of vision and their ambiguity create in the novel “magic” and “wonder”- the two effects that Head asserts should be the task of the writer to produce, and also subvert the romantic reading of the novel.

Margaret the painter is, no doubt, the representative of Head the writer; her art and the role it performs in the novel reflect Head’s own views on art. As we have seen, Margaret’s paintings reflect an interest in the immediate environment and express urgent social messages; they also depart from these earthly concerns and reach out for the spiritual world that even Margaret herself cannot account for. We clearly see, thus, practicality and broadness of vision side by side; what Head suggests is that an artist can find his inspiration in the earthly dimension, the people, the landscape, and at the same time be a visionary for whom artistic production is a strange experience. The practical and the spiritual are not necessarily at odds, but are presented as two necessary aspects of art.

In sum, we can say that the role of art as expressed in the novel is to offer an alternative interpretation of the reality- a revision of the things we daily observe or of some realities we take for granted, such as the portrayal of the women or the dissociative representation of Maru’s dream. In this way, art, for Head, can be used to effect change in individuals in particular, and in society in general; it can be socially committed, representing the daily suffering of common people for example, without losing that “magic” and “wonder” that

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<sup>440</sup> Ibid. P60

are meant to propel us to a higher dimension through addressing our inner selves, and effect thus our moral betterment as individuals *and* members of society. Through the paintings of Margaret, Head expresses her conception of art and the role it can perform; art for Head is committed in the sense that it has the power to affect and change the inner worlds of individuals, and thus can have important impacts on society in general. She articulates commitment in different terms from her contemporaries who simply sees it as taking a clear social and political stand; Head gives it a broader, universal perspective as she concentrates on the effects art can have on the inner worlds of people, regardless of tribal or social belonging. She puts thus Art and Morality on broad human and universal levels.

c) The Ambiguous Ending:

As far as the morality of the novel is concerned, the ending is quite interesting: It is complex, ambiguous and raises more questions than it gives answers. It presents the final marriage of the two protagonists, Maru and Margaret, and the consequent liberation of the Masarwas; this ending made many critics uneasy because of the seeming naiveté of the solution proposed to the racial prejudice perpetrated against the Masarwas in the novel- as Colette Guldimann writes, the “marriage-as-solution, and indeed the novel itself, is subsequently dismissed as naïve”<sup>441</sup>. However, a close analysis of the ending and the prolepsis that is linked with it, shakes off this simplistic interpretation of the novel. What we will attempt to demonstrate throughout this point is that this complex ending that Head chooses emanates from her sense of practicality and broadness of vision, in other words, the fusion of the two aspects that define her personality and vision of art, namely: realism and idealism. This will subsequently allow us to move to a discussion of her unique conception of commitment. As said, a romantic interpretation of the novel is not tenable, as the very use of the prolepsis shakes it off. Whereas romances in general end with the final marriage of the protagonists, here the prolepsis gives us information about what happens after this seemingly typical marriage. Indeed, before the events of the story start, we are given a picture of the married life of Maru and Margaret outside the village in a remote house, and this life, contrary to the conventions of the romance genre, is far from being the happy, idyllic one expected. The first details that are associated with Maru and Margaret’s married life are to be found in the definition of the landscape surrounding their house:

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<sup>441</sup> Colette Guldimann in: Maxine, Sample. Ed. Op. Cit. P48

The rains were so late that year. But throughout that hot, dry summer those black storm clouds clung in thick folds of brooding darkness along the low horizon. There seemed to be a secret in their activity, because each evening they broke the long, sullen silence of the day, and sent soft rumbles of thunder and flickering slicks of lightening across the empty sky. They were not promising rain. They were prisoners, pushed back, in trapped coils of boiling cloud. P221

Blackness and darkness hover around Maru and Margaret's house, projecting negative suggestions; through exploring the different uses of darkness in literature, Stuart Kelly writes:

Darkness is such a pliant and redolent theme, encompassing terror, comfort, wisdom, folly, being lost, being estranged, being sneaky, being smart; it is a representation of the seething, absent force of all that is selfish and wicked and cloaked, or a profound and inexpressible and enigmatic presence.<sup>442</sup>

What this critic does in this quotation is emphasize the ambiguous nature of darkness; as we have seen it in *Heart of darkness*, it is equated with confusion, loss and ignorance. In Maru, darkness is suggestive of a presence brooding along the horizon, sending thunder and lightning across the empty sky; just like in *Heart of darkness*, it seems to be in fight with light, and it seems to retain thunder and lightning prisoners. A few passages later, Head gives us the clue to decipher the meaning of this powerful imagery:

But there was a depth of secret activity in [Maru] like that long, low line of black, boiling cloud. There was a clear blue sky in his mind that calmly awaited the storm in his heart and when all had been said and done, this earth would be washed clean of all the things he hated. P223

Head makes us see the fight between light and darkness as a struggle inside the human mind, through creating a link between the activity of the clouds and the "secret" one at work in Maru; it is equated with a fight between good and evil, the clear sky representing the good and beautiful new world Maru dreams about, the darkness standing for all that he hates, the evils of human nature he loathes; the use of "earth", instead of more precise terms such as "house", suggests the broad dimension of this imagery, and makes us transcend social boundaries, and contemplate its implications in more universal terms. Furthermore, this imagery implies that even if Maru seems to have realized his dream, that of marrying Margaret and settling in a remote house, they are not quite at peace: They have not entered that perfect, idyllic world, for there is still darkness brooding along the horizon,

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<sup>442</sup> Kelly, Stuart. "Darkness in Literature : Five Great Darknnesses". The Guardian, (2012). <The Guardian.com>

a darkness that finds an echo in his inner being, and reminds Maru of the presence of the evil he strove to eradicate. Change does not come easily, Head suggests; it still belongs to a somewhat distant future that Maru dreams about, when “the earth would be washed clean of all the things he hated”. Marriage, thus, is not presented as a magical solution that just puts an end to centuries of racism and injustice.

Moving from the general to the specific, we are given another detail that further makes us doubt this notion of marriage as a romantic happy ending:

There were two rooms. In one his wife totally loved him; in another, she totally loved Moleka. He watched over this other room, fearfully, in his dreams at night. It was always the same dream. Moleka would appear trailing a broken leg with blood streaming from a wound in his mouth and his heart. No one ever cried with such deep, heart-rending sobs as his wife did on these occasions. Often he would start awake to find those hot tears streaming onto his arm from her closed eyes.  
P224

When Maru seems to live an almost perfect life with Margaret, he has a dream that shows his awareness of a presence- the presence of his friend and rival Moleka, whom Margaret never ceased to love. This is a detail that completely obscures the happiness painted at the beginning and makes us associate the presence of Moleka with the clouds hanging over the horizon. Maru’s victory is thus tainted, since he does not completely own the woman he loves; it is said a little later in the novel that this defeat of Maru leads him “to identify with the many wrongs of mankind” (P224), betraying thus the gods in his heart. His visionary quality leads him to see the injured Moleka, the broken leg, the blood from his mouth and heart, and we understand that he is the perpetrator of those wounds because earlier Head makes us aware of Maru’s killing motivations towards Moleka: “He was thrown off balance by the haunting fear that he would one day be forced to kill Moleka, one way or another” (P224). Head thus does not paint the portrait of Maru as the perfect future leader in a perfect world; instead, she presents us with a more realistic picture of him as a man who is in constant inner struggle between good and evil. Virginia Ola elaborates on this point as follows:

This presence undermines the degree of his victory, and serves as a constant reminder to him of that dangerous aspect of his personality, the use of ruthless power for selfish reasons which is the true demon that thwarts the efforts of visionaries like himself to build a more humane society.<sup>443</sup>

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<sup>443</sup> Abrahams, Cecil. Ed. Op. Cit. P67

The presence of Moleka thus reminds Maru of this aspect of his personality that makes him identify, as we have seen, with “the many wrongs of mankind”, which prevents him from realizing his dream of a better world. Head here articulates a message for leaders that is to constitute the basis of her conception of change: That they must start to fight their inner wrongs and overcome them before being able to bring about a better world; so, even Maru, the visionary, the king of the soul, is not ready to become this perfect leader. This shows Head’s realistic conception of change which is not presented as miraculous, and is intrinsically linked with the human soul. Head does not seek easy, naïve solutions, but takes into consideration the complexities of human nature.

Another thing that critics were dissatisfied with was the passivity of Margaret, who has come to be seen as the helpless romantic heroine who needs to be rescued:

As a fairy tale princess, Margaret is objectified through her extreme passivity. She does exactly what others intend her to do. Her education, her employment and her marriage, all are governed by the expectations of others. Her status in her marriage to Maru is analogous to that of a fairy tale princess who is fiercely guarded by a monster keeping her all to himself. Marriage does not change her position in society as she continues to live with marginalized discourses, first as a Masarwa and then as a wife.<sup>444</sup>

Margaret, according to this view, is thus reduced to “a fairy tale princess”- the focus being put on her passivity, as she does exactly what others want her to do, starting with the white Margaret Cadmore, who considered her a scientific experiment, continuing with Dikeledi and Maru, especially in their manipulation of her painting, and the final marriage in which she had no choice. However, this does not correspond to the impression we have about Margaret in the novel; on the contrary, besides tranquility and peace, we are constantly made aware of an inner strength and a power to impact on people, as already mentioned. Moreover, despite her isolation from her people, the Masarwa, she is attributed the role of the saviour; Annie Gagiano reflects on this point as follows:

In some ways disconcertingly “identityless” or even “beyond” identity, in other ways branded a despicable “lesarwa” woman, Margaret (Jr.) is also endowed with a responsibility toward “[her] people” that presumes an *identification* with them. She is never shown meeting any of them and has been effectively severed from “Masarwa” society through no choice of her own. Yet both symbolically and in a way politically (given the effect her marriage has), Margaret fulfills the destiny of being a saviour of her people. She does so in the way Head favours: as an independent, visionary artist rather than as a political organizer or ruler.<sup>445</sup>

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<sup>444</sup> Pathania, Shivalik Katoch. Op. Cit. P75

<sup>445</sup> Gagiano, Annie. Op. Cit. P150

Indeed, Margaret was inculcated this sense of purpose by her adoptive mother from her very youth, who frequently told her: "One day, you will help your people". The deep impact this had on Margaret is shown in the fact that "it created a purpose and burden in the child's mind" (P231). Indeed, as this critic points out, despite her isolation from the Masarwas, and her much emphasized universal dimension, Margaret is still able to identify with her people with this sense of "purpose" and "burden". Moreover, she influences Maru who immediately sees in her, in the words of A. Gagliano, "the ability to empower *him* in a socially transformative way"<sup>446</sup>. Consequently, he decides to marry her, and this marriage brings about the symbolic liberation of the Masarwas. So despite her apparent passivity, Margaret plays a pivotal role in the novel, around which all the characters and events revolve. This hardly corresponds to the figure of the romantic and helpless heroine that critics are dissatisfied with.

Besides, this gives us further insight into Head's conception of change which cannot be effected by a political figure but through an independent artist who, instead of advocating ideologies and political plans, addresses the inner souls of people, and hence brings about a deeper, and more radical change. Moreover, Head herself defends this passivity as follows:

There's a kind of patterning that's really music. There're your huge background characters who pace the book out for you in peaceful rhythms. It is as though I can only communicate the eternal through a passive medium. But I wouldn't say that my characters are entirely wooden. This argument has been raised against the Masarwa girl, Margaret. She seemed to want nothing and she seemed to be somebody who is drained of everything, but it isn't really so. They have to be characters who convey eternity, because this message is intended to live.<sup>447</sup>

The passivity that Head refers to here is the passivity of character, as Margaret does not show any kind of resistance and revolt to what is happening around her. Yet, it is a passivity that hides strength and an admirable personality that inspires in the readers affection as well as awe. Passivity, according to Head, is a medium through which huge messages- messages intended to live- are expressed. Head tries to raise Margaret to a universal dimension where she communicates messages to humanity in general, as she is able to affect the inner worlds of readers.

The consequence of the marriage between Margaret and Maru is the liberation of the Masarwa people. In fact, this liberation is the outcome of a gradual process of change that

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<sup>446</sup> Ibid.

<sup>447</sup> Qt. In: Mackenzie, Graig. and Cherry Clayton. Ed. Op. Cit. P22

Margaret started through her affirmation of her Masarwa origin. Indeed, from the beginning, where Margaret meets Dikeledi, she shows no intention of hiding her origin to anyone- she clearly says: "I am a Masarwa", and is not worried by Dikeledi's advice to hide it, Dilepe being the stronghold of powerful chiefs owning Masarwa slaves. Her perseverance in affirming her Masarwa identity makes some effect on Dikeledi: 'I am not like you, Margaret', she said. 'I am afraid to protest about anything because life easily overwhelms me, but you are right to tell anyone that you are a Masarwa' (P238). We see that Dikeledi instantly changes her mind and realizes the absurdity of a long ingrained racial prejudice. The impact of Margaret's attitude on the other characters is also strong: There are those who are completely intolerant, such as Seth, Pete and Morafi, who cannot accept a Masarwa climbing up the social ladder; the impact on people in general, we venture to say the majority, is more positive though:

That very afternoon people were looking at each other with shock. They said: "Did you hear? The new mistress says she is a Masarwa." By evening they began to laugh: "The eye is a deceitful thing", they said. "If a Masarwa combs her hair and wears modern dress, he looks just like a coloured. There is no difference." Those with children at Leseding School debated the matter. They were trying to accustom the hearts of their children being taught by a Masarwa. They said: "Prejudice is like the old skin of a snake. It has to be removed bit by bit. P263

In this paragraph, Head shows the gradual change people underwent after learning that the new school teacher is a Masarwa; first they were shocked, then they began to laugh, realizing that everything is about appearance, and hence realizing the shallowness of their judgement, and then admitting their prejudice and the necessity to get rid of it gradually. This final step shows thus their readiness to accept change and the time it takes to be effected. Through expressing a full acceptance of her origin, Margaret has thus already started the process of change- marriage being only the final blow. Horace I. Goddard tackles this point as follows:

This acceptance of "self" provides a measure of strength for her people- people who are ostracized and dehumanized by other Africans and Europeans alike. Margaret refuses to live the lie of being thought of as "mixed breed" or Cape-coloured, and declares her true identity as a Masarwa.<sup>448</sup>

The other important impact of Margaret's self-acceptance depicted in the novel is the one made on Maru after he contemplates Margaret's paintings:

He wishes he could leave the matter with the remark he had made to Ranko, that the creator of all this vitality was simply a great woman in herself, with no other attachments or identification. Being

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<sup>448</sup> Abrahams, Cecil. Ed. Op. Cit. P108

so highly individualistic himself, he dreaded working out any conclusions along those of tribe or race. But the conditions that surrounded him at the time forced him to think of her as a symbol of her tribe and through her he sought to gain an understanding of the eventual liberation of an oppressed people. P315

What strikes us here is the fact that Maru is unwilling to see Margaret as a representative of her tribe, and is forced to do so by some reasons that are vaguely related to “the conditions that surrounded him”. This unwillingness may reflect in fact Head’s own unwillingness to be limited within the barriers of tribe or race, and suggests that this identification with the Masarwas is necessary when we operate at the immediate level- the events of the story. We notice that the passage that comes after this opens with: “How universal was the language of oppression” (P315)- a warning from Head for all those who tend to be limited within the circle of racial or tribal belonging. The impact of Margaret’s paintings on Maru raises thus the issue of her identity who, on one hand, “had grown beyond any definition”, and on the other hand, plainly cries out her Masarwa origin. This shows the importance Head gives to the fact that an individual’s personality can work at two planes, the immediate level of social belonging, and the broader level of human belonging.

The final liberation of the Masarwas closes the novel- here again, as is the case throughout the novel, the focus is on the inner worlds of these oppressed people:

When people of the Masarwa tribe heard about Maru’s marriage to one of their own, a door silently opened on the small, dark airless room in which their souls had been shut for a long time. The wind of freedom, which was blowing throughout the world for all people, turned and flowed into the room. As they breathed in the fresh, clear air their humanity awakened. They examined their condition. Here was the foetid air, the excreta and the horror of being an oddity of the human race, with half the head of a man and half the body of a donkey. They laughed in an embarrassed way, scratching their heads. How had they fallen into this condition when, indeed, they were as human as everyone else? They started to run out into the sunlight, then they turned and looked at the dark, small room. They said: “We are not going back there”. P331

We see here that Head depicts the inner change that the Masarwas underwent when they heard about the marriage, and she does so through a powerful imagery: The opening of a door that used to close in their souls, instead of a depiction of a real revolution where we would see Masarwas physically standing up against their oppressors. The short and very telling sentence, “They examined their condition” suggests the birth of a new awareness, an ability of reflection and analysis, that makes the fall back into slavery impossible. The effect of this strong awakening is suggested in the final passage where the narrator declares that “it would no longer be possible to treat Masarwa people in an inhuman way without getting

killed yourself". Head shows here the importance of the recognition of one's humanity, and presents it as a strong and effective way to combat oppression and racism. She presents thus a solution to racism that goes beyond tribe, race, or nation, because it lies inside, in the inner worlds of people. So, according to Head, to be effective, change has to come from the inside, and not from a shallow, externally imposed social or political ideology. Moreover, this makes for the universal dimension that critics vehemently rejected- indeed, as we see in this passage, specifications on tribe are made- the oppressed are the Masarwas-, but we can safely apply this definition of liberation to any oppressed social group around the world, because it focuses on the human soul, where the solution to all human evils is found. In addition, what is interesting in this passage is the play on the word "light" and "darkness". One implication of the use of this imagery is the fact that Head takes the conflict into a broader perspective: It is no more between Botswana people and Masarwas, but between the two forces these concepts represent: Good and evil. Through using this imagery, Head universalizes the language of racism- once again. Moreover, this imagery reminds us of the beginning of the novel where the light dominating the sky seemed to be in contention with a brooding darkness spreading along the horizon. This is another instance that demonstrates the subversive role of the prolepsis that tells us beforehand that the darkness has not been totally eradicated. S. K. Pathania comments on this point as follows:

Head seems to believe that winds of change may herald a new dawn but they cannot completely erode the smothering darkness. That would require a consistent and collective effort on the part of every individual of the succeeding generation.<sup>449</sup>

Here again, thus, the prolepsis makes us regard with suspicion the seemingly happy ending of the novel; it depicts the presence of darkness, and shows that it has not been completely eradicated. This is another instance that shows a realistic conception of change on the part of Head who does not rely on easy, romantic solutions. This awakening of humanity is an important, vital step in the process of change, but it is neither "the be-all" nor "the end-all" of it.

So, as Colette Gudimann puts it, "far from having a romantic resolution, *Maru* is, in fact, a radical subversion of the romantic genre and reading it this way will offer a way out of the longstanding critical impasse"<sup>450</sup>. Indeed, as we have seen, the use of the prolepsis, where

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<sup>449</sup> Pathania, Shivalik Katoch. Op. Cit. P68

<sup>450</sup> Colette Gudimann in: Sample, Maxine. Ed. Op. Cit. P48

Head shows us the after-marriage life of the couple haunted by a brooding darkness, the creation of a heroine who is confusedly passive and active at the same time, Head subverts the Romantic genre. Through this prolepsis-ending, Head reveals a very realistic conception of change, affirming that it is gradual and that it must start from the inside to be truly effective. Moreover, Head universalizes the discourse of racism, and claims that the solution to all human evils lies in the human soul, and not in some elaborated and shallow socio-political ideologies. Besides, Head shows her capacity to bring together, in harmony, the immediate and the broader concerns- the practical and the universal; she does so through seeking within human nature, whose definition cannot be contained within the language of tribe, race or nation. This shows Head's specific conception of commitment which successfully incorporates the immediate, "the African", and the universal, "the human". To conclude, Head succeeds, throughout the novel, to bring these two dimensions together, the immediate and the universal, through the focus she puts on the human soul. Human nature, according to Head, is capable of greatness as well as meanness. This is exemplified in her creation of such characters as Maru and Margaret, as well as Seth and Morafi. These two categories of characters stand in contrast to one another, one representing the good and admirable in human nature, and the other one representing the evil and despicable. However, she succeeds to avoid such a clear-cut and simplistic categorization through painting the personality of Maru who is a good man, but not completely free from defects and weaknesses. Human nature is made up of these two polarities, well represented through the images of light and darkness in the novel. On one hand, Maru is elevated above the common people as "a king of the soul", endowed with the capacity to transcend the reality and reach out for a vision of a better world. He is the only character in the novel who presents an awareness of evil, in people and society, and feels the necessity to fight it in order to create this better world he dreams of. Yet, as Head shows, he himself is not exempted from evil doing, and this prevents him from becoming the redeemer he dreams to be. He is himself embarked on an inner struggle between good and evil- a struggle, however, we don't witness in the "Petes" and "Morafis" of the world. Head suggests that the very presence of this struggle is a sign of goodness, and constitutes in itself a process of moral betterment. Margaret, on her part, is defined by her greatness of soul- a greatness that instantly impacts on the people she meets, even creating other "kings of the soul", as she does with Moleka. Through Margaret, Head also suggests that the only effective way to

bring about an end to racial discrimination is to maintain one's sense of humanity in the face of oppression; this is what, at the end of the novel, allows the Masarwas to retrieve this precious sense of humanity and brings an end to centuries of racial denigration.

In this chapter, we have hopefully been able to bring into light Head's very personalized conception of commitment- a conception that made for her uniqueness of writing, and was the source of her rejection by African critics and readers who saw in her mere Western orientedness and denial of African identity. Head's conception involves commitment to one's immediate environment- Margaret, despite her alienation from her tribe, never denies her Masarwa origin and even claims it proudly. Similarly, Head never denies her Southern African origin, and is much aware, tragically aware, so to speak, of the difficulties encountered in her socio-historical context and the necessity to find out solutions. Head's interest in human dignity in general, and not in African identity in particular, cost her accusations of Western oriented universalism. Yet, the source of inspiration of this human dignity is shown in her compassion with, and high respect for, the African people, as she says: "the immense suffering black people experience in South Africa had created in me a reverence for ordinary people"<sup>451</sup>. Head is aware of the extreme suffering of her people, and developed this conception of human dignity which she considers lost in all victims of racial oppression regardless of their origin. The characters she paints in her work can in fact belong to any socio-historical context; i.e.: they do not particularly express an African personality, but are people with whom any reader, regardless of his/her origin can identify with. The focus is laid on their humanity rather than on their social belonging. In the following quotation, Head explains the source of her focus on people as follows:

I think my situation can best be described in the words of a Jewish artist, Josef Herman, with whom I was slightly acquainted a few years ago. Josef Herman had lived through the Nazi invasion of Poland; then fled as a refugee to England. He chose to settle in a small Welsh mining village and for many years painted portraits of the villagers which were all of the same kind. He painted his landscapes very small but the people in those landscapes were enormously large. They were always quietly and absent-mindedly staring into space. He described his work of this period in words that made a great impact on me. He said: 'A voice seemed to cry out in me for a new name for human dignity.'<sup>452</sup>

This painter focused on people whom he paints disproportionately large, even dwarfing the landscape they stand in- this is the same for Head who focuses in her portrayal of characters

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<sup>451</sup> Qt. In: Mackenzie, Graig. Ed. Op. Cit. p63

<sup>452</sup> Ibid. p62

on their human potential, rather than their social belonging. The human dimension does dwarf the social one, but the latter is not eliminated, as it is still painted in the background. The message of Head's work is intended to linger, as it is not limited by space and time. Head thus has a specific sense of commitment that involves the African and the human; the immediate context and the broader horizon. Head's work acquires significance at the African as well as at the universal level.

Furthermore, Head's sense of commitment is manifested in the need she expresses in her novel to find solutions to the problems society faces; it is precisely the solutions she articulates that differentiate her from the other African writers. Cecil A. Abrahams explains this difference in the following words:

Bessie Head differs with other South African writers, such as Alex La Guma, regarding their solution to the problem of racism and the inhumanity of one group towards another. In this instance, as well, her early life experiences contribute greatly towards her perception of the reality in South Africa. Although it is the apartheid and class systems which created terrible pain and separation for her parents, and which forced upon her a life of insecurity and hurt, she tends to react to that personal injury which she so often had to suffer at the hands of the more powerful in society. Hence, unlike La Guma, she seeks solutions in the nitty-gritty of face to face action and in the dark recesses of the human soul.<sup>453</sup>

Indeed, as we have seen in Maru, the soul looms large in Head's world. Africa does not need shallow politicians who speak of social reform and a better future while trying to benefit as much as possible from their position. Africa needs "Kings of the soul" to lead people towards a true appreciation of their humanity, bringing about a more drastic and long-term change in the process of moral betterment- just like Maru who does not hesitate to turn his back on social position and prestige in his pursuit of a dream of a better world. Through his behaviour, Maru shows the way for the others to follow, offering them new moral codes inspired from the inner goodness that, we understand, is inherent in every individual.

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<sup>453</sup> Abrahams, Cecil A. Ed. Op. Cit. p7-8



## **Chapter Six: A Grain of Wheat**

### 1) Ngugi's all-embracing commitment:

Ngugi has a well established reputation worldwide as one of the greatest modern African writers; besides, and this is what pertains to our subject of study, he is very famous for his devotion to the literature of commitment. His views on literature and the role it can perform in society are not only deduced from his creative writing, but are also directly expressed in his non-fiction work; in fact, as G. D. Killam puts it, the "essays and the creative writings are companion pieces, the one explicating the other"<sup>454</sup>. Ngugi's non-fiction writing is hence very important as it illuminates his views on art and commitment, and thus leads to a better understanding of his fictional works.

In "Literature and Society", Ngugi presents literature to be intricately linked to society, as he explains in the following passage:

Literature results from conscious acts of men in society. At the level of the individual artist, the very act of writing implies a social relationship: one is writing about somebody for somebody. At the collective level, literature, as a product of men's intellectual and imaginative activity, embodies in words and images, the tensions, conflicts, contradictions at the heart of a community's being and process of becoming. It is a reflection at the aesthetic and imaginative plane, of a community's wrestling with its total environment to produce the basic means of life, food, clothing, shelter, and in the process creating and recreating itself in history.<sup>455</sup>

At the individual as well as at the collective level, writing does always involve a social dimension for Ngugi; indeed, he completely rejects "the general tendency [...] to see literature as something belonging to a surreal world, or to a metaphysical ethereal plane"<sup>456</sup>. We are far from Head's belief in this surreal dimension of literature in its capacity to create the "magic" and "wonder". For Ngugi, literature is worldly, and must be foremost concerned with the individual's immediate and mundane life within society. In a complex postcolonial context, this social orientedness is indeed needed to help society recover its history, redefine itself in the present, and thus be able to project itself in the future.

We have already evoked in the introduction to this part the third and last stage of imperialism, namely: Cultural imperialism. We have explored its main concern with the

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<sup>454</sup> Killam, G. D. *An Introduction to the Writings of Ngugi*. Ibadan, Nairobi: Heinemann, 1980. P7

<sup>455</sup> Killam, G. D. Ed. *Critical Perspectives on Ngugi Wa Thiong'o*. Washington: Three Continents Press, 1984. P19

<sup>456</sup> Ibid.

distortion of the colonized subject's history and self-definition. Ngugi tackles this point in the following quotation:

Cultural imperialism was then part and parcel of the thorough system of economic and political oppression of the colonized peoples and literature was an integral part of that system of oppression and genocide. It was used in the same way as language and religion. But it was a more subtle weapon because literature works through influencing emotions, the imagination, the consciousness of a people in a certain way; to make the colonized see the world as seen, analyzed, and defined by the artists and intellectuals of the Western ruling classes.<sup>457</sup>

Ngugi argues that Western colonialism used literature to further exercise its oppression and cultural domination over the colonized through a dangerous distortion of the latter's history and culture. In *Moving the Centre*, Ngugi offers a more thorough analysis of Western literature and its devastating effects on the colonized:

Inevitably because of the position of domination of Europe *vis a vis* the rest of the globe over the last five hundred years, European literature has occupied a place of great prominence on the world stage. It has unarguably, given rise to a great humanistic tradition. It has given us fantastic images of the world of struggle, of great upheavals, of change, of movement. [...] But given the domination of the West over the rest of the world through such repressive historical moments as the slave trade and slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism, this literature tends to opt for silence or ambivalence or downright collaboration.<sup>458</sup>

What started as "a great humanistic tradition" that celebrates development and human progress has become a contradiction: European writers and scholars remain blind and ambivalent to the plight of the colonized, or overtly collaborate with the oppressive colonial system. Literature works through images that directly address the imagination of the individual and hence leaves strong emotional effects. The images produced about the African are that of the savage, the lazy native, deprived of any will or agency towards the betterment of his situation, and likewise does not possess notions of history and culture. Narrowing down his concern to Kenya, Ngugi declares: "British colonialism tried to cover up the true history of Kenya. They tried to re-write Kenya's history to justify their invasion and subsequent occupation of the country<sup>459</sup>. The British colonialists disseminated fallacious images of Kenya's history in order to justify their invasion and occupation. In the following quotation, Ngugi explains the way they distorted Kenya's history:

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<sup>457</sup> Ibid. P28

<sup>458</sup> Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedom*. London: James Currey, Nairobi: EAEP, Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann: 1993. P14

<sup>459</sup> Ibid.

History is very important in any people, how we look at our past is very important in determining how we look at and how we evaluate the present. A distorted view of the people's past can very easily distort our views and evaluations of our present potentials and the future possibilities as a people.<sup>460</sup>

According to Ngugi, our vision of the past is very important in shaping our present as well as our future. The imperialists distorted Kenya's history through portraying Kenyan people as passive and unambitious, indirectly asserting their need of the West for their development and progress. The need now is for "Kenyan writers, intellectuals, historians, political scientists [...] to show us Kenya's past", to allow a better appreciation of the present and the future. Ngugi's interest in history is indeed strongly marked, and is at the core of his conception of commitment.

In an interesting article entitled "The Novelist as Historian", Ime Ikiddeh argues that in "a general sense every writer and every artist is a historian of his time, the unconscious recorder of the events and the mood of his society"<sup>461</sup>. This critic goes on to mention two opposite tendencies in criticism about Ngugi's work concerning his concern with history, and explains that "while one regards the historical elements in the novel as unartistic and objectionable interventions, the latter complains that the writer is not always faithful to widely accepted historical facts"<sup>462</sup>. Firstly, to regard Ngugi's work as a mere record of historical events is limiting and fallacious; its fallacy is in fact hinted at in the second tendency that points out the lack of historical accuracy. One explanation to solve this contradiction is offered by Simon Gikandi who asserts that "Ngugi's main interest is in the images generated by history rather than the historical event itself"<sup>463</sup>. Ngugi's concern with history is thus not limited to recording past events and retelling them to the reader for the sake of remembrance: more subtly, he attempts to create historical images that have an emotional impact on the reader and are intended thus to linger on the imagination, which he considers the most effective way to fight back the distorted images perpetrated by Western literature. The images thus that Ngugi draws in his work are not simple records of history, but are subjected to his imagination.

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<sup>460</sup> Qt. In : Killam, G. D. *An Introduction to the Writings of Ngugi*. Op. Cit. P10

<sup>461</sup> Ime Ikiddeh in: Killam, G. D. Ed. *Critical Perspectives on Ngugi Wa Thiong'o*. Op. Cit. P67

<sup>462</sup> Ibid.

<sup>463</sup> Gikandi, Simon. *Ngugi Wa Thiong'o*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. P6

Moreover, Gikandi mentions a more personalized attitude of Ngugi towards history, as the latter himself declares:

My writing is really an attempt to understand myself and my situation in society and history. As I write I remember the nights of fighting in my father's house; my mother's struggle with the soil so that we might eat, have decent clothes and get some schooling; my elder brother, Wallace Mwangi, running to the cover and security of the forest under a hail of bullets from colonial policemen; his messages from the forest urging me to continue with education at any cost; my cousin, Gichini wa Ngugi, just escaping the hangman's rope because he had been caught with live bullets; uncles and other villagers murdered because they had taken the oath; the beautiful courage of ordinary men and women in Kenya who stood up to the might of British imperialism and indiscriminate terrorism. I remember too some relatives and fellow villagers who carried the gun for the Whiteman and often became his messengers of blood. I remember the fears, the betrayals, Rachael's tears, the moments of despair and love and kinship in struggle and I try to find the meaning of it all through my pen.<sup>464</sup>

Ngugi expresses his own personal experience of the past- the struggle, the poverty of his family, the heroes and the traitors in his surrounding; yet, just remembering does not seem to be enough, as he finds himself "trying to find the meaning of it all". Writing becomes for Ngugi a process of understanding, of finding meaning, and thus does in no way provide simple and clear-cut solutions. For Ngugi, as Oliver Lovesay puts it, "healing the trauma of colonialism is one of the functions of art"<sup>465</sup>. This trauma is that of a society in its quest for self-definition and cultural rehabilitation, and also that of a writer who tries to cope with the haunting conflicted past. Here again, we are reminded of Bessie Head for whom writing became "a stabilizing factor" that helped her deal with her tormented past. Ngugi's conception of commitment is not thus limited to the external social dimension, but covers the personal, and more subjective, inner experience.

Ngugi further elaborates on the extent of his concerns in the following passage from *Moving the Centre*:

Moving the center in the two senses- between nations and within nations- will contribute to the freeing of world cultures from the restrictive walls of nationalism, class, race and gender. In this sense I am an unrepented universalist. For I believe that while retaining its roots in regional and national individuality, true humanism with its universal reaching out, can flower among the peoples of the earth, rooted as it is in the histories and cultures of the different peoples of the earth.<sup>466</sup>

"Moving the center", in the first sense, between nations, means moving it from its "assumed location in the West to a multiplicity of spheres in all the cultures of the world"<sup>467</sup>.

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<sup>464</sup> Ibid.

<sup>465</sup> Lovesay, Oliver. *Ngugi Wa Thiong'o*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 2000. P18

<sup>466</sup> Wa Thiong'o, Ngugi. Op. Cit. Pxxvii

<sup>467</sup> Ibid. Pxxvi

This first meaning is expressed through the term “eurocentrism”, by which Western imperialist nations assume that this model is to be followed by all nations throughout the world in their evolution and betterment. It imposes itself as universal and denies cultural diversity. Ngugi warns against the dangers of eurocentrism in affirming that it affects “the self-confidence of Third World peoples when it becomes internalized in their intellectual conception of the universe”<sup>468</sup>. The second sense of “moving the center”, “within nations”, implies moving it from the dominant “male bourgeois minority”, which is manipulated by the West; here Ngugi calls for the involvement of “the working people in conditions of gender, racial and religious equality”<sup>469</sup>. Moving the centre is thus a movement away from the hegemony of the dominant West and that of the ruling elite, towards a “true humanism” that takes into consideration the differing histories and cultures of “the peoples of the earth”.

Here again, as is the case with Head, common people are the key to change and progress towards a more humane world. In another nonfiction work; *Barrel of a Pen*, Ngugi addresses his fellow writers, crying out: “Let our pens be the voices of the people”<sup>470</sup>; and indeed, the common people represent another central part of Ngugi’s commitment. Furthermore, this concern with the common people in his fiction writing came as a reaction to the growing elitism of modern African literature that he notes, the failure of African writers to take into consideration the condition of the masses in the difficult postcolonial contexts:

When we, the black intellectuals, the black bourgeoisie, got the power, we never tried to bring about those policies which would be in harmony with the needs of the peasants and workers. I think that it is time that the African writers also started to talk in the terms of these peasants and workers.<sup>471</sup>

Without even being aware of it, African writers became more and more alienated from the masses, failing to recognize their needs and aspirations, and thus failing to see their important role to effect social change; as Neil Lazarus puts it, a “literature written by the elite, about the elite, and for the consumption of the elite simply could not, in the end, bear

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<sup>468</sup> Ibid. P xvii

<sup>469</sup> Ibid.

<sup>470</sup> Cantalupo, Charles. Ed. *Ngugi Wa Thiong’O : Texts and Contexts*. Ngugi Wa Thiong’O: “Barrel of a Pen”. New Jersey: Africa World Press Inc, 1995. P69

<sup>471</sup> Qt. In : Cantalupo, Charles. Ed. *The World of Ngugi Wa Thiong’O*. New Jersey: African World Press, 1993. P19

the burden of social activism”<sup>472</sup>. African writers thus, with Ngugi in the lead, turned to the people; In *Moving the Centre*, he declares:

It seems to me that the African writer now, the one who opts for becoming an integral part of the African revolution, has no choice but that of aligning himself with the people: their economic, political and cultural struggle for survival. In that situation, he will have to confront the languages spoken by the people in whose service he has put his pen. Such a writer will have to *rediscover* the *real* languages of struggle in the actions and speeches of his people, learn from their great heritage of orature, and above all, learn from their great optimism and faith in the capacity of human beings to remake their world and renew themselves.

We are far from Achebe’s definition of the African writer as teacher of the masses; here, it is the writer that learns from the masses the language of struggle, the traditional culture crystallized in their orature, and finally their belief in “the capacity of human beings to remake the world”.

Peter Nazareth says that Ngugi told him once that “[an] African writing about his society will find himself committed to socialism”<sup>473</sup>. This implies that every African writer is systematically driven towards socialism. In fact, this commitment to socialism came under the influence of two important figures: Karl Marx and Frantz Fanon. G. D. Killam discusses this influence as follows:

Ngugi is concerned with the history of his people and seeks to extrapolate from his consideration of the influence of Europe on Kenya the means for making a better future. There are two predominating influences on his third and fourth novels. These are Karl Marx and, especially, Frantz Fanon. It is Marx who articulates a political and economic philosophy which will suit Ngugi’s conviction about post-independent Kenyan development. It is Fanon who places the thinking of Marx in the African context.<sup>474</sup>

So, Marx’s economic and political philosophy, based on the rejection of capitalism in favour of socialism, impacted greatly on Ngugi, who saw it as the most suitable solution for the problems of independent Kenya, and led him to dedicate his work to the working classes and peasants. Furthermore, P. Nazareth presents Ngugi’s encounter with Fanon and his analysis of colonialism in Africa as decisive in making him cross “what Conrad calls the Shadow Line between his early and what is to become his mature work”<sup>475</sup>. Fanon’s major works, *Black Skin, White Mask* and *The Wretched of the Earth*, are based on his medical

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<sup>472</sup> Ibid. P21

<sup>473</sup> Peter Nazareth in: Killam, G. D. Ed. Op. Cit. P243

<sup>474</sup> Killam, G. D. Op. Cit. P11

<sup>475</sup> Peter Nazareth in: Killam, G. D. Ed. Op. Cit. P243

experience as a psychologist during the Algerian struggle for independence. In the words of Peter Nazareth, “Fanon points out that the imperialist powers will not hand over independence peacefully to the colonized. Instead, independence can only be attained through violence, for Europe has laid hands on Algeria and will not go unless the fingers are hacked off”<sup>476</sup>. Violence is the only way to win back independence from the colonialist hold; however, violence is to have enduring psychological effects on the colonizer as well as the colonized. In Ngugi’s novel, as we shall see, we find this inevitability of violence and a marked concern with its psychological effects on individuals. P. Nazareth comments on this point as follows:

So we see that in *A Grain of Wheat* Ngugi is attempting to deal with very complex questions: not only does he want to show how Kenya gained its independence but also he wants to find out what happened in the process to the souls of the people. Thus this novel has not only a historical setting but also what we might call a psychological subtext. What do people feel and think? How do people react to events?<sup>477</sup>

In other words, Ngugi’s concern is not only historical, but also psychological, as the souls of nearly all the characters of the novel are scrutinized; for Ngugi, historical events are not enough to understand the past, and he feels the need to record the psychological experience of the events as well, and it is on this psychological plane that our study of *A Grain of Wheat* is based.

From the Western tradition, there are two main figures that had an important impact on Ngugi, namely, Joseph Conrad and D.H. Lawrence. Ngugi is said to have learned from Lawrence the access into the soul of people, and his concern with spirituality; he says in an interview with Dennis Duerden: “When I am reading D.H. Lawrence, I feel the spirituality of things very near to me as if I am touching the very spirit of things”<sup>478</sup>. Even if Ngugi expresses a clear aversion to anything abstract and metaphysical in literature, we see in his work a marked interest in spirituality and the mystery of the human soul. On the other hand, Conrad was an attraction for Ngugi for the reasons he explains in the following passage:

Reading Conrad one feels struck by man’s capacity for bearing suffering, but much more than this, he questions what appears on the surface. He questions, what I call ‘the morality of action’. What is ‘success’; for instance? [...] what is ‘action’? is failure to make a decision, a moral action or not? So

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<sup>476</sup> Ibid.

<sup>477</sup> Ibid. P245

<sup>478</sup> Duerden, Dennis. and Cosmo Pieters. London: *African Writers Talking*, Heinemann, 1972. PP122-123.

you find that some characters in Conrad fail to do something, but their failure to do something has impressed me a lot, because with Conrad I have felt I have come into contact with another whose questioning to me is much more important than the answers which he gives<sup>479</sup>.

Ngugi is fascinated with Conrad's concern with the 'morality of action', with what makes an action moral or not, and with its psychological effects on the individual; moreover, it is the questioning spirit of Conrad that is the biggest source of attraction- the questions Conrad raises about action, its success or failure, its nature and its consequences are more important than the answers he gives, or might not give. We find in Ngugi's work, more particularly in *A Grain of Wheat*, a marked concern with the nature of action as he investigates the souls of the characters searching for the origin, motives and psychological consequences of their acts.

We have covered so far Ngugi's main areas of concern in his work, deduced from his nonfictional as well as his fictional works; we have seen that art in general, and literature in particular, takes on different functions for Ngugi in the complex postcolonial context. It is used to recover a sense of history and a healthy cultural self-definition; it is socially engaged in the sense that it speaks on behalf of the masses and to the masses. On the other hand, writing for Ngugi has a private, subjective dimension as well, as it is used as a healing process to cope with his personal experience of the past. We clearly see the two dimensions, the collective and the individual, fuse in Ngugi's writing in his engagement to find "the meaning of it all". Simon Gikandi discusses these concerns in the following passage:

The writer is, in fact, placed in a situation where he has to negotiate three social positions in order to establish his authority: the split between his subjective experience and his public commitments, the inscrutability and dissonance of the history that generates his work, and the tension between the bourgeois aesthetic and the realities of class society.<sup>480</sup>

Gikandi then adds that Ngugi never manages to go beyond these splits, and that they continue to inform his work.

With *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi is said to have crossed the "shadow line" towards a more mature phase; S. Gikandi identifies this moment of change as follows:

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<sup>479</sup> Sander, Reinhard and Bernth Lindfors.ed. *Ngugi wa Thiong'o Speaks: Interviews with the Kenyan Writer*. Africa World Press, 2006. P4

<sup>480</sup> Gikandi, Simon. Op. Cit. P13

Sometime in 1967, as a student at Leeds University, working on *A Grain of Wheat*, his third novel, Ngugi came to the realization that the narrative of independence, which had provided the most obvious structure for his works and thought, was proving to be more vexed than he had anticipated. He awoke to the realization that the promises of nationalism were already being betrayed by the very nationalists who had fought against colonial rule and culture.<sup>481</sup>

Gikandi presents Ngugi's maturation as a moment of painful disillusionment, as he realized that independence had not brought the changes expected, and that the "nationalists" that fought for it are now taking important social positions and exercising the same colonial oppression on people. This novel is consequently marked with a strong sense of disenchantment on the part of Ngugi who has now "awaken" to face the bitter reality of post-independence Kenya; it presents the celebration of Uhuru through praising the heroes that fought for it, and is marked with flashbacks where the writer denounces past atrocities of colonialism, and attempts to correct certain distortions made on Kenyan history, such as the presentation of the Mau Mau movement as a savage, terrorist organization. Besides, we find throughout the novel a deep concern with the inner worlds of the individuals in their evolution with the events around them; it is precisely at this level that we find articulated Ngugi's concern with morality, as K. Indrasena Reddy puts it:

*A Grain of Wheat* is concerned with the egalitarian values of a people who seem determined to learn and cultivate the habit of living in harmony with each other in a spirit of mutual trust, respect and tolerance for one another. The novel urges the reader to examine his own inner self so as to discover his limitations and weaknesses, with a view to correcting the same in the larger interests of the community.<sup>482</sup>

The realization of a just and egalitarian society has to start from the inner selves of the individuals who must first correct their "limitations and weaknesses". Again with Ngugi, as we have seen with Head, overt moral didacticism, which consists in imparting direct moral lessons to the reader, is not favoured, as Ngugi attempts to engage the reader in an ethical dialogue in order to effect an inner change that would then bring about social change. Ngugi's social commitment is thus, first and foremost, moral, hence the concern in the novel with the souls of the characters, the meaning of their actions and their psychological consequences, involving the reader in a constructive moral debate. In the present chapter, the focus is on Ngugi's sense of commitment and on the different dimensions it takes in the novel: The historical, the social and the psychological. The historical dimension is seen in

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<sup>481</sup> Ibid. P31

<sup>482</sup> Reddy, K. Indrasena. Op. Cit. P82-83

Ngugi's concern with revising a past distorted by colonialism; the social dimension is seen in the concern with the masses, with the common people in their daily struggle for better lives; the psychological dimension is manifested in the exploration of the recesses of the human soul to investigate the origin, nature and consequences of their actions. However, instead of investigating these different spheres separately, we shall rather show the way they are fused together, yet with a focus on the psychological plane which, as we shall see, is predominant in the novel; hence, our analysis is to be based on a close study of the moral development of the main characters through whom we find at play these three dimensions. The novel turns around five principal characters: Mugo, Kihika, Gikonyo, Mumbi and Karanja, and the way each one of them relives the war during the preparations for the celebration of Uhuru. As we shall see, each character is haunted by a troubled past. Given that Ngugi's interest is, as we have seen, in moral action, its nature and its psychological consequences, we shall investigate these points in each character, and hence bring to light Ngugi's all-embracing, or multi-dimensional commitment.

## 2) *A Grain of Wheat*:

The four characters we are to explore are haunted by a strong sense of guilt and regret as they approach the celebration of Uhuru. Ngugi manages to fuse in the novel the past and the present through using flashbacks and interior monologues to make us penetrate the minds of his characters and make us understand their acts and their motives; G. D. Killam elaborates on this point as follows:

Ngugi has developed a complex narrative structure in which he moves quickly and easily back and forth between various periods of time. He does this because he is primarily interested in the inner lives, in the mental states of his characters and his aim in attempting to account for the present mental states of his characters is to show how these are the product of events, layer upon layer, moving forward from past time. The aim is, really, to make time present and time past coincident. Thus he employs a number of devices to create a chronology which is lacking in linear form. The novel is a montage made up of narrative passages, interior monologues, dialogue, recollections and anecdotes.<sup>483</sup>

Indeed, the novel follows no chronological order, but keeps moving back and forth in time, allowing the reader to have a better appreciation of what is going on in the minds of the

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<sup>483</sup> Killam, G. D. Op. Cit. P54

characters, understand their motives for acting one way or another, and witness the extent to which they are affected by their acts.

a) Kihika Vs Mugo: Heroism, Betrayal and Moral Fortitude

Just like Maru in Head's novel, Kihika and Mugo are two important figures that offer an interesting revisiting of the concept of the hero in modern literature. These two characters are in fact in contradiction with one another: While Kihika is the representative of the perfect hero through his personality and achievements, Mugo represents the anti-hero. Gikandi places these two figures on two oppositional planes, arguing that "Mugo is marked out as a lone individual, an ironic figure, while Kihika, who is constantly compared to Christ [...] is clearly represented as an allegorical figure"<sup>484</sup>. While the allegorical is a clear and uncomplicated mode of representation, the ironic, on the contrary, involves first and foremost contradiction. Ngugi's use of these oppositional modes is significant, as it allows him to confront ideals about the past, about independence, about moral values with the harsh reality of the present and of the weakness of human nature.

Kihika is an important figure of the movement of struggle for independence; he exhorted his people to join the other fighters in the forest, forming what came to be called the Mau Mau movement. This movement is, in the words of Oliver Lovesay, still hotly contested, as the latter points out the colonial manipulative interpretation of it- a distorted interpretation, presenting its members as savage terrorists, that continues to be fought over even after independence by historians, politicians and intellectuals<sup>485</sup>. It presents the fighters as blood-thirsty murderers who have no organization nor any aim except that of the purging of their brutal murderous instincts. Ngugi reacts strongly against this offensive interpretation, and aims to restore the image of these heroic fighters through the portrayal of Kihika.

Kihika is depicted as "a man following an idea"<sup>486</sup>, an idea that had been entertained since a very young age when he "sat under the feet of Warui listening to stories of how the land was taken from black people" (P81). Warui's stories impressed upon the young Kihika the heroic deeds of Waiyaki, Harry Thuku and other warriors who sacrificed their lives for the cause. Kihika was also impressed by stories of resistance against colonialism in other

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<sup>484</sup> Gikandi, Simon. Op. Cit. P113-114

<sup>485</sup> Lovesay, Oliver. Op. Cit. P9

<sup>486</sup> Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. *A Grain of Wheat* (1967). London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2002. P95 (All references to this novel will be taken from the same source)

countries, such as Burma, Egypt, Palestine and India. The narrator says that “Kihika fed on these stories: his imagination and daily observation told him the rest; from early on, he has visions of himself, a saint leading Kenyan people to freedom and power” (P82). The seeds of heroism were thus planted in Kihika’s mind from his youth until he finally projected an image of himself as the hero of his people who would liberate them from the grip of the colonialists. Moreover, he found support for idealism in the bible, as he identified with such religious figures as Moses and Christ, who led their people out of oppression and suffering. Kihika’s ideals do not remain for long in the theoretical realm, as they are put into effect with his decision to join the Movement and put his life at the service of the cause. This makes of him a man of action and not a mere idealist; Govind Narain Sharma argues that “[i]f Kihika is a man of action, it is because his action is an extension of his moral values”<sup>487</sup>. The values he cherishes the most are self-sacrifice and the spirit of unity in the face of a common enemy; in fact, what Kihika offers, beyond religion, is “a social ethic; a national aspiration and a sense of commitment”<sup>488</sup>- the three areas where his moral idealism is turned into practice. In the following passage, Kihika, as G.N. Sharma puts it, “explains the rationale for, and ideology of Mau Mau”<sup>489</sup>:

‘We don’t kill just anybody [...]. We are not murderers, we are not hangmen [...] We only hit back. You are struck on the left cheek. You turn the right cheek. One, two, three-sixty years. Then suddenly, it is always sudden, you say: I am not turning the other cheek anymore. Your back to the wall, you strike back. You trust your manhood and hope it will keep you at it. Do you think we like scuffling for food with hyenas and monkeys in the forest? I, too, have known the comfort of a warm fire and a woman’s love by the fireside. See? We must kill. Put to sleep the enemies of black man’s freedom. They say we are weak. They say we cannot win against the bomb. If we are weak, we cannot win. I despise the weak. Why? Because the weak need not remain weak. Listen! Our father fought bravely. But do you know the biggest weapon unleashed by the enemy against them? It was not the Maxim gun. It was division among them. Why? Because a people united in faith are stronger than the bomb. [...] You think we don’t fear death? We do. My legs almost refused to move when Robson called out to me. Each minute, I waited for a bullet to enter my heart. [...] But a few shall die that the many shall live. That’s what crucifixion means today. Else we deserve to be slaves, cursed to carry water and hew wood for the whiteman for ever and ever. Choose between freedom and slavery and it is fitting that a man should grab at freedom and die for it. PP185-186

Kihika does not just speak for himself, but also on behalf of his fellow Mau Mau fighters, articulating in very strong words their doctrine. The first statements are a direct reaction to the false image spread about this movement, insisting that they are not cold-blooded

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<sup>487</sup> Govins Narain Sharma in: Killam, G. D. Ed. Op. Cit. P256

<sup>488</sup> Reddy, K. Indrasena. Op. Cit. P69

<sup>489</sup> Govins Narain Sharma in: Killam, G. D. Ed. Op. Cit. P256

murderers, but that their actions are in fact a reaction to former attacks. The violence of the Movement, Kihika explains, is necessary as passivity in the face of the offenders is impossible; in his "Preface" to *The Wretched of the Earth*, Jean Paul Sartre dwells on the necessity of violence as follows:

When the peasant takes a gun in his hands, the old myths grow dim and the prohibitions are one by one forgotten. The rebel's weapon is the proof of his humanity. For in the first days of the revolt you must kill: to shoot down a European is to kill two birds with one stone, to destroy an oppressor and the man he oppresses at the same time: there remain a dead man, and a free man; the survivor, for the first time, feels a national soil under his foot.<sup>490</sup>

Counter violence is important for the oppressed because it proves his humanity, as it springs out from a realization of one's human dignity; it brings about freedom and the feeling of belonging to one's "national soil". The Mau Mau fighters "must kill" and live in harsh conditions in the forest, far from home and comfort; their violence is defined in heroic terms regarding the focus on the notion of self-sacrifice which they consider as an indisputable moral obligation: They "must kill". They must be violent for their own sake, for they affirm their own human dignity, and for the sake of the "black man" in general. Towards the end of his speech to Mugo, Kihika emphasizes his own humanity and that of the Mau Mau fighters in the face of death, a point Ngugi highlights in the face of the false caricature of these men as cold blooded rebels. Moreover, this fear of death, Kihika explains, cannot be overcome except by a strong sense of self-sacrifice, which he associates with the Christian concept of crucifixion. Self-sacrifice, Ngugi suggests, is the first and foremost moral value that is needed in this struggle for independence.

Kihika's bravery and courage are demonstrated in his heroic feats against the colonialists, such as the capture of Mahee, "a big police garrison" and "a transit prison for men and women about to be taken to concentration camps". Kihika and his men freed the prisoners and provided the fighters with "fresh supplies of men and guns and ammunition to continue the war" (P16). This earned Kihika the name of "the terror of the white man". Besides, he killed Robson, the hated District Officer who killed "men and women without cause or purpose" (P185). People started to spread legends about Kihika, such as moving mountains and compelling thunder from heaven" (P16). When captured, he was atrociously tortured to

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<sup>490</sup> Jean Paul Sartre in: Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Farrington, Constance. Trans. London: Penguin Books, 1961. P19

give up “the secrets of the forest”, but would not say a word. The following passage recounts his death:

Kihika was hanged in public, one Sunday, at Rung’ei Market, not far from where he had once stood calling for blood to rain on and water the tree of freedom. A combined force of homeguards and Police whipped and drove people from Thabai and other ridges to see the body of the rebel dangling on the tree and learn. [...] The Movement, however, remained alive and grew, as people put it, on the wounds of those Kihika left behind. P17

The death of Kihika is fit to be called the death of hero who resists torture and chooses to die rather than betray his people; furthermore, Kihika is related to the figure of Christ, as he is executed on a tree, “the nearest thing to crucifixion in this day and age”<sup>491</sup>. Hence, similarly to Christ, Kihika is dead, but his spirit remains alive and nourishes the minds of people with courage and patience. Kihika is thus the charismatic heroic figure that Ngugi chooses to draw in this novel. He is a man of ideals and a man of action at the same time: The ideals he fights for are given a human, universal dimension, as they involve freedom, dignity, and the need for a national belonging. This is the idealistic heroic figure, characterized by bravery and self-sacrifice, that Ngugi celebrates and suggests its vital role in the achievement of freedom and the construction of a better "postcolonial" future. Ngugi chooses the allegorical mode as we see that Kihika is a direct representation of moral standards that he expresses, fights for and even dies for. On the socio historical plane, Ngugi "writes back" to the Western evil caricaturing of the Mau Mau fighters whom he presents as true admirable heroes and models of behaviour, who had organization, ideals and acted out on the legitimate principle of self-defense.

Kihika is the embodiment of moral values, the hero who sacrificed his life for the sake of his people and for humanity as well. However, unlike Mugo, he is not the central character around whom the events occur. Ngugi seems to have drawn the portraits of these two characters in contrast to one another for certain reasons we shall explore.

Mugo is the most complex character in the novel through whose mind we are given several interesting explorations; Reddy argues that “[the] novel in a way is a study in human nature and human psychology attempted through the psyche of Mugo”<sup>492</sup>. Ngugi chooses to carry out this study through the psyche of a betrayer, a criminal, through seeking out the causes

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<sup>491</sup> Killam, G. D. Ed. Op. Cit. P257

<sup>492</sup> Reddy, K. Indrasena. Op. Cit. P77

and consequences of his crime. In this moral investigation, Ngugi takes us back to the past in order to witness Mugo's difficult childhood that might determine his future action. Mugo was a poor orphan child left in the hands of his aunt- an aggressive drunkard who held him in contempt. The insights Ngugi gives about Mugo's mind at that time are interesting; for example, at moments, he felt that "the world had conspired against him, first to deprive him of his father and mother, and then to make him dependent on an ageing harridan"(P7). In reaction to poverty and to a hating widow aunt, Mugo developed a negative attitude towards life, reflected in feelings of abandonment, hatred and helplessness. In addition, as his aunt grew older, things kept getting even worse for him, as it is shown in the following passage:

The more feeble she became, the more she hated him. Whatever he did or made, she would deride his efforts. So Mugo was haunted by the image of his own inadequacy. She had a way of getting at him, a question maybe, about his clothes, his face, or hands that made all his pride tumble down. He shut his eyes to her oblique smiles and looks. P7

The worst assault Mugo receives as a child is on his self-esteem, as his aunt seizes every chance to "deride his efforts", perpetrating thus a pernicious form of psychological violence; Mugo's reaction to this is counter-violence as we are told that his "one desire was to kill his aunt"(P7). Even if he did not put these thoughts into action, to imagine his aunt's struggle as he strangles her with his bare hands, "her muffled groans and cries for mercy", and the visions of her blood on his finger tips, are very violent images, especially for a child. The mention of these details as early in the novel is significant as it suggests the lasting impact this violent childhood is to have on the personality of Mugo, his desires, aspirations as well as his actions.

We are then presented with a brief portrayal of Mugo as a grown-up who tries to attract esteem and respect in society; regarding the difficult childhood he went through, we do expect as readers to find some imbalance or contradiction in his character. The first ambivalence observed is clearly made manifest in Mugo between his fear of solitude and a marked longing for privacy and isolation from the others. Indeed, after the death of his aunt, Mugo develops a strong fear of loneliness; to his own surprise he realizes that he misses her, and that he does not want to be "left alone- an outsider"(P8). His life as a grown up seems to be centered around his person as he anxiously attempts to stay away from any

trouble that would result from any involvement with others; this is shown in the following passage:

Kenya had been in a state of Emergency since 1952. Some people had been taken to detention camps; others had run away to the forest: But this was a drama in a world not his own. P182

Mugo thus seems to have evolved psychologically in “a world of his own”, untouched by the reality around him. Despite the recognition of the necessity of social belonging he expresses after the death of his aunt, he leads the life of a loner, a hermit, and seems to like it better than the surrounding turmoil of revolution. He is defined by D. Cook and M. Okenimkpe as an anti-hero “in whom Ngugi most clearly portrays complete failure to accept social responsibility”<sup>493</sup>.

Once again, Ngugi gets us back to Mugo’s childhood to show us that this yearning for privacy is not a recent tendency; indeed, the narrator asserts that “all his life he had avoided conflicts: at home, or at school, he rarely joined the company of other boys for fear of being involved in brawls that might ruin his chances of a better future. His argument went like this: if you don’t traffic with evil, then evil ought not to touch you; if you leave people alone, then they ought to leave you alone”(P189). Thus Mugo, since his young age, refuses to get involved with others, because he thinks it would ruin his very individualistic prospect of a “better future”. In addition, Ngugi points out a dangerous equation Mugo seems to make between involvement with people and evil: For him, evil and people are the same- they must be left alone in order not to get harmed oneself. This denotes a terrible miscomprehension on the part of Mugo that makes us see him as a psychologically imbalanced person, deprived of a healthy moral discernment. His individualistic yearnings are so strong that they destroy his comprehension of ethics and morality, and deprives him of a healthy interaction with the people around him, whom he considers evil. The very negative attitude towards the external world he developed as a child might be the origin behind this psychological deficiency, as he was led to see, through the example of his aunt, that people are harmful. This led him to withdraw to a world of his own, as he came to equate safety with aloneness. However, as we have seen, he does feel the need of “social

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<sup>493</sup> Cook, David. and Michael Okenimkpe. *Ngugi wa Thiong’O :An Exploration of His Writings*. London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1983. P72

recognition”, and does not want to be an “outcast”; this need, Ngugi suggests, is inscribed in human nature and, despite distortions and escapes, cannot be totally ignored.

Mugo is characterized thus, in the words of D. Cook and M. Okenimkpe, by “an obsessive unwillingness to participate in the affairs of the community”<sup>494</sup>. In addition, his private, individualistic aspirations are entertained by one important obsession he has: Work. This is presented in the following passage:

He turned to the soil. He would labour, sweat, and through success and wealth, force society to recognize him. There was, for him, then, solace in the very act of breaking the soil: to bury seeds and watch the green leaves heave and thrust themselves out of the ground, to tend the plants to ripeness and then harvest, these were all part of the world he had created for himself and which formed the background against which his dreams soared to the sky. P8

Hard work, for Mugo, is the only alternative to restore his injured self-esteem, as it provides him with very positive feelings of achievement and success. On one hand, this passage further brings to light Mugo’s ambivalent mind that we discussed previously, as he attempts to win the recognition of a society he constantly avoids to get involved with. On the other hand, it puts to the front this notion of escape into work, which reminds us of Marlow in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, as it allowed him to “keep [his] hold on the redeeming facts of life” (HD P33). Similarly, work for Mugo is an escape from the reality that frightens him, and allows him to concentrate on the more positive aspects of life- even if they are mere “surface” aspects. Moreover, work helps him entertain his privacy, since what it actually provides him with is a living and an individual sense of reward, whereas he does not really dwell on social recognition.

In addition, Mugo further entertains his privacy with another contradictory aspiration, which is expressed in the following passage:

He had trained himself to enter a twilight calm whenever he lay on his back, in bed, or in the shamba. At such moments his heart dialogued with strange voices. And the voices faded into one voice from God calling out, Moses, Moses! And Mugo was ready with his answer: Here am I, Lord. P183

When free from work, in his moments of rest and relaxation, Mugo harbours strange dreams of leadership that even take on a messianic dimension, as he directly identifies with the figure of Moses, and hears the voice of God calling him. Bu-Buakei Jabbi explains that “Mugo’s secret hopes of public leadership [...] are unearthed in the Moses and Issac motifs

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<sup>494</sup> Ibid.

of his habitual reveries"<sup>495</sup>. In other words, Jabbi argues that Mugo's messianic dreams denote his secret aspirations of being a public leader; yet, what kind of public leader does Mugo aspire to be, regarding his obsessive individualistic yearnings? In fact, what these reveries do indicate is a troubled mind or, in the words of David Cook, "neurosis", as they are indirect expressions of Mugo's conscience that rejects individualistic tendencies in favour of more commitment with others. This reminds us of the "dagger of the mind" that Macbeth sees floating in the air, ushering the way towards the King. The dagger is a warning of his conscience against the act that found a way of expression despite the continual neglect of Macbeth. In Mugo's case, the reveries have another function, not that of warning, but that of soothing an inner torture resulting from denying duty towards people; these self-deceptive reveries function as a compensation for the lack of involvement with others, and help Mugo gain, more or less, moments of peace of mind. The contradiction between his messianic dreams and lack of involvement is more clearly pronounced in the following passage: "He kept alone, feeling a day would come when horns and trumpets would beat together to announce his entrance into the other world"(P182). We see that these reveries intervene when Mugo finishes work and is alone to compensate for his solitude through taking delight in a distant future of glory, whereas, ironically, real glory is to be achieved in his own surrounding if only he listened to the call of his people. Ngugi paints here the portrait of Mugo around the conventional dichotomy between theory and practice, ideals and reality, in a very dramatic way; we see Mugo taking refuge in the world of ideals while completely ignoring the urgent call of his society to take part in the actual fight against the immediate enemy. In addition to work, ideals also constitute an escape for Mugo.

Ngugi keeps digging further and further into Mugo's mind, suggesting another reason for his social uncommittedness, which is associated this time with a certain fear of action; in the following quotation, the narrator says:

He had always found it difficult to make decisions. Recoiling as if by instinct from setting in motion a course of action whose consequences he could not determine before the start, he allowed himself to be drifted into things or be pushed into them by an uncanny demon; he rode on the wave of circumstance and lay against the crest, fearing but fascinated by fate. P24

The difficulty of making decisions for Mugo is mainly due to the fear of the "course of action" that would bring about events he could not control. As a consequence, he

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<sup>495</sup> Killam, G. D. Ed. Op. Cit. P150

developed a passive attitude- that of being led adrift or "pushed" by circumstance. The kind of decision that frightens Mugo is the one that involves consequences, and thus moral responsibility for them; to be led adrift does not entail this kind of responsibility, because there is no decision making nor any action resulting from will. Mugo's attitude is thus defective, as the man is not capable of engaging in a course of action and to bear its consequences. Mugo wishes that any action he would undertake would be "the be-all and the end-all", and hence it would relieve him from taking responsibility and assuming its consequences. D. Cook and M. Okenimkpe argue that Mugo developed "a psychopathic fear"<sup>496</sup> of action- that kind of action that involves moral responsibility and which, as we have seen, is the matter of interest of Ngugi, namely: moral action.

Ngugi provides us before hand with an inner portrayal of Mugo so that we can better evaluate the difficulty of the moral choice he is confronted to with the appeal of Kihika : His tortured childhood that resulted in a low self-esteem, his need for recognition and the necessary, almost vital focus on work he takes as an escape, the refuge he takes in absurd messianic reveries that compensate for his lack of involvement, and the fear of moral responsibility. All these elements, combined together, made it difficult, even impossible, for Mugo to consider "serious involvement or to exercise a moral choice"<sup>497</sup>. The moral choice Mugo is confronted to is, at the first level, between Kihika and the colonizer, and at a deeper level, between involvement with others and privacy. The moment Kihika enters Mugo's life is carefully depicted: when the latter is seemingly satisfied with his situation, appreciating his work on the land, and dreaming about a distant glorious future, the narrator abruptly says, "But then Kihika had come into his life"(P8). This meeting with Kihika, at night, after the latter's murder of the hated DO Robson, is lived by Mugo as a moment of interruption and extreme distress, because he knows that his precious privacy is spoiled for ever. The following passage provides us with an interesting dive into his mind at this very moment:

A few minutes ago, lying on the bed, in his room, the future held promise. Everything in the hut was in the same place as before, but the future was blank. He expected police or homeguards to come, arrest him or shoot him dead. He saw only prison and death. Kihika was a man desperately wanted by the government especially after the destruction of Mahee. To be caught harbouring a terrorist meant death. Why should Kihika drag me into a struggle and problems I have not created? Why? He is not satisfied with butchering men and women and children. He must call on me to bathe in the

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<sup>496</sup> Cook, David. And Michael Okenimkpe. Op. Cit. P74

<sup>497</sup> Reddy, K. Indrasena. Op. Cit. P70

blood. I am not his brother. I am not his sister. I have not done harm to anybody. I only looked after my little shamba and crops. And now I must spend my life in prison because of the folly of one man!  
P188

Mugo looks back with nostalgia to the moments before Kihika enters his hut- moments of peace when he could explore a good and glorious future. Then he feels extreme anger towards Kihika, and dissociates himself completely from the cause he fights for; for him, Kihika becomes a bloody butcherer who only wants him to join him in the blood shedding of innocent people, and hence Mugo comes to deny the integrity of the battle Kihika chooses to dedicate his life for, reducing it to "the folly of one man". Mugo fails to see Kihika's proposition from the militant perspective because of the different reasons Ngugi allowed us to explore, namely, his difficult childhood, his social uncommittedness and lack of moral fortitude. His extreme dissociation from the reality around him is represented through these words: "have I stolen anything from anybody? No! [...] Have I killed anybody? No. How can Kihika to whom I have done no harm do this to me?"(P189). This is the articulation of the philosophy of self-centeredness by which he lived his whole life. We clearly see here that Mugo is not able to understand that it is impossible to deny one's surrounding and commitment to others. He had his mind troubled in this way for days, repeating to himself: "Why did he do this to me?", unable to concentrate on his work nor to entertain his usual messianic dreams. The moral choice presented to him, between keeping his privacy and getting involved is a burden that he is not able to bear. Thus, when he sees an opportunity to shed this burden, his mind is made up at the cost of betraying Kihika to the white military. This possibility is in fact the reward given to anyone by the government who would help capture the fugitive Kihika. At the sight of the prize to be given, Mugo felt the same excitement and terror he once experienced, as a boy, when he wanted to strangle his aunt- being the only way that would free him from his misery. Although, as we have seen, Mugo did not put these thoughts into action, he experienced them through telling evocations of blood and groans. With Kihika, he is going to act similarly, although the circumstances are different; on his way towards the District Officer, he falls into messianic reveries:

Mugo walked towards the District Officer, hazed with suppressed wonder and excitement. God called upon Abraham to offer an only son Issac for a burnt sacrifice upon a mountain in the land of Moriah. And Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood.[...] He walked in this vision. And in his dazed head was a tumult of thoughts that acquired the logic of a dream. The argument was so clear, so exhilarating, it explained things he had been unable to solve in his life. I am important. I must not die. To keep

myself alive, healthy, strong- to wait for my mission in life- is a duty to myself, to men and women of tomorrow. If Moses had died in the reeds, who would ever have known that he was destined to be a great man? PP191-192

This passage is very important for it provides an insight into the way Mugo's mind operates , i.e., through contriving self-deceptive arguments to soothe a guilty conscience and to commit the crime- the betrayal of Kihika. He identifies with the figure of Abraham who blindly executed the order of God to kill his only son; then, he convinces himself that he must stay alive, just like Moses, because he has a mission to perform, and brands a false commitment to himself and to the "men and women of tomorrow". The narrator quite correctly says that Mugo follows the logic of a dream, which means that his thoughts are deprived of any logic. These images only work to entertain his mind in order not to think about the act itself and foresee its consequences. Bovine Narain Sharma reflects on Mugo's self-deception as follows:

The appearance of Kihika brings to light his self-deception, the inconsistency of his position: he would be a saviour but when the opportunity offers itself he takes the road of retreat and betrayal, choosing to be a Judas rather than a Moses.<sup>498</sup>

Without realizing it, Mugo betrays the figures he seems to admire and identify with, and betrays them to follow the example of Judas, one of the disciples of Jesus who is said to have betrayed the latter for mere thirty silver coins. Mugo is self-deceptive because he needs to distance himself from the real nature and implications of his betrayal, as he needs to protect himself from the consequent torture of mind he would endure if he truly faced the reality of his act.

In addition, he provides himself with more arguments for betrayal, this time more realistic, as the narrator adds: "These lofty sensations were mixed up with thoughts of the money reward and the various possibilities opened before him"(P192). These opportunities would be to buy more land, build a big house, get married and have kids- tempting motivations indeed for a lonely orphan and social outcast. Moreover, this way, he feels sure his "place in society would be established" and he would be "half-way on the road to power"(P192). He then dwells on this notion of power as follows: "Yes- to be great you must stand in such a place that you can dispense pain and death to others without anyone asking questions. Like a headmaster, a Judge, a Governor"(P192). Mugo seems to be convinced that the reward

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<sup>498</sup> Govind Narain Sharma in: Killam, G. D. Op. Cit. P205

would enable him to climb up the social ladder and reach a powerful social position through which he would be above people and even above their judgement of him. Ngugi shows us here another facet of Mugo which is the least congenial, as we discover that he is capable of being a selfish individual who would not hesitate to deliver a countryman to the enemy for the sake of money and power; it reveals also that, besides the "reveries", Mugo is capable of more earth-bound motivations

However, these thoughts of grandeur, the messianic figures, the social position he would gain, contrast sharply with the humiliating treatment he receives from the two policemen guarding the office of the District Officer: They beat him, insult him and laugh at him.

However, this does not awaken him to the surrounding reality- they are for him, "unreal things that stood in his path"(P192). This further denotes the unhealthy relationship Mugo entertains with the real world. Even at the very moment Mugo finally betrays Kihika, telling John Thompson:"I know where Kihika can be found, tonight", his mind keeps hiding the reality and entertain him with false arguments:

For a time he experienced a pure, delicious joy at his own daring, at what he suddenly saw as a great act of moral courage. Indeed, for him, at that moment, there was a kind of purity in the act; he stood beyond good and evil; he enjoyed the power and authority of his own knowledge: did he not hold the fate of a man's life in his head? His heart- his cup- was full to overflowing. Tears of relief stood on the edge of his eyes. For a week he had wrestled with demons, alone, in an endless nightmare. This confession was his first contact with another man. He felt deep gratitude to the whiteman, a patient listener, who had lifted his burden from Mugo's heart, who had extricated him from a nightmare. PP193-194

This passage presents a strong irony about Mugo: The fact that he sees his betrayal as "a great act of moral courage"; it does demand courage to betray one's fellow man to the enemy, but not that kind of positive courage Mugo praises himself with. In addition, he feels he stands beyond good and evil, and dwells on the power of holding one man's fate in his hands, failing to consider the true consequences of his act. Besides, he wrongly feels gratitude to the white man, whom he now considers a new friend, for having released him from his burden.

Through these insights into Mugo's mind, Ngugi reveals the psychological processes by which an individual, who keeps to himself and refuses social involvement, goes through deceiving himself into believing that he is doing the right thing- even the betrayal itself becomes "a pure act". Conscience, and its ability to discriminate between good and evil, is silenced, or perhaps even lured towards adopting the wrong course of action through

repetitive, unrealistic and self-deceiving arguments. Besides, Ngugi keeps reminding us, at the moment when Mugo is about to betray Kihika, of his childhood, as he remembered his killing drives towards his aunt, of his blinding and contradictory messianic reveries, and of his lack of moral fortitude in the quest for the background and motives behind moral failing. The result is that we do not see Mugo as a mere despicable betrayer, but rather as a man with a trauma, a victim of a violent childhood and a violent environment, thus to be pitied rather than held in contempt. Morality is the real interest of Ngugi, as he does not merely draw the portrait of a betrayer in order to call for our condemnation, but rather to consider the circumstances that can lead to committing an evil act. Mugo's moral failure involves a scrutiny of the background and different motives that determine it as well as the impact it leaves on the individual's mind.

Indeed, we have a marked interest in the novel in the impact that the decision to betray Kihika leaves on Mugo's mind. The brutal reaction of Thompson to Mugo's revelation shook him strongly, as the DO, whom he just came to wrongly consider a new friend, spat on his face and slapped him hard. The shock Mugo experienced at this moment seems to have awakened him to the reality around him and to the true implication of his act; this is suggested in the following passage:

The table, the white face, the ceiling, the walls moved round and round. Then everything stopped abruptly. He tried to steady himself. Suddenly the ground where he stood gave way. He was falling down. He thrust his arms into the air. The bottom was so far away he could see only darkness. But he knew that there were stones jutting out, sharp, at the floor. He was nothing. Tears could not help him. With a choked cry, his body smashed on to the broken stones and jutting rock, at the white man's feet. The shock of discovery was so deep it numbed him. He felt no pain, and saw no blood.[...] Then the table, the chair, the DO, the white-washed walls- the earth- started spinning, faster and faster again. He held on to the table to still himself. He did not want the money. He did not want to know what he had done. PP194-195

Mugo seems to go through an intense nervous breakdown as he realized that he was wrong about everything: The collapse to the ground suggests the realization of his false aura and the shallowness of his dreams to become a great man and lead his people, thinking to himself that finally "He was nothing". The slap of the officer awakened him from his limbo state, and abruptly confronted him to the truth, which "numbed him". He does not want the reward anymore, and wants to distance himself from what he has done. All the motives he elaborated in his mind are discarded, and prove to be only sham excuses in order not to get involved with others in his blind pursuit of privacy. The confrontation with the reality proves

to be too harsh for Mugo as his conscience, with the collapse of superficial motives, comes to start its natural function of discriminating between good and evil and to realize the true consequences of his act, which Mugo immediately faces once he touches the hard ground. Through this episode, Ngugi suggests that our ability of discrimination can be momentarily shadowed, but cannot be completely discarded.

From this moment on, and up to the few days before the celebration of independence, Mugo lives the life of a misunderstood hermit- he has neither the peace of mind, nor the material ease he convinced himself he would gain as a reward for his betrayal; on the contrary, nervousness and even further alienation from people characterize the life span of ten years after his betrayal. Ngugi chooses water symbolism in order to represent the extreme tension that Mugo's mind goes through as a result of his deed. According to Abu-Buakei Jabbi, "the water symbolism [...] obtains mainly in relation to Mugo's drama of conscience"<sup>499</sup>. Indeed, the very first paragraph of the novel presents a strange dream Mugo has few days before Uhuru:

Mugo felt nervous. He was lying on his back and looking at the roof. Sooty locks hung from the fern and grass thatch and all pointed at his heart. A clear drop of water was delicately suspended above him. The drop fattened and grew dirtier as it absorbed grains of soot. Then it started drawing towards him. He tried to shut his eyes. They would not close. He tried to move his head: it was firmly chained to the bed-frame. The drop grew larger and larger as it drew closer and closer to his eyes. He wanted to cover his eyes with his palms; but his hands, his feet, everything refused to obey his will. In despair, Mugo gathered himself for a final heave and woke up. Now he lay under the blanket and remained unsettled fearing, as in the dream, that a drop of cold water would suddenly pierce his eyes. P1

Water is often used in literature with positive connotations, as it often suggests cleansing, purity, and fertility; however, the drop of water used in this passage is rather negatively defined: It is dirty and menacing. Peter Nazareth argues that it is "a symbol of violence"- not only violence in society, as a consequence of colonialism, but to the one "done to the soul of the individual"<sup>500</sup>. Indeed, the drop of water is violent- it reminds us of the Chinese water torture through which the victim is chained and exposed to water dripping on the forehead. Mugo experiences in his dream the same feeling of enchainment as he could not move to avoid the drop. Ngugi, through these symbolist references, suggests that Mugo goes

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<sup>499</sup> Bu-Buakei Jabbi in: Nazareth, Peter. Ed. *Critical Essays on Ngugi Wa Thiong'o*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 2000. P154

<sup>500</sup> Peter Nazareth in: Killam, G. D. Ed. Op. Cit. P244

through a self-inflicted psychological torture as a consequence of his betrayal, as feelings of guilt prove to be too strong for him.

In addition, what adds to Mugo's torture is people's mistaken consideration of him as a hero. In the following passage, the elders of the village come to see Mugo and offer him a proposition that best illustrates their mistaken view of him:

'[...]The movement and leaders of the village have thought it a good idea to honour the dead. On Independence Day we shall remember those from our village and ridges near, who lost their lives in the fight for freedom. We cannot let Kihika's name die. He will live in our memory, and history will carry his name to our children in years to come.' He paused and looked straight at Mugo and his next words addressed to Mugo were full of plain admiration. 'I don't want to go into details- but we all know the part you played in the movement. Your name and that of Kihika will ever be linked together. As the General here has said, you gave Kihika shelter without fear of danger to your own life. You did for Thabai out here and in detention what Kihika did in the forest. We have therefore thought that on this important day, you should led in the sacrifice and ceremonies to honour those who died that we might live.' PP23-24

This passage ironically shows the mistaken admiration people have for Mugo, for they think he had sheltered Kihika on that fateful night when he entered his hut. Gikonyo's words add to the irony of the moment when he says that Kihika's and Mugo's names will be linked together forever, while we know, as readers, in which real way they will be so, as hero and his betrayer. Thus the mental distress Mugo goes through is heightened with people's claim of him as a hero, and their desire to make of him the leader of the Uhuru celebrations.

According to Abu-Buakei Jabbi, this only serves to "revive Mugo's drama of conscience", and that this dream of the water drop is "a subtle enactment of that battle of conscience, with Mugo's better instincts striving to burst the dam of repression and public deception while baser emotions like fear still stand a resolute guard at the behest of his conscious will"<sup>501</sup>.

So, feelings of guilt are heightened by feelings of falsehood, and combined together, they become a strong source of mental torture for Mugo. Moreover, Gikonyo's words to Mugo, mistaking the latter's apparent distress for a humble desire to be left alone, are also ironic: "I know how you feel", Gikonyo said, 'You want to be left alone. Remember this, however: It is not easy for any man in a community to be left alone, especially a man in your position'(P24). By saying so, Gikonyo further adds to Mugo's torture, as the desire to be left alone was the incentive that pushed him to betray Kihika. We notice that Ngugi relentlessly resorts to the ironic mode as it serves to point out the gap between Mugo and the

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<sup>501</sup> Nazareth, Peter. Ed. Op. Cit. P156

community, and brings to light the inner distress he goes through. This irony is heightened by the complicity created between the narrator and the reader, which allows for a closer participation in the drama of conscience that Mugo goes through- a participation which Ngugi deems necessary in order to fully witness the workings of Mugo's mind in his investigation in 'moral action'.

Ngugi then explores another phase of Mugo's drama of conscience, as Mugo starts considering the possibility of building a new life for himself among the community, and forget this terrible past that torments him; in other words, Mugo considers the possibility of a second chance:

Mugo was now alone in the darkness. He felt he could embrace the whole night, could contain the world within his palms. For he walked in the edge of a revelation: Gikonyo and Githua had brought him there. He remembered the words: he shall save the children of the needy. It must be him. It was he, Mugo, spared to save people like Githua, the old woman, and any who had suffered. Why not take the task? Yes. He would speak at the Uhuru celebrations. He would lead the people and bury his past in their gratitude. Nobody need ever know about Kihika. To the few, elect of God, the past was forgiven, was made clean by great deeds that saved many. It was so in the time of Jacob and Esau; it was so in the time of Moses.P124

Mugo experiences here a revival of his messianic dreams he so much delights in, and which thrill him towards accepting the proposal of leadership, as he considers it as the fulfilment of his inner aspirations to be someone important- to lead the people. He finds in the religious narratives the possibility of the past being forgiven and even redeemed by "great deeds that saved many": He would now lead the people towards a better future, and be able to cleanse his past with their gratitude. This moment is lived by Mugo as a moment of relief from years of torment and self-torture. At this point, a question arises out of the narrative: Would it be possible for an individual to bury the past and start a new life without confronting the consequences of past wrong actions? On his way towards Gikonyo's hut to announce his recently taken decision, he finds Mumbi alone, and the latter will have an unexpected effect on him.

In a long conversation she holds with Mugo, whom she considers the hero who sheltered her brother, Mumbi recounts the heavy events of the past- her brother, her marriage, and her mistake. With her narration, Mumbi brings to life the suffering of the people of Thabai during the Emergency, and hence the legitimacy of the cause Kihika fought for and paid with his life, and which he, Mugo, so egotistically denied. The effect Mumbi's narrative has on Mugo is expressed through an interesting use of water symbolism:

"He saw the light at the bottom of the pool dancing in her eyes. He felt her dark power over him. [...] She was still young, vulnerable; but it was he who was scurrying with hands and feet at the bottom of the silent pool. It was terrible for him, this struggle: he did not want to drown"(P132-133).

Jabbi attributes this drowning imagery to Mugo's fear of involvement with people and his vital need to be left alone: "Such involvement seemed to Mugo akin to plunging into a pit, a pool, or a stream in which he might drown. [...] This habitual drowning imagery is subjectively reactivated during Mumbi's story about her past and the sufferings of Thabai after Kihika's arrest"<sup>502</sup>. The call that Mumbi's story makes is too strong to be denied- it pierces through the sham illusions he developed about the future, about leading his people and saving them just like Moses did; Mumbi's story presented Mugo with the immediacy of the people's suffering that he so often denied in his privacy, and awakened in him a repressed feeling of identification with the people around him. This sudden and unprecedented feeling of identification is reflected in the drowning image. Then, Ngugi captures Mugo's state of mind at the end of Mumbi's narrative:

She paused. The light still played in her dark voluptuous eyes. She was young. She was beautiful. A big lump blocked Mugo's throat. Something heaved forth; he trembled; he was at the bottom of the pool, but up there, above the pool, ran the earth; life, struggle, even amidst pain and blood and poverty, seemed beautiful; only for a moment; how dared he believe in such a vision, an illusion?  
P146

Mugo felt he is at the "bottom of the pool", and we notice that he is not struggling anymore. The mental distress he formerly felt in gave way to some kind of limbo state, akin to death, watching life from a distant spot; indeed, what he finally comes to see above the pool is the beauty of life, with its struggle, pain, poverty and suffering. Mumbi's beauty and the story she tells elicits in Mugo, even for a brief moment, an admiration for a life he has always abhorred- life with others. He goes here through an important moment of realization, for as soon as he gave up struggling and resisting, he was able to see the beauty of the life he always avoided. This is an important phase in his "drama of conscience", as it represents the first premises of redemption that foreshadow the coming confession. For the moment, as Jabbi puts it, it "seems he cannot now resort to his former life of isolated repressiveness, nor apparently can he now accept the proffered leadership"<sup>503</sup>, because he finally does not announce his recent acceptance to lead the Uhuru celebrations; yet, the narrator adds, he

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<sup>502</sup> Nazareth, Peter. Ed. Op. Cit. P156-157

<sup>503</sup> Ibid. P156

"was irrevocably drawn to the lives of the villagers"(P167).

The effects of Mumbi's story are still to be dwelt on by the narrator; in his way back to his hut, Mugo feels some change in him, as it is shown in the following passage:

Yesterday, this morning, before Mumbi told her story, the huts had run by him, and never sang a thing of the past. Now they were different: the huts, the dust, the trench, Wambuku, Kihika, Karanja, detention-camps, the white face, barbed-wire, death. He was conscious of the graves beside the trench. He shuddered cold, and the fear of galloping hooves changed into the terror of an undesired discovery. Two years before, in the camps, he would not have cared how Wambuku lay and felt in the grave. How was it that Mumbi's story had cracked open his dulled inside and released imprisoned thoughts and feelings? P167

The consciousness of what is really happening around him is awakened by Mumbi's story. He feels an inescapable identification with the huts, the people around him, the past, the revolutionary figures he so much despised, or thought he did so. These thoughts and feelings, it is important to note, were already in Mugo's mind, and seemed to be waiting for an incentive to be released. Ngugi suggests thus the impossibility of leading a life of privacy and neutrality which he equates with the denial of one's natural urges to get involved with people. Furthermore, the awakening of Mugo's consciousness seems to gain in intensity on his way back to his hut, as it is shown in the following passage:

It is not me, it would have happened ... the murder of women and men in the trench ... even if ... even if ... he was moaning. Mumbi's voice was a knife which had butchered and laid naked his heart to himself. The road from his hut led to the trench. But would it not have happened? Christ would have died on the cross, anyway. Why did they blame Judas, a stone from the hands of a power more than man? Kihika ... crucified ... the thought flashed through him, and a curious thing happened. Mugo saw thick blood dripping from mud walls of his hut. Why had he not seen it earlier, he now wondered, almost calmly, without fear. But he was shaking as he walked to his hut, resolved to find out if the blood was really there. PP 170-171

Mugo goes through an intense crisis as he gives way to his feeling of guilt at having betrayed Kihika; he tries to convince himself that it is not the death of Kihika that led to the death of people, whereas he knows that it is related to it. The use of the words "knife" and "butchered" suggests the violence of this crisis of consciousness at the realization of the consequences of his act. He tries hopelessly to find solace in his usual religious reveries, but to no avail, as his mind keeps hovering on the crucifixion of Kihika and, at this very moment, he has a vision of blood "dripping on the walls of his hut". Bu-Buakei Jabbi argues that this vision is another occurrence of water symbolism which ushers in "a slight but dramatic shift

in Mugo's hitherto adamant impenitence and concealment of guilt"<sup>504</sup>. It is indeed an important phase in Mugo's development, as we see that the water drop that opens the novel is transformed into a drop of blood, a vision Mugo has when he is fully awake. This is a vision his conscience emits as a symbolic representation of his betrayal and its consequences. Mugo now faces his act and fully experiences a deep sense of guilt. Killam refers to this moment as "Mugo's nadir"<sup>505</sup>, as it represents the turning point preparing a profound inner change.

Water symbolism, as we have said, is used by Ngugi to present images evoking Mugo's "drama of consciousness". In the following passage, this water symbolism is moved interestingly from a subjective to an objective level of representation:

We saw the man walk in the rain. An old dirty basket filled with vegetables and potatoes was slung on his back. He was tall, with broad shoulders, and he walked with a slight stoop that created an impression of power. The fact that he was the only man in the rain soon attracted the attention of people along the pavements and shop verandas. Some even forced their way to the front to see him. [...] 'Mugo is a strange man'. PP 173-174

The change in the use of water symbolism that was used previously from a subjective point of view as it was directly related to Mugo, is used now from an objective perspective, as the rain is falling on all the people of Thabai. Mugo walks in the rain which he seems not to notice, and hence attracts the attention of people who stop to watch him. This transition from the subjective to the objective is significant as it suggests the end of the inner torture we saw Mugo experiencing from the beginning after the betrayal of Kihika; as Killam puts it, the "drop of water, grown fat and dirty which threatens to engulf him in the tortured dream with which the story opens is translated into a cleansing rain, symbolizing his regeneration, a baptism for a new life"<sup>506</sup>. Water here is not an element of torture anymore, but, on the contrary, of cleansing; moreover, this transition suggests the end of his alienation and the advent of his involvement with people. Bu-Buakei Jabbi refers to it as "a sort of ritual self-exposure which apparently points to an inward readiness at last to face to the need to confess and lift the oppressive burden of secrecy and deception"<sup>507</sup>, prophecizing thus his coming, imminent confession and reconciliation with himself and the people.

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<sup>504</sup> Bu-Buakei Jabbi in: Nazareth, Peter. Ed. Op. Cit. P158

<sup>505</sup> Killam, G. D. Op. Cit. P62

<sup>506</sup> Ibid. P63

<sup>507</sup> Bu-Buakei Jabbi in: Nazareth, Peter. Ed. Op. Cit. P159

Confession is indeed the last phase of Mugo's drama of consciousness. First, he confesses his crime to Mumbi, the agent that helped him out of his limbo. In extreme nervousness, Mugo behaves as a mad man laughing loudly and threatening to kill Mumbi as he did to her brother, but then ends up letting her leave safely. Through this episode, Ngugi suggests that self-exposure is not easy, and that it requires fortitude and calm in order to resist the very natural instinct of fear and self-preservation. Mugo lacks this fortitude at this moment and gives way to his nervousness through this violent attitude towards Mumbi; in addition, the scorn and horror he sees on Mumbi's face serves as an incentive that pushes him further towards public confession. On his way towards the Uhuru celebrations, we have an interesting glimpse into his mind:

Why should I not let Karanja bear the blame? He dismissed the temptation and stood up. How else could he ever look Mumbi in the face? His heart pounded against him, he felt sweat in his hands, as he walked through the huge crowd. His hands shook, his legs were not firm in the ground. In his mind, everything was clear and final. He would stand there and publicly own the crime. He held on to this vision. Nothing, not even the shouting and the songs and the praises would deflect him from this purpose. It was the clarity of this vision which gave him courage as he stood before the microphone and the sudden silence. As soon as the first words were out, Mugo felt light. A load of many years was lifted from his shoulders. He was free, sure, confident. P231

Mugo first experiences doubts regarding his public confession, and starts to explore a legitimate way to avoid public wrath through letting Karanja, despised and hated by everyone, bear the blame. However, the remembrance of Mumbi dissuades him from any kind of escape; at this moment, we realize the importance of the role Mumbi played in Mugo's moral development: Her story got him out of his self-centeredness, and the remembrance of the horror on her face when she heard his confession to her drove him inescapably towards public confession, which is the ultimate expression of his complete recognition of the crime he committed, and the final readiness to meet the consequences. Critics present Mumbi as "a representation of everything positive: "Home", "Wife", "Woman", "Friend"<sup>508</sup>. For others, she embodies "all the good and natural attributes of an African community at its best"<sup>509</sup>, and at a broader perspective, she is seen as "an embodiment of Ngugi's humane vision"<sup>510</sup>. In Mugo's moral crisis, Mumbi is indeed the embodiment of the African community from which he seeks forgiveness; the embodiment

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<sup>508</sup> Killam, G. D. Ed. Op. Cit. P228

<sup>509</sup> Cook, David. and Michael Okenimkpe. Ed. Op. Cit. P8

<sup>510</sup> Reddy, K. Indrasena. Op. Cit. P71

of the human goodness that he betrayed. Yet, in relation to Mugo, Mumbi has developed into an outward representation of his own conscience that urges him towards confession, the only possible way towards redemption. Once the confession is done, Mugo feels free, sure and confident, even if for a short time, as thoughts about his own safety regain precedence. But still, the moment of confession allowed him to realize things he was unaware of, that "he was responsible for whatever he had done in the past, for whatever he would do in the future"(P232). Instead of running away from the village, as he instinctively considers, he returns to his hut and waits in order to meet the consequences of his act. In the following passage, Ngugi presents us with Mugo's state of mind after the confession:

Later, he shut the door behind him and went into the drizzling rain. He did not continue with his earlier plans. Instead, he walked back to his hut. In the hut, he lit the oil-lamp and sat on the bed. He did not remove his wet clothes. He stared at the wall, opposite. There was nothing on the walls: no visions of blood, no galloping foot-steps behind him, no detention camps, and Mumbi seemed a vague thing in a remote past. [...] Water dripped from his hair, down to his face and neck in broken lines; water dripped from his coat, again in broken lines, down his legs and on to the ground. A drop was caught in his right eyelashes and the light from the lamp was split into many tiny lashes. Then the drop entered his eye, melted inside, and ran down his face like a tear. [...] He did not rub the eye, or do anything. P233

We have another interesting use of water symbolism in this passage: Here, the rain turned into a drizzle, suggesting tranquillity and stability, and representing thus the complete and final end of torture and nervousness for Mugo. As it is said clearly in this passage, he is not haunted anymore by visions of blood and events from the past, pointing out his final reaching of inner reconciliation and calm. Even Mumbi is now "a remote thing in the past", as he is now in peace with his conscience. The drop of water mentioned at the end of the passage reminds us of the opening of the novel where the drop was defined as dirty and menacing to pierce his eyes, while Mugo is trying in vain to hide his face. Here, the drop enters his eye without pain, and melts inside only to run down his face like a tear without any move or sign of resistance from him. Mugo is thus finally cleansed from his crime and announces to the elders who entered his hut: "I am ready"(P234). Without any struggle, he follows them to meet his fate which he courageously accepts when he hears the words: "Your deeds alone will condemn you. [...] You- No one will ever escape from his actions"(P234).

The words of General R. express a moral that is fundamental in determining human conduct, and which Mugo sought to avoid throughout his life. The moral says that every

individual is responsible for his deeds and their consequences; this is indeed what Jim, in Conrad's *Lord Jim*, tries to escape after diving from the boat to save his life, leaving the pilgrims onboard. Through the character of Mugo, Ngugi investigates moral action, the background and the motives that affect it, and the consequences. It is interesting to note that, despite the betrayal, Mugo is not a person we despise and loathe because, by giving us all the details about his past and all the insights into his mind, we are brought to understand him and feel empathy for him. This process of comprehension is very important as it engages the reader in a process of self-exploration and of weighing the consequences of one's acts before it is too late. This is the moral purpose of Ngugi through creating such a complex character; this point is further elaborated in the words of David Cook and Michael Okenimkpe:

Our closeness to Mugo, our real concern for him, must surely inspire in each of us an urgent desire to eschew social treachery of any degree whatsoever and to be positively involved in our community and its aspirations before it is too late. If Mugo leads us to contemplate the terrible possibilities within ourselves, then the novel will be an active ingredient in the struggle which Ngugi espouses.<sup>511</sup>

Thus, through this process, Ngugi aims to realize his moral purpose- which is to achieve moral betterment within ourselves, and hence reach out for the betterment of society in general. The individual and the social are by no means two separate realms in Ngugi's world, because the morality he advocates encompasses them both. Through Mugo, we learn that it is impossible for any individual to live in isolation from his community, and that every act is systematically followed by consequences on the community as well as on the individual himself. Hence, in Ngugi's world, there is no dichotomy between private and social morality. At the more immediate socio-historical level, Ngugi suggests an important message through building this contrast between Kihika and Mugo. As we said at the beginning of this point, these two characters are in contradiction with one another- the former representing the society's true hero, the emblem of the aspirations of a whole community, whereas the latter is the anti-hero, the traitor who seeks personal comfort over social sacrifice, and who is mistakenly taken for a hero by his people. However, Ngugi does give privilege to Mugo over Kihika in the narrative, and this is seen in the fact that it is Mugo who presides the celebrations of independence, while Kihika is made a martyr. In the following passage, Gikandi discusses the effects of this choice as follows:

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<sup>511</sup> Cook, David. And Michael Okenmkpe. Op. Cit. P77

For by constructing the moment of independence around the traitor, rather than the sacrificed hero, Ngugi nudges his text- and its readers- to foreground the compromised nature of independence; he uses his novel to show how postcolonial attempts to produce a stable and collective narrative about the past are bound to flounder in the face of competing interpretations, desires, and recollections.<sup>512</sup>

The focus Gikandi makes here is on the people with their mistaken perception of Mugo and their ill-placed aspirations to make of him the symbol of their revolution and independence. This indeed foregrounds the disillusionment that characterizes the post-colonial period: The people are confused, disoriented, and their happiness with independence is dulled. Indeed, the discovery of the truth about Mugo is a harsh confrontation with the reality as people realize the extent to which they were mistaken by glorifying a traitor, and are not able to enjoy their celebration of Uhuru- the day they dreamed about for so long; this is captured in the following passage:

'Something went wrong...' Warui started again, slowly following his own thoughts. 'Everybody gone. And a minute before, the field was covered with so many people, like in the days of Harry, you know, at the procession. Then in the twitching of an eyelid, all gone. The field was so empty. Only four (or were we five?) left. We slaughtered the Rams- and prayed for our village. But it was like warm water in the mouth of a thirsty man. It was not what I had waited for, these many years.' P237

Warui pictures the atmosphere on the celebration day just after the confession of Mugo: It did not leave people angry, but rather deeply disappointed, depressed, hardly able to say a word, parting in silence and leaving the place. We imagine it would have been different if Karanja, whom they despised, was presented before them as the true traitor- then, they would scream at him and empty their souls of years of suffering and oppression. Their reaction at Mugo's confession expresses rather disillusionment as they realized their limited understanding and wrong perception of the world around them.

However, the novel does not end with such negative connotations; on one hand, ironically enough, it is Mugo's character that captivates the reader throughout the narrative. His rich, complex and tormented inner world is fascinating, and his final confession and readiness to meet his acts come to dwarf Kihika's strong pronouncements on principles, duty and sacrifice. Moreover, the effect of his confession on the other characters is very important. Gikonyo very poignantly expresses his admiration for what he considers to be true courage:

'He was a brave man, inside' he said, 'He stood before much honour, praises were heaped on him.

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<sup>512</sup> Gikandi, Simon. Op. Cit. P116

He would have become a chief. Tell me another person who would have exposed his soul for all the eyes to peck at'. He paused and let his eyes linger on Mumbi. Then he looked away and said, 'Remember that few people in that meeting are fit to lift a stone against that man. Not unless I- we- too- in turn open our hearts naked for the world to look at'. P229-230

Gikonyo admires Mugo's readiness to reject immediate glory and to expose his inner self to the world. Mugo's confession, according to Gikonyo, should exhort everyone to be true to one self and to the world around. He elevates Mugo to the level of a hero, and implicitly says that what Mugo teaches people on the day of Uhuru is not about the glorious past and the victory, but about the strengths and weaknesses of human nature, and the necessity to scrutinize one's soul in order to become better individuals, and hence be able to build a better future. Ngugi suggests that the failure of the post-independence period in bringing about the stability, prosperity and peace wished for is mainly due to the people's lack of self-insight and over reliance on past revolutionary figures, failing thus to meet the immediate demands of a present complex situation. Moral betterment is the solution to build better societies.

b) Gikonyo, Mumbi and Karanja: Moral fortitude, Human Frailty and Selfishness

These three characters are involved in a triangle relationship since the two men are in love with Mumbi, Mumbi choosing Gikonyo over Karanja, but accidentally bearing a child for the latter. Besides, they are linked together through the fact that, just like Mugo, the three have committed betrayals of varying nature and degree, and are to live with a guilty conscience; moreover, as it is the case with Mugo, Ngugi provides us with insights into their minds that allow us to understand their motives, choices and their tormented minds.

Like Govind Narain Sharma puts it, the "dialectics of alones and community dominates the spiritual evolution of Gikonyo too"<sup>513</sup>. Indeed, just like Mugo, Gikonyo too is torn between his private desire to live a stable, happy life with the woman he loves, and the duty towards the community that urges him to take the oath and follow the lead of Kihika. Contrary to Mugo, however, he willingly responds to the call of the community and seems ready to bear the consequences. In the following passage, Ngugi delves into Gikonyo's mind when he is taken to the concentration camps because of his alliance with the fighters:

Gikonyo walked towards detention with a brisk step and an assurance born in his knowledge of love and life. This thing would end soon, anyway. Jomo would win the case, his lawyers having come all the way from the land of the whiteman and from Ghandi's India. The day of deliverance was near at

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<sup>513</sup> Govind Narain Sharma in: Killam, G. D. Ed. Op. Cit. P206

hand. Gikonyo would come back and take the thread of life, but this time in a land of glory and plenty. This is what he wanted to tell his mother and Mumbi when the soldiers led him to the waiting truck. Let the whiteman then do anything; the day would come, indeed was near at hand when he would rejoin Thabai and, together with those who had taken to the forest, would rock the earth with a new song at the birth of freedom. P102

We sense in this passage an exaggerated optimism on the part of Gikonyo, as he seems to try and persuade himself through repeating that the day of deliverance is "near at hand", and that he would soon come back to Mumbi and resume a life of freedom and prosperity. His insistence on this quick recovery of life is indeed human and understandable, but contrasts sharply with Kihika's unflinching sense of sacrifice and his willingness to abandon love and comfort without any consideration of coming back. Just like Conrad does with his characters in his moral investigation, Ngugi puts to test this momentary "moral fortitude" once Gikonyo is in the detention camps; there, Gikonyo hears the news that Jomo Kenyatta lost the case, and thinks to himself: "The whiteman would silence the father and the orphans would be left without a helper"(P103). This was the first set back that shook Gikonyo's strength, and not the last; the long time he spends in the detention camps represents an even harder test, best expressed through the following passage where the narrator depicts the feeling of abandonment and despair he experiences there:

They were abandoned in a desert where not even a straying voice from the world of men could reach them. This frightened Gikonyo, for who, then, would come to rescue them? The sun would scorch them dead and they would be buried in the hot sand where the traces of their graves would be lost forever. This thought brought more despair to Gikonyo, remembering Mumbi and Wangari: that his identity even in death would be wiped from the surface of the earth was a recurring thought that often brought him into a cold sweat on cold nights. At such times, words formed in prayers would not leave his throat. PP104-105

The detainees were simply abandoned in a desert far away from the world of men- words that suggest a strong sense of alienation; an instance that reminds again Conrad and the way he isolates his characters from the world they're used to and put them to test. This isolation torments Gikonyo and in him grows the fear to be forgotten even in death- which would be as if he never existed. Despite the growing fears, Gikonyo and the other detainees "held on to their vows. They would not say anything about the oath". Yet, time flies and things do not seem to get better, especially after the suicide of Gatu, a detainee that used to be "their good spirit"(P105), and who constantly reminded the others of the necessity of solidarity and faithfulness. After this incident, Gikonyo's inner torment increases, as is

shown in the following passage:

So Gikonyo started walking round the compound in the evenings before the sun set. The walls of each compound into which the camp was divided were buttressed with barbed-wire; the wall around the whole camp was covered with barbed-wire. In the morning they went away from the barbed-wire to the roads and quarries; in the evening they returned to the barbed-wire. Barbed-wire, barbed-wire everywhere. So it was today, so it would be tomorrow. The barbed-wire blurred his vision. There was nothing beyond it. Human voices had stopped. The world, outside, was stopped. No, perhaps, he thought as he went towards the wall of barbed-wire, it was his ears that had gone dumb, his eyes blind. For days he went without food, he lived on water, and did not feel hungry or weak. P109

The repetition of "barbed-wire" intensifies the feeling of entrapment and confinement Gikonyo and the other detainees undergo; Gikonyo seems to go through some kind of spiritual death when cut off from the human world ; he grows dumb and blind and does not even eat. Even Mumbi, the memory of whom used to help him out, seems to have disappeared; he "struggled to recall the outline of Mumbi's face without success, there was only a succession of images each one cancelling out the one immediately preceding it. Was he dead?"(P109). Ngugi insists on the spiritual agony Gikonyo goes through and provides an interesting incursion into his mind at the moment he takes the decision to forswear the oath:

He only knew that he had woken from an unreal dream in which he had walked and walked ever since Gatu was hanged. His desire to see Mumbi was there. His mind was clear and he knew without guilt, what he was going to do. Word went round. All the detainees of Yala crowded to the walls of their compounds and watched him with chilled hostility. Gikonyo fixed his mind on Mumbi fearing that strength would leave his knees under the silent stare of all the other detainees. He walked on and the sound of his feet in the pavement leading to the office where sleeping, interrogations and confessions were made, seemed, in the absence of other noise, unnecessarily loud. The door closed behind him. The other detainees walked back to their rooms to wait for another journey to the quarry...PP110-111

It is significant that we are not given much detail about the betrayal itself, because what Mugo focuses on here is "moral action" before it is translated into act. Ngugi shows that Gikonyo has completely recovered his mind and that he now seems to be confident about the choice he has made- that of betraying the oath; and it is without guilt, with Mumbi in his mind, that, under the hostile look of the other detainees, he walks to the office to confess and save himself from the moral death he fell into. The sound of his feet on the pavement during this walk takes on a symbolic meaning, as it comes to represent his conscience, which has been silenced by a long moral agony. Indeed, four years later, for he was not released immediately after his confession as he refused to give the names of those involved in the

movement, he is haunted by this sound:

As Gikonyo left the road and took a path into the fields, he could still hear the echo of his steps on the cement pavement four years back [...] Would the steps always follow him, he wondered, suddenly scared of meeting someone he had known in the old days. He did not feel victorious, less so a hero. The green leaves were not for him. But then, Gikonyo did not want them. He only wanted to see Mumbi and take up the thread of life where he had left it. P111

Gikonyo's state of mind four years later differs from the one he had when he resolved to betray the oath; then he knew without guilt what he had to do, but now, he is haunted by the steps on the pavement and by the fear that he would meet someone from the concentration camps- two signs that denote a guilty conscience. Similarly to Mugo, Gikonyo refuses to consider the consequences of his betrayal, but is then forced to do so. At the first signs of regret, he concentrates on Mumbi and the thread of life, but the irony is that, on his return, he discovers that the latter had a child with his friend and rival Karanja. Gikonyo then experiences bitter disillusionment, and distances himself from his wife.

From the beginning, Ngugi shows that Gikonyo lacked the moral strength to bear the hard conditions of the concentration camps, as he mainly focused on the quick going back to Mumbi- Ngugi clearly shows how Gikonyo's private earnings take precedence over his duty towards the community. The extreme disillusionment that he experiences is expressed in the following passage:

Life had no colour. It was one endless blank sheet, so flat. There were no valleys, no streams, no trees- nothing. And who had thought of life as a thread one could continue weaving into a pattern of one's choice? P112

Gikonyo goes here through an important moment of self-scrutiny, where he comes to the realization of his mistake, which is the belief that one's life is one continuous thread woven according to one's choice. An individual's life does not wholly belong to him/her, but is shaped by the external world, made up of the people and the environment. Consequently, he develops a philosophy of existence in order to cope with the wreckage of his life, expressed in these words: "one lived alone, and like Gatu, went into the grave alone. Gikonyo greedily sucked sour pleasure from this reflection which he saw as a terrible revelation. To live and die alone was the ultimate truth" (P115). These words strongly remind us of Marlow's reflections in *Heart of Darkness*, when he says: "We live as we dream, alone". And indeed, Gikonyo concentrates all his efforts on work and never speaks to Mumbi, and rarely to his mother. Ngugi shows that the impact of the feeling of betrayal

Gikonyo takes is devastating. Yet, Gikonyo is saved out from this bitter attitude towards life under the effect of Mugo's confession.

During the Uhuru celebrations, Gikonyo goes on a foot race, and gets hurt; he is then sent to the hospital, where he spends the time necessary to go through a deep introspection that allows him to review his life and the decisions he has made:

For the last three days he thought of Mugo and the confession. Could he, Gikonyo, gather such courage to tell people about the steps in the pavement? At night he went over his life and his experiences in the seven detention camps. What precisely had all these years brought him? At every thought, he was pricked with guilt. Courage had failed him, he had confessed the oath in spite of vows to the contrary. What difference was there between him and Karanja or Mugo or those who had openly betrayed people and worked with the whiteman to save themselves? Mugo had the courage to face his guilt and lose everything. Gikonyo shuddered at the thought of losing everything. P241

"The steps on the pavement" become in this passage the symbol of Gikonyo's betrayal because he hears them at the moment he resolves to forswear the oath. At this moment, Gikonyo confesses that he did not have the courage to honour the oath until the end, and for the first time, overtly acknowledges guilt for what he did. Indeed, he realizes that there is no difference between him, Karanja and Mugo, as the three betrayed their people in order to save their lives. The influence of Mugo's revelation is very important, as Gikonyo finally aligns himself with the betrayers, and experiences thus true feelings of guilt and regret that would finally allow him to restore his peace of mind; as Killam puts it, Mugo's confession "becomes the agent for [Gikonyo's] personal catharsis"<sup>514</sup>. It is after this catharsis that he is able to forgive Mumbi, and experiences the desire to resume "the thread of life" with her:

Every morning Mumbi and Wangari brought him food. At first he tried not to speak to Mumbi; he even found it painful to look at her. But after Mugo's confession, he found himself trying to puzzle out Mumbi's thoughts and feelings. What lay hidden behind her face? What did she think of Mugo and the confession? P241

Gikonyo is humbled by the recognition of his own shortcomings, and is now more open to tolerate Mumbi's past mistakes, and to finally talk to her about the detention camps and the footsteps on the pavement. Ngugi suggests here that it is only through the recognition of one's own mistakes that moral betterment can be effected.

Mumbi, on the other hand, is the expression of another aspect of morality that Ngugi

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<sup>514</sup> Killam, G. D. Op. Cit. P66

explores in the novel- the more humane aspect. According to Killam, Mumbi is "the least complicated of the four main characters in the novel"<sup>515</sup>; indeed, she expresses in the following passage a simple quest in life:

'Even when I got married, the dream did not die. I longed to make my husband happy, yes, but I also prepared myself to stand by him when the time came. I could carry his sheath and as fast as he shot into the enemy, I would feed him with arrows. If danger came and he fell, he would fall into my arms and I would bring him home safely to myself'. P132

Through this passage, Ngugi paints the portrait of a courageous woman who heroically dreams of assisting her husband in the fight against the enemy- she would provide him with arrows, and would heal his pains- this is the dream that "did not die". However, she soon experiences disillusionment too, like the other characters: 'Yet when they took him away, I did nothing, and when he finally came home, tired, I could no longer make him happy'(P132). Mumbi is, like the other protagonists, haunted by the sense of her own failure, as she succumbed to Karanja in a moment of weakness. However, unlike the other characters, we do not find in Mumbi a tormented conscience nor a sense of guilt, because, as G. N. Sharma puts it, Mumbi "is the only major character in the novel who does not suffer a real fall from grace"<sup>516</sup>. Indeed, it is made plain in the novel that her sexual encounter with Karanja does not happen in normal consequences, but does happen at a moment of supreme joy at the news of her husband being released from prison. She explains this to Mugo as follows:

'What else is there to tell you? That I remember being full of submissive gratitude? That I laughed- even welcomed Karanja's cold lips on my face? I was in a strange world, and it was like if I was mad.'P146

At the moment Karanja announces to her the news of her husband's coming back, Mumbi is overcome with emotion, and loses every sense of reality- she is "like mad". In fact, it is Karanja that is more to blame here, as he took profit of her momentary weakness. In addition, we are even led to blame Gikonyo, for he is too harsh on her when he discovers the truth, and when he imagines her betraying him with every man in the village. Ngugi thus elevates Mumbi above the other characters in the novel in the treatment of her betrayal, suggesting that individuals can make mistakes out of some weaknesses, but are not

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<sup>515</sup>Ibid. P67

<sup>516</sup> Govind Narain Sharma in: Killam, G. D. Ed. Op. Cit. P206

necessarily deprived of their goodness. She is, in the words of G. N. Sharma, "an angelic figure, the only one besides Kihika who keeps her vision intact, never losing her warm reality, her good sense and nobility"<sup>517</sup>. Through Mumbi, Ngugi expresses thus another aspect of his vision of morality, the one that recognizes "the potential of heroism in man" as well as "his frailty and fallibility"<sup>518</sup>. This vision is softer and more humane, as it involves and brings together two seemingly opposite aspects in man side by side: Greatness as well as frailty.

Through Karanja, Ngugi treats another kind of betrayal, the one which allows neither forgiveness nor purge. In Killam's words, Karanja is "the most pathetic" character in the novel<sup>519</sup>. He is the complete antithesis of Kihika for he "represents the morality of the colonized African"<sup>520</sup>. This mentality consists in developing a very inferior perception of oneself, and an exaggerated belief in the grandeur of the white colonizer. As a consequence of this attitude, he betrays his people through joining the homeguards, and feels a great satisfaction at the distorted perception of the superiority he gains from working for the white man. On the other hand, his sense of racial inferiority prevents him from even feeling at ease with the white people. The tea episode with the white woman, Mrs Thompson, tells a great deal about this: After finally accepting to have tea with her, "he had no courage to lean back and be comfortable. At the same time, he desperately wished one of the workers was present to see him entertained to coffee by a white woman, the wife of the Administrative Secretary"(P37). He gradually acquires among the whites the superior position of "a trusted servant"(P153), which further alienates him from his people, whom he despises and never seems to hesitate to torture or even kill. This is the pathetic portrait of "a black man who yearns to be a white man"<sup>521</sup>. Yet, despite this very negative portrait, Ngugi succeeds to make us regard Karanja with sympathy and a certain degree of understanding. Indeed, he succeeds to do this through giving us insights into his mind to explore his motives and inner torments. For example, Karanja once says to Mumbi: "a time will come when you too will know that every man in the world is alone, and fights alone, to live"(P141). We are, as readers, surprised at this reflection that denotes in Karanja a

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<sup>517</sup> Ibid. P207

<sup>518</sup> Ibid.

<sup>519</sup> Killam, G. D. Op. Cit. P68

<sup>520</sup> Ibid.

<sup>521</sup> Ibid. P253

capability to express such a deep and moving feeling- a capability we do not expect from a man who turns against his people and aligns himself with the enemy. Karanja is somehow humanized by this reflection, as it denotes pain and suffering, and the fact that he is moved by the very natural instinct of survival just like Mugo and Gikonyo. In the following passage, he further expresses his firm belief in the white power, and the very natural fear of death- two important motives that determine his acts:

'You don't understand. Did you want us all to die in the Forest and in Detention so that the whiteman could live here in this land alone? The whiteman is strong. Don't you ever forget that. I know, because I have tasted his power. Don't you ever deceive yourself that Jomo Kenyatta will ever be released from Lodwar. And bombs are going to be dropped into the forest as the British did in Japan and Malaya. And those in detention will never, never see this land again. No, Mumbi. The coward lived to see his mother while the brave was left dead on the battlefield. And to ward off a blow is not cowardice.' P144

Even if we are far from the heroic speeches of Kihika, we are forced to acknowledge that there is some truth in what Karanja says: The strength of the whiteman, the imprisonment of Kenyatta, and the eminent death awaiting the rebels. Ngugi thus does not totally condemn Karanja as he presents his own perception of what is going on around him, and which is not devoid of truth.

In the following passage, Ngugi provides us with a very significant insight into Karanja's mind, which allows to better understand the motive that led him to betrayal:

He had gone to see Kihika hang from a tree. He had searched his heart for one has pity or sorrow for a lost friend. Instead, he found only disgust; the body was hideous; the dry lips over which a few flies played, were ugly. What is freedom? Karanja had asked himself? Was going to detention freedom? Was any separation from Mumbi freedom? Soon after this, he confessed the oath and joined the homeguards to save his own life. P226

Looking at the body of Kihika hanging from a tree has an unexpected effect on Karanja, as he experiences bitter disgust instead of the pity and sorrow for a lost friend. This image of death he finds repugnant- the dried lips, the playing flies- is transformed into the image of freedom his friend fought for, and for which he himself had taken the oath. He has a sudden moment of realization of the futility of the cause they fight for, and soon after betrays the oath. Karanja is not made of the stuff of Kihika indeed, but this insight into his mind presents us with his own inner experience of the events around him. Gikandi relates Karanja's incapacity for sorrow at the sight of Kihika's dead body to his betrayal: "Karanja's

betrayal is tantamount to social death; he no longer has the capacity for empathy"<sup>522</sup>.

However, as we have seen, this incapacity for empathy is rather presented to us as a motive for betrayal than an effect; what Ngugi suggests here is that Karanja lacks this capacity and is unable to identify with his people, and hence is unable to sacrifice himself for the sake of his community. In the following passage, we meet again this detachment Karanja feels with his people:

But why am I afraid of dying, he asked himself, remembering the many men, terrorists, he and other homeguards led by their white officers, had shot dead? Then, somehow, he had not felt guilty. When he shot them, they seemed less than human beings and more like animals. At first this had merely thrilled Karanja and made him feel a new man, a part of an invisible might whose symbol was the whiteman. Later, this consciousness of power, this ability to dispose of human life by merely pulling a trigger, so obsessed him that it became a need. P225

Karanja's extreme lack of empathy and identification with his people produces complete detachment and coldness. This allows him to shoot them dead and regard them like mere animals. Disposing of human life thrills him and even becomes an obsession. Moreover, in his eyes, these men were no more than terrorists, using thus the language of the whites he serves.

So, Ngugi depicts the mind of a traitor who has no regard for his people, and is not even tormented by guilt. In fact, we can safely say that he is also antithetical to Mugo who does have this capacity for empathy which was awakened, as we have seen, through the story of Mumbi, and which led him towards confession and redemption. For Karanja, a quite different ending is reserved. This is painted in the following passage:

It's the hooded self that Karanja now vividly saw in front of him, in the dark. He could almost touch the slits through which the man inside the hood saw the world. It's only in the mind, he reassured himself. He was now near the railway crossing. He heard a train rumble in the distance[...]. One day people were collected from Rung'ei Station for screening. One by one they went past him, and Karanja inside the hood recognized many people and knew with pleasure that none of them could see him [...]. The picture of Mugo at the platform, like a ghost, rose before him, merging with that of the hooded man. Karanja stood near the crossing, contemplating the many eyes that had watched Mugo at the meeting [...]. He was conscious too, of many angry eyes watching him in the dark [...]. When the train disappeared, the silence around him deepened; the night seemed to have grown darker. P226

Karanja's first job in the service of the whiteman was in a hood, a white sack that covered all his body except the eyes, and "[by] a nod of the head, the hooded man picked up those involved in Mau Mau"(P226). Now that everything is over, the whiteman gone and

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<sup>522</sup> Gikandi, Simon. Op. Cit. P126

independence finally obtained, Karanja is haunted by this “hooded self”; however, contrary to Mugo, this is not an image of the mind that leads to guilt and then to redemption, as we feel that with Karanja it is too late. The image of the hooded self then merges with the ghost of Mugo- the betrayer who reached redemption through confession, and who serves now to remind Karanja of the latter’s cowardice. Now it is only darkness, peopled by many watching “angry eyes” that surround Karanja. Killam refers to this point as follows: “For Mugo, Mumbi and Gikonyo Uhuru Day has produced freedom, freedom of an unexpected kind- from guilt and doubt and fear. But no such freedom will come to Karanja”<sup>523</sup>. Ngugi reserved a different ending for Karanja because his betrayal is of a different kind, as it is, in the words of Gikandi, “premised on an absolute disregard and contempt of collective norms and desires”<sup>524</sup>. According to Ngugi, thus, complete denial of collective values and the failure to identify with one’s people is condemnable. Karanja is not killed for his crimes against his people, but is doomed to live alone, continually haunted by the terrible deeds of the past. Ngugi makes us sympathize with this character through depicting his motives and his inner suffering, yet he does by no means present a lenient attitude towards him, suggesting that the betrayal of one’s people and the refusal to comply with their standards is the supreme unpardonable sin.

This is the ending that Ngugi chose for his novel, with all the characters forced to look into their past, scrutinize their actions, and recognize their mistakes and weaknesses. As we have seen, except Karanja, the three other characters, Mugo, Gikonyo and Mumbi are finally free of their inner torture. The novel goes through a deep exploration of the motives and the external forces that determined the characters’ actions and presents us with the consequences of these actions on their inner selves. Ngugi has a specific aim in doing this, an aim that is very well explained in the words of David Cook and Michael Okenimkpe:

The wider purpose is to implicate us all, in the hope of inducing a true self-searching and reorientation in every reader. We are asked to recognize the characters’ guilt, and then to acknowledge that we share it in part whenever we ourselves fail the cause of society, so that we will be moved to try and do better in future. This is Ngugi’s aim. <sup>525</sup>

Through this search into the inner being of the characters, Ngugi induces the reader to go through a process of identification, and hence to induce self-scrutiny in order to experience

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<sup>523</sup> Killam, G. D. Op. Cit. P70

<sup>524</sup> Gikandi, Simon. Op. Cit. P126

<sup>525</sup> Cook, David. And Michael Okenimkpe. Op. Cit. P70

a catharsis along with the characters, so that we would improve our attitudes in the future as far as our duty to our society is concerned.

The novel is not a simple social document, where we learn about the history and culture of a specific society, but an allegory that is able to affect the inner worlds of readers, make of them better individuals who would be more apt to create better societies. This is Ngugi's commitment; his focus is not limited to politics but, similarly to Bessie Head's project, it encompasses the individual's soul. Killam tackles this point as follows:

*A Grain of Wheat* is not a political novel in the fullest sense. The political theme is balanced against the exploration of human fallibility the novel offers. Ngugi's humanism, revealed by his care for his people and his understanding of what prompts them to action, dominates the novel. <sup>526</sup>

The human soul is at the forefront of the novel because Ngugi sees that there lies the solution to create better societies. However, this does not mean that politics is not important for Ngugi; on contrary, individuals are prompted to recognize their responsibility towards their society and be ready to sacrifice themselves for the sake of its well being. This is summed up in the title of the novel, since the grain of wheat comes to take a significance that encompasses the political and the moral; Killam and Openimkpe write:

Our 'grain of wheat' is the political will of the people planted at this earliest stirring of the demand for social justice. But the grain must die in order to be reborn. Ngugi insists that all of us as members of a community must individually and collectively accept responsibility for its growth and well-being. Only by the general discharge of this responsibility can a society progress: this is the sole foundation on which moral order can be built. Individualistic, messianic leadership is rejected. <sup>527</sup>

The grain of wheat represents this social responsibility that must be planted in the souls of the individuals and which represents, as Killam and Okenimkpe put it, the foundation of every moral order.

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<sup>526</sup> Killam, G. D. Op. Cit. P72

<sup>527</sup> Cook, David. And Michael Okenimkpe. Op. Cit. P70



### Concluding Remarks:

The novels we have studied so far express, in different ways, the issues of their socio-historical period: racism, social injustice, corruption- issues faced by most independent African societies. Moreover, they explore the complex relationship that individuals entertain with their society, and the way in which the personality of these individuals is shaped. The social orientedness of African literature is clearly exemplified in *Maru* as well as in *A Grain of Wheat*- this social orientedness is expressed in the aim, on the part of the authors, to create better societies. In both novels, we have seen that the betterment of these societies is to be effected only through the moral betterment of the individuals that constitute it; both authors do not offer socio-political reforms of any kind, nor do they present clear moral codes of behaviour for these individuals to follow. In both works, the novelists put their characters in complex circumstances that engage them in moral dilemmas, allow them to make choices, bring them to a final recognition of their failures and weaknesses, and thus induce them to discover by themselves important moral lessons. The authors do not intervene to dictate specific codes of behaviour, but leave this to the characters, and the readers alike, to formulate them for themselves.

We come as readers to witness this process of deep moral investigations the authors effect in the recesses of their characters' souls. Indeed, a clear message is imparted at the end of both novels: the solutions to the evils that postcolonial societies face are to be found in the human soul. In her novel, Head articulates her vision of the perfect leader that would be able to create a better society; this leader is not political in the conventional sense of the word, since he does not act as such, and people are dissatisfied with him because he is never "on show". Maru is in fact presented as "a king of the soul" who operates only according to high spiritual standards, and loathes the masses for their limitations and corruption. Yet, this visionary and idealist, who dreams of a better world, is aware that he is not completely cleansed of some evil in his nature, and learns that he will have to eradicate it in order to fully effect the mission of redeemer he assigned to himself. Margaret, on her part, is defined by her greatness of soul- a greatness that instantly impacts on the other characters of the novel, even creating other "kings of the soul", as is the case with Moleka. Through the character of Margaret, Head suggests that the only way to bring an end to racial discrimination is to maintain one's sense of humanity- and this is the way Margaret leads the people she represents, the Masarwas, to final liberation. In *A Grain of Wheat*,

Ngugi also dwells on this notion of the perfect social leader that would bring society out of the reigning oppression and injustice. Mugo, whom everyone considers a true hero and a future leader, is ironically a social betrayer. Ngugi leads us, throughout the novel, to investigate with him the reasons and motivations that lead to his betrayal as well as the consequences, through flashbacks into the past and a thorough exploration of the recesses of his mind. At the end, Mugo comes to renounce the position of leader assigned to him by his people, and all the comfort and prestige it would have brought him, and decides to confess his crime in front of everyone. In the final analysis, we do not have the impression that Mugo fails as a leader; on the contrary, he has brought people to go through deep self-reflections, and to realize that the true fight is about to start, now that colonialism is over: the fight within the soul to become better individuals in order to build a better society. Although the novels differ in tone and even in style, as *Maru* emphasizes the sense of wonder and magic, whereas *A Grain of Wheat* is more “realistic”, they both express this notion of commitment that we introduced beforehand. The social commitment of the authors by no means makes of their works mere social documents, that would present the past cultural traditions and call for a movement back to “a glorious past”. The past is rather a problematic issue which, in *Maru*, is completely out of discussion, whereas in *A Grain of Wheat*, is emphasized only to be revised and be regarded with a critical look. Social commitment is expressed in the need to redeem this postcolonial society that has endured the traumatic experience of colonialism, and this is to be effected only through awakening the conscience of the individuals that make it up: To make them dive into the recesses of their souls, discover their human potential of goodness, and hence to fight the evil within and without. Modern African literature thus offers us an interesting ground to discuss this intricate relationship between literature and morality. It is a demonstration of the fact that the writer can be committed, in the sense that he can attribute to his work a social and moral functionality, without making the work simplistic and uninteresting. The reader is involved in the ethical debate of the work in question, and is led to appreciate what he has found out and to use it for the sake of the general good of the society he lives in. The notion of commitment, of the moral and social functionality of literature is not necessarily equated with didacticism, nor does it by any means cancel the aesthetic dimension. The modern African works we have studied are important works of art that present us with the complex

moral dilemmas an individual faces within challenging historical changes and paradigms of behaviour.

## *Conclusion*

Throughout this study, we have been concerned with the very intricate relationship between art and morality. Our interest has been to explore the morality of fiction, the whys and wherefores that the selected novels deal with, as far as ethics are concerned. We based our approach on the main tenets of J. Krapp's 'responsible ethical criticism', which he developed as a reaction to the limiting conventional ethical criticism that is monologic, and tends to deny the aesthetic dimension of literary works; Krapp's responsible ethical criticism is an attempt to achieve a proper balance between ethics and aesthetics. We have seen that the novels offer different sets of ethical claims, which are expressed through complex aesthetic structures. The socio-historical circumstances have a crucial role in shaping the ethical claims as well as the attitudes of the writers towards them, and hence give rise to different aesthetic techniques to express them. The novels chosen for this purpose are important works that offer interesting grounds for our discussion, as they are situated at important socio-historical junctions: the "American Naissance" and the need for a cultural break from the mother continent, the rise of modernity and the consequent cultural decadence, post colonialism and the continual search for an original cultural identity. Ambiguity, aestheticism and commitment are the notions that best express the attitudes that the authors chose towards questions of morality in their respective societies.

In the first part entitled Moral Ambiguity in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, we explored the techniques the writers used to assume distance from the events of their novels, and hence insure moral ambiguity. We saw that this moral ambiguity was in fact a peculiarity that characterized 'true' American works as different from the European literary tradition. It is typically American because it is an expression of the division and instability inherent in the American imagination; this split resulted from the two opposite tendencies to see America either positively as a new world, 'the promised land', that promotes progress for the human race, or rather as a land that is 'degenerately primitive'. The novels we are concerned with are considered to have achieved true 'Americanness' because they express, each in its own way, this American split of consciousness. Aesthetically speaking, this split is expressed through romance which is situated, according to Hawthorne, in a moonlit space between the real and the imaginary. We might say that this is the most adequate aesthetic form to adopt, since its definition

expresses lack of clarity, confusion and instability, and account for the moral ambiguity of the works in question.

We saw in the first chapter devoted to Hawthorne that the latter is a dualistic writer; we saw interesting comments from critics as well as contemporary writers where Hawthorne is presented as split between a surface simplicity and conventionality, and a hidden darkness, expressed in the concern with evil and the dark secrets of the human soul. Hawthorne expresses in his work different shades of this dualism, such as art vs society, as he presents the artist in perpetual conflict with a society which he still tries to make better. Another dualism, which is still related to the former, is the conflict Hawthorne experiences between the world of the imaginary, where he likes to dwell, and the world of practical reality, with which he needs to connect to preserve his moral health. Hawthorne expresses this dualism in his work throughout an interesting interplay between the use of two contradictory modes of representation: the allegorical and the symbolic; we saw that while the allegorical stands for simplicity, the symbolic stands for complexity and inconclusiveness.

Indeed, we saw that Hawthorne used symbolism in an attempt to account for the new complexity of man's life, for it ushers a complex connexion with the reality, where the reader is engaged in an active process of interpretation and decoding. Hence we based our analysis of the novel on the decoding of the meaning of the scarlet letter, and we tried to account for its different perceptions and representation. We saw that the meaning of the letter is in constant change, and that it can never be put down within conventional categories of good or evil. Indeed, the moral ambiguity of the novel is achieved through the impossibility to reconcile the different interpretations of the letter A that the novel offers. We saw that even at the very beginning of the novel, the Puritans themselves are distracted by the beauty of its art away from its true import. Then, with her good acts within the community, Hester makes people see in A only 'able', or 'angel', and its bodily representation, the little Pearl, is herself a symbol of life, movement and spontaneity. We are tempted as readers to conclude that the A is in fact a symbol of goodness and change, and a rejection of the Puritan stern and dark understanding of religion and morality. Indeed, we are tempted to say that personal morality triumphs over social and religious morality, since Hester succeeds to assert her goodness among the people of the community, and she

is said in the novel to have dwelled morally in far broader spaces than the restrictive Puritan one. However, the narrative pushes us to dismiss any such simplistic readings.

While the living letter, Pearl, is presented as a symbol of life and revolution, she has a restrictive role on Hester, since she prevents her from becoming a revolutionary figure herself. Moreover, she is Hester's joy and retribution at the same time, giving her the happiness of motherhood while reminding her of her sin, relentlessly forcing her mother to face her past. We remember the forest episode where she obliges her to put on again the badge of shame which she threw away for a momentary relief. At the end, she does not seem to obtain relief until everything is revealed, and everyone gets the merited retribution; then, she is said to have left to lead a happy life somewhere else, and disappears from the narrative. With this personification, Hawthorne gives the symbol a vast interpretive potential that is impossible to account for, as it offers irreconcilable meanings. We are left wondering whether Pearl is a symbol of freedom, or, on the contrary, a form of conscience, or some kind of moral agent, that attends to the reparation of the broken moral code, for she disappears from the narrative as soon as justice is done: Dimmesdale is revealed to be the sinner, and dies on the scaffold that staged the humiliation of her mother. The symbol around which the novel turns is thus impossible to submit to a definite interpretation, because it is capable to give rise to different contradictory meanings.

In addition, Hawthorne's own attitude towards the Puritan moral code is obscure, because while we are led to think throughout the narrative that he totally condemns it, he makes Hester choose at the end to come back to that same community, and retake the badge of her "shame and ignominy". The ending is disturbing, for we are not given any indication about the author's attitude and what moral message he intends to convey. The novel ends up in complete inconclusiveness and ambiguity, and Hawthorne suspends his judgment.

However, this moral ambiguity does not make of the novel morally void or nihilistic; on the contrary, it is in fact a strategy on the part of the author to involve the reader and make of him an active participant in the moral debates it raises. It achieves this through putting to the forefront the issue of interpretation; indeed, the symbol around which the novel revolves gives rise to different perceptions and contradictory readings, and suggests that the process of interpretation and understanding is subjective and changeable. Moreover, Hawthorne suggests that this process of thinking, this active involvement of the

reader in the attempt to decode the meaning of the symbol, is more interesting and effective as far as ethics are concerned. In other words, the stress is put on this process of moral decoding, rather than the passive discovery of the moral lesson. This is how Hawthorne perceives the role of the novelist: to present the reader with a moral ground to explore and test, rather than with pre-determined moral codes of behaviour.

Mark Twain, similarly to Hawthorne, is a dualistic writer, torn between contradictory tendencies. In the second chapter devoted to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, we first explored this dualism in Twain; we saw that critics are divided between those who see in him only a humourist, and those who consider him a moral sage who tackles moral issues in the aim of inculcating moral lessons. We also saw that Twain clearly expressed an interest in the hidden, dark side of human nature; this is seen in his fascination with Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, with the 'double' that resides in every human being, hidden in the dark like the other hemisphere of the moon. In addition, Twain was born at a time of transition, which he himself named The Gilded Age when he wrote his novel, *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today* (1873). With this novel, Twain captured this division in America between a shining surface and hidden social problems. Moreover, the American consciousness at that time was torn between the westward movement, with its call for the wilderness and adventure, and the sophisticated life of the Eastern coast. Consequently, in such an atmosphere of change, Twain experienced a deep division between a nostalgia for a past of simplicity, and an admiration of a present of development and revolution. Through the exploration of these different points, we could clearly see that dualism was an inherent factor in Twain's personality as well as background; moreover, as far as forms of literary expressions are concerned, Twain was torn between two seemingly contradictory modes: realism and romance. He assumed an ambiguous attitude towards realism at a time when it was considered the most appropriate form of expression. He never declared to be a realist, nor wrote any manifesto about it; in addition, he seemed to oppose the realists' belief in the moral function of art, and rather chose to end his novel with an escape from responsibility. In fact, we saw that he had more affinities with the romance writers than the realist ones. This is seen in his declaration that the point of departure must be a fact taken from the reality, and that then it can be taken to the realm of the imaginary; the novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, in its interest in dilemmas and its moral inconclusiveness ascribes itself to the American romance rather than realism.

We then moved on to the analysis of the novel in question, and explored the three main points that engender moral ambiguity: man's moral nature, racism, and the question of functionality of art. We first studied the inner dilemmas Huck went through in different instances: the life he led with the Widow Watson and his decision to escape, and turn away from civilization and social conventionality. Then, Huck was on the raft with Jim; the raft is a neutral setting, free from social or religious conventions, perfect for Huck to go through the inner debate between personal morality and social morality. Throughout the narrative, we could see that Huck's personal morality, which is practical and intuitive, wins over the social one, which is rather theoretical and evasive. Indeed, we saw that Huck's 'sound heart' triumphs along the development of the friendship that grows with the runaway-slave, and which attains its paroxysm in his decision 'to go to hell', and not to denounce Jim. However, moral ambiguity arises when Twain diminishes the importance of this moment through making Huck adopt a very negative attitude towards this decision, as he links it to 'wickedness', and projects to perform worse deeds, believing that he is fated to do so because of his low upbringing. This negative attitude diminishes the strength of the moral triumph of Huck over social morality, and engenders confusion in the reader, for we are not guided by the author whether to take that position seriously or not.

Another instance of moral ambiguity in the novel emanates from the impossibility to make out the attitude of the author towards racism; we explored this instance through the confusing portrayal of Jim, which oscillates between a compliance to the tradition of minstrelsy and its rejection. On one hand, Jim is presented as the superstitious, naïve, dim-witted and childish slave, in accordance with the denigrating stereotypes of the minstrelsy shows at that time, and which Twain is said to have appreciated. On the other hand, there are episodes when these stereotypes are put into question and completely rejected. We could see this in the beginning when Jim was elevated to the stature of a cultural hero through the adventurous tale he invents and elaborates of being seized by a witch. In fact, with this episode, we are divided between the laughter engendered by the exaggerations that Jim gradually adds to his fabulous tale, and admiration of his narrative skills that makes him famous among his people. Moreover, we saw other episodes where we meet the beautiful nature of Jim, characterized by a great generosity and capacity for affection; this is mainly seen in his relationship with Huck and the beautiful friendship that develops on the raft. These contradictory impressions we have

of Jim create an ambiguity that is impossible to solve within the narrative, for it expresses a division in the writer's mind, and we are left wondering whether the novel has a racist character, or contains a revolt against racism.

In our discussion of the last source of ambiguity, the ending of the novel, we were able to re-consider the other points discussed: Howellsian responsibility, conscience and racism. Throughout the narrative, we have many passages that describe quiet and happy moments that Jim and Huck enjoy on the raft, away from the tumultuousness of the shore society. Both of them, and especially Huck, delight in these quiet moments of freedom where they can lazily enjoy life without any call for action. These passages often involve impressionistic descriptions, where the surrounding is described from the subjective point of view. Impressionism in itself is an escape from responsibility, because it emphasizes the importance of the present moment, and calls for its enjoyment. This dive into subjectivity, away from the constraining demands of society, represents Huck's flight from responsibility, that foreshadows his unexpected escape from his aunt at the end of the novel. Moreover, the novel puts to the front again the ambiguous stance towards the issue of racism; indeed, we saw that the ending made us put into question the friendship between Huck and Jim, which seemed to have crossed racial boundaries, the moral growth of Huck, as well as Jim's dignity. Twain realizes this through making Huck choose to follow Tom in his plan to capture Jim, and make him do different meaningless things just to imitate situations in the books he reads. We cannot sort out the reasons for Huck's behaviour here, nor Jim's, for the latter accepts to do everything said by the boys. We saw that such an ending engendered dissatisfaction on the part of readers and critics; it was considered by some to be disappointing, and to represent a deplorable relapse into the burlesque. However, we came to the conclusion that this sense of dissatisfaction in itself is a key to understanding the way this novel functions, for it makes the readers think, formulate conclusions and expect lessons; but such readers are disoriented by the outcomes, and invited to revise prior judgements. The novel becomes a ground for moral reflection, where the reader is to adopt a standpoint. Moral ambiguity is not a sign of nihilism, but is an invitation for active participation in the ethical debate of the narrative.

The two novels we discussed in this part have in common moral ambiguity, which is the impossibility to make out definite solutions to the moral issues they raise, such as the complex relationship between the individual and society, and the interplay between

individual, practical morality and social, theoretical morality. The novelists obscure their stances behind the veil of ambiguity, and leave us to think on the issues raised. Their works become thus stages for endless ethical reflection, rather than tools for imparting moral lessons.

In part two, we discussed aestheticism and decadence in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. These two terms summarize well the spirit of the fin-de-siècle, with the development of l'art pour l'art attitude and the decadence of moral values. Critics often present the works chosen as immoral and decadent, reflecting the age when they were produced. However, through a close textual study, we could observe that beyond the apparent immorality, there is a deep concern with ethics on the part of the writers, striving to find the right attitude amidst the surrounding moral decadence. In the chapter devoted to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, we saw that Oscar Wilde is the perfect representative of the spirit of his age; he was the dandy or 'flaneur', who voluntarily adopted the aesthetic, decadent stance, and attempted to express it through his foremost concern with his physical appearance, unconventional suits and long hair, and a tumultuous social life where he delighted in rejecting Victorian moral and social conventions. He also expressed his belief in aestheticism in his non-fiction works, where he preached the necessity of art to be self-contained, completely detached from moral and social realms. However, we saw that this seemingly perfect aesthetic stance is undermined by some contradictory claims; for example, Wilde professes the supremacy of art over nature, and its complete dissociation from the outside reality, and highlights its role in making for the depth and spirituality of life. In the study of the novel, we explored the main tenets of the Aesthetic movement, hedonism, beauty and atavism, and highlighted the different ways they are undermined and shown to be flawed and unsustainable. Wilde had the sceptic Lord Henry Wotton express the main theories of the Aesthetic decadent movement, and put them into practice, or test, through the young Dorian Gray.

The first theory put to test is the aesthetic belief in hedonism: the perusal of sensual pleasure over spiritual concerns. In fact, hedonism expresses the growing disappointment with moral codes of behaviour which became too abstract and irrelevant in a complex modern context; it represents an alternative that offered a more concrete approach to life and a sense of mastery over it. However, the blind pursuit of sensual pleasure is done at the expense of the soul, a discrepancy that the decadents themselves

were aware of. In the novel, the young Dorian blindly follows the new and fascinating precepts of Lord Henry Wotton, and starts putting into practice his theories; he indulges his senses in the pursuit of fullness and happiness. However, he is not able to silence the appeal of his conscience, of his soul, to get back onto the right path. Consequently, he is more and more tormented, and cannot cure this inner suffering through the senses, as professed by Lord Henry. The theory about the senses proves to be wrong when put to practice, at the expense of Dorian himself, whom we see losing his inner peace, instead of the promised happiness.

Another element in the decadent-aesthetic theory that is verified throughout the novel is the one called the moral aesthetic, which consists in adopting the sense of beauty, instead of conscience, as the only guide in the ethical life; in other words, the sense of beauty is believed to replace our sense of right and wrong. It appeared as a reaction against the prevailing ugliness of a rapidly industrializing modern world, since art, with its ultimate concern with beauty, was taken as a refuge from the ugly and dreary reality. Moreover, the aesthetes believed that beauty contributes to the moral betterment of the individual: to see beautiful things leads to the development of a beautiful mind. Yet, the concept of beauty, and the sense of beauty, are put to test in the novel, and are proven to be unsustainable. Beauty is first attributed to the physical appearance of Dorian, and which is captured very well in his portrait. However, we saw that by the end of the novel, the portrait ends up in extreme, horrifying ugliness. Dorian puts into practice this sense of beauty through his blind love for the beautiful actress Sybil Vane; yet, we do not see that this led to his moral development, but instead, made him shallow and selfish, since he gives up on her the moment she decides to quit acting. To live by the sense of beauty does not lead to spirituality and moral betterment, but instead, drives Dorian through torment, anguish and fear, and a final attraction to the ugliness of life.

Degeneration is another paradox that characterized the fin de siècle period, since it refers to the spiritual regression of the human race, in contrast to the material development of the modern age. The aesthetes were considered the expression of this paradox, with their concern with immorality and sin. Wilde plays on this sense of degeneration, as he presents sin as essential to the evolutionary process of man. Through Lord Henry, he assumes that the indulgence of man's animal nature is essential to his evolution and progress, and that it demands courage to realize it, whereas he associates

conscience with cowardice. Dorian then puts to practice this theory, as he yields completely to his baser instincts, to animalism. Yet, this does not lead to any kind of progress for him, for the more he indulges his senses, the stronger they become. Moreover, we have the sense that Dorian himself gets weary of it, as he tries to resume contact with human civilization, deploring the tragedy of his soul. The indulgence of sin, then, does not lead to evolution and progress, but to degeneration, which we visualize through the portrait itself.

The different elements of the decadent Aesthetic movement are thus first pronounced as sustained theories, and then they are put to practice through Dorian, only to show their different inconsistencies and the impossibility to apply them in real life. Given Wilde's position as the perfect representative of the movement, and his professed decadent tendencies, we can fairly assume that he is not in control of the outcome of his own narrative, because, while he aimed his book to be the perfect aesthetic manifesto, it is transformed into a book of deep moral lessons. Indeed, despite the narrative's apparent immorality, and despite Wilde's stated position towards the artistic moral purpose, there is a moral that forces itself out, and impels the reader to recognize it; it is a moral which concerns the interplay of art and morality, and expresses the fact that life is meaningless when lived in a moral vacuum.

The other writer chosen in this part was Joseph Conrad, with his masterpiece *Heart of Darkness*. This novel presents the same interest in aestheticism and moral decadence despite the many differences between the two authors and their works. Both lived through the disturbing changes of the fin de siècle period, and adopted different attitudes and tones, for while Wilde professed to embrace the disenfranchised spirit of his time, and seemed to welcome it, Conrad seemed to struggle against it and wore the veil of ambiguity and pessimism. His work is characterized by a troubling inconclusiveness, which is, according to critics, the expression of his own pessimism and loss of faith. However, we saw in this chapter that his work, especially the novel under study, foregrounds an inner struggle between prevalent nihilism and a need to cling to the last remnants of faith- faith in man, in religion, in moral values. Indeed, Contrary to Oscar Wilde, Conrad overtly deplored in many of his letters the modern world's loss of spirituality and growing materialism, and even warned the artist against moral nihilism, and called for the necessity to cling to hope and express it. We saw that in his letters he promoted the role of the artist as a moral educator who works for the edification of mankind, a position which is in complete

opposition to the Aestheticism of the time. Yet, in the novel, we did not find this overt optimistic stand; on the contrary, we found that Conrad could not help being influenced by the current aesthetic theories, and attempted to struggle against them and to find moral alternatives. This created a tension in his work which has been worth exploring, for it expressed the struggle Conrad went through between faith and disillusionment.

Impressionism as an Aesthetic movement expresses the ultimate turn from abstract religious and historical themes towards a concrete concern with everyday life. It involved a complete reliance on the senses, and thus favoured the importance of the moment, and a denial of time, past or future. In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad adopted the impressionistic technique, for he strongly believed that the aim of the writer should be to let the reader 'see'; however, he takes the aim of Impressionism further, for he claims to reach the inner being of the readers behind the seemingly shallow concern with appearances. We saw that throughout the novel 'seeing' is not always equated with 'understanding'; through our study of the contrasts built between light and darkness, between surface and depth, and our analysis of sensual perception, we saw that Conrad was not concerned with the surface physical dimension of the reality, but rather worked through blurring conventional meaning and associations, to bring forth what's hidden beneath the surface. For example, we saw that darkness refers to knowledge, and light to ignorance, because the former entails an awareness of the ugly reality and moral nihilism, whereas the latter is attributed to naiveté, lack of experience and blind faith. We also saw that man cannot be a mere sensual creature, attending to the mere incidents of surface reality, but that there is always a call to look inside- a call for introspection. Finally, Conrad gave a final blow to Impressionism through completely canceling the sensual perception of the characters, making them blind (the fog), and deaf (the disturbing silence in the jungle): a condition aimed to test the inner fortitude of a civilized man when completely cut off from the world he thinks he knows through his sensual perception. Here again, it is reflection that is needed amidst the materialism and superficiality of the modern world.

Similarly to Oscar Wilde, Conrad treated the theme of degeneration in his novel. While aesthetes presented degeneration, the indulgence of man's oppressed animal drives, as important for his development and fulfilment, Conrad shows the weakness of such a theory. The journey in itself is qualified as a dream, which is considered as a reversal into the repressed animal nature. Furthermore, the wilderness is made to stand for the wild,

animal nature of man: big, dark, silent, and always brooding over something. Moreover, throughout his letters, Conrad equated primitivism with the absence of conscience, and even seemed to idealize it; we saw this in his admiration for Singleton, the single minded character of *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, who is conscience-free, and thus happy. However, this theory is not sustained throughout the narrative, as Conrad presents the concept of hollowness, which he elaborates around this notion of absence of conscience. We saw this in the manager of the station who survived in the wilderness because he did not think, because he had nothing 'inside'. Yet, it is Kurtz who is the ultimate representation of this concept of hollowness: the wilderness completely took control in the case of Kurtz, because there was nothing inside him with which to fight it, no consciousness or ability to think. We saw that because of his solitude and alienation from the civilized Western world, Kurtz is an easy prey for the wilderness, because he did not develop a real ability to think and question, and held the moral codes of behaviour at their surface meaning. Unsurprisingly, Kurtz does not prosper when he falls into primitivism, but is rather transformed into a monster, and is destroyed by it. Moreover, even after his death, he is seen by Marlow as a spirit with his mouth open wide, as if to devour everything, suggesting the impossibility to reach satiety or complete satisfaction. Conrad thus warns against the dangers of yielding to one's inner animal drives, and the necessity to develop inner fortitude in order to fight them back and stay in control. Just like Oscar Wilde, he suggests that the indulgence of man's animal nature does not lead to self-fulfilment and happiness, but rather to a state of dehumanization and final destruction.

The final point of our discussion of *Heart of Darkness* concerned the alternatives Conrad hints at throughout the narrative to the moral impasses of modern reality. Indeed, despite the critical reception of the book as an immoral one, we saw that Marlow's inconclusive tale did suggest solutions to the moral problems posed; the main ones concerned work and restraint. Indeed, throughout the narrative, Marlow presents work as a direct link with the concrete reality, and a ground where we can bring our ethical judgment in play, for it involves an undeniable sense of responsibility. On the other hand, restraint is presented as a solution, because it enables the individual to combat the different temptations the modern world offers; it is a natural instinct that needs to be explored and put into practice. Moreover, we saw that Marlow's journey takes the dimension of a mythical quest journey that culminates in the recovery of a valuable treasure. Here, the

object of Marlow's quest is the knowledge that would enable us to cope with the modern moral dilemmas; indeed, he got this knowledge from Kurtz, whose experience presented a warning against individualism, and a call for human brotherhood. We notice that Conrad does not offer abstract moral codes of behaviour, but seeks solutions within the concrete environment, through calling out for the individual's sense of responsibility; he also seeks solutions within our own nature, which does not contain only negative animal impulses, since restraint is a human natural quality, mostly needed in a tempting modern world. Finally, human solidarity is called for in the face of the growing individualism. Conrad thus is not a mere sceptic and nihilist, for he strives to counter the aesthetic decadent tendencies of the modern, fin de siècle period, and hints for alternative solutions for the moral problems posed.

The two novels discussed in this part are different in tone, but share the same experimental quality, which consists in presenting the readers with theories to be tested throughout the narrative in specific circumstances. Through the use of elaborate aesthetic techniques, we come to witness that the theories professed by Aestheticism prove to be unsustainable, and even dangerous for human civilization. The novelists do not overtly impart ethical codes of conduct, but, through the experience of the protagonist, and with the use of elaborate aesthetic techniques, they warn the individual against the dangers of a modernity that rejects conventions and calls for the espousal of unbounded freedom.

The third part is in contrast with the previous ones, because here we are impelled by the works chosen to assume another perspective; in the former chapters, we were faced with a marked unwillingness, a hesitation on the part of the authors to use their works as morally functional tools, whereas in these last two chapters, we saw that these two authors, Bessie Head and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, acknowledged their responsibility towards society, and the moral role their work can play in the betterment of the individuals that constitute it. We explored the commitment of these postcolonial writers, and the different ways they used to express it.

Commitment, or moral and social functionality, is a feature that characterized African traditional art; the latter is mainly manifested in oral form, named as the oral tradition. Similarly to the Greek tradition, traditional African societies had important gatherings, where orators entertained people through telling them stories about heroes and legends- stories that aimed to educate them codes of conduct, and to perpetuate their

cultural tradition. This social functionality is most needed in a postcolonial context marred by oppression, corruption, and a disintegrating cultural identity. Contrary to the Western artist, who lives on the fringe of society, the African writer becomes 'l'homme engagé', whose aim is cultural retrieval and assertion. He/she is helplessly involved in this 'nation building project', to help society retrieve its cultural identity, and project itself in the future. Moreover, there is this strong notion of 'writing back' to the different stereotyped presentations of the African in Western literature.

Moreover, commitment became a cornerstone of African literature, and critics expected to find its expression in creative writing. In fact, they took it as a valuable way of approaching African works, contrary to the Western standards of criticism, which were sometimes held as the only valid ones. This led to the tendency to take African works as mere social documents- a tendency which was not appreciated by African writers; the latter indeed called for the consideration of the human implications their works express, as well as their aesthetic dimension. In this part, we have attempted to take into account these different points in our study of *Maru* and *A Grain of Wheat*; we have sought to bring to light this notion of commitment, as well as the human and aesthetic dimensions of the works in question. Similarly to the contents of the works studied first, we saw that the protagonists are put in complex situations that engage them and, by implication, the readers, in important moral debates.

The two authors chosen for this purpose are different in their conception of commitment, but express the same concern with social change. Whereas Bessie Head was considered the alienated, uncommitted writer, Ngugi is remembered for his strong positions towards the responsibility of the writer towards society. In the chapter devoted to Bessie Head, we saw that she was considered uncommitted by African critics, because her work did not appeal to a specific African audience, and because it was too "Western-like"; this lack of commitment was not appreciated in a Southern African context where engagement was highly favoured. We sought the reasons that made her different from her contemporary writers, and found out that her origin, as well as some influences, philosophical and literary, set her apart. Bessie Head went through the trauma of racism, as she was accepted neither by the black nor the white race from which she is issued. She lived with a strong feeling of alienation- of non-belonging, and hence did not develop attachment to any specific social group. Moreover, this alienation had a strong impact on her, as she sought refuge in the

human race, and hence did not have a particular audience in mind when she wrote, except humanity in general. This alienation had some positive effects on her, as it freed her and broadened her perspective. In addition, this broad perspective was nourished by the books she read about Buddhism and other Eastern philosophies, which were based on spirituality and the power of the soul to effect change. Moreover, she admired the broad horizons of Lawrence, with his insistence on transcending race, class and national boundaries. On the other hand, there was an influence that served to counter-balance these ones above mentioned: Bertold Brecht, and his social orientedness. Indeed, Brecht had a strong sense of practicality, and used his work as a tool for social reform. These two sets of influences led Head to oscillate between the spiritual and the worldly, between the immediate and the transcendent, between the practical and the ideal. We find in Head's work this oscillation, or rather the attempt to bring these two dimensions together in harmony, creating thus the atypical character of her work. We saw that Head was a committed writer, just like her contemporaries, but that she expressed her commitment differently, and sought solutions to social problems elsewhere: within the human soul.

Indeed, we saw in our analysis of the main characters of the novel that the emphasis is put on the rich inner world they possess, which puts them aside from common people, and makes of them the ones that can bring about change. Maru is a complex character that expresses Head's atypical political views- a character in whom she succeeded to blend together the spiritual and the earthly. Indeed, Maru is a village chief, yet who does not fully perform his role as such, because he is a visionary who dreams of a better future. He is a 'king of the soul', who is able to impact on people's inner worlds, rather than a conventional leader, who performs the usual political shows. Moreover, he is a charismatic leader, who is able to inspire 'magic' and 'beauty', but who uses tricks in order to realize his plans for a better world- plans which are said to be whispered by voices in his head. Finally, Maru stirs the incomprehension of the people through renouncing power to marry a woman, but yet this renouncement is a political stand in itself, since the aim behind it is to effect a deep impact on the people's minds. Through Maru, Head denounces many political leaders whose aim is mainly to enjoy the privileges that their position offers them, and who do not express a real concern for the people and their future. Leaders should have a rich inner world in order to break through the sham of politics, and realize real social change.

Besides Maru, Head paints the portrait of Margaret Cadmore, who is also delineated around extreme contrasts, and who is, similarly to Maru, a 'queen of the soul'. In fact, Margaret is depicted to have a rich and complex inner world that even dwarfed Maru's. Bessie Head assigns such inner depth to a Masarwa, a member of an oppressed social group, persecuted and enslaved for centuries. She is, in fact, the result of an interesting experiment made by a white missionary's wife, who was keen to find out what wonder could be created from giving a chance of education and better life to a member of an oppressed social group. The result is a talented young woman, who struggled to make a way for herself amidst racist assaults on her being. Margaret was able to survive these blows through learning to have control over a world her oppressors could never reach: the inner world. This resulted in the development of an interesting complex personality that goes beyond the boundaries of tribe, race and nation. Here again, the solution that Head presents regarding racism is the soul, where the oppressed can find solace and strength to survive.

Moreover, Margaret is described throughout the novel around an interesting contrast: Outwardly, she is presented as a shy and passive woman, but inwardly, she is said to possess power. This power is reflected in the impact she is able to effect on Moleka, another king of the soul in the novel, but who was not able to find the key to this inner kingdom until he meets Margaret. Moleka's transformation after his encounter with Margaret is described as a rebirth; his inner kingdom is said to be equal to Maru, which makes of him another potential leader. Head fights the clichés that nourish racism through giving an unfathomable inner strength to a member of an oppressed social group, emphasizing the human potential over tribe, race and nation.

The three protagonists of the novel are thus elevated above the common people not through power or wealth, but through their possession of a spiritual depth that goes beyond any shallow definition of tribe or social position: We almost forget that Margaret is a Masarwa, or that Maru and Moleka are members of "royalty" in their village. The realm of the soul takes precedence over the external world- the realm through which change can be effective. People are encouraged to delve into their souls, and to discover its potential for goodness, to become better individuals through overcoming shallow social conventions and prejudice, and thus to form better societies.

We explored then the way Head expresses her conception of art through Margaret, and her portrayal as an artist. Art is described as a powerful, irresistible urge that cannot be controlled, and which has the power to make things 'reappear', in the sense that the reality is allowed to have a different interpretation fashioned by the artist's mind. Art then has the power to affect the minds of individuals, and thus to bring about change at a larger social scale. Moreover, Head merges the practical and the spiritual together in Margaret's paintings, as the latter is inspired from everyday life, and paints common people in their daily tasks; we saw that she paints women carrying buckets, for example, and shows their strength and dignity. The message expressed here is very important, as it says that these women represent the common people, the oppressed people, who have the power to change things. On the other hand, she produces paintings which are said to emanate from her mind, and which strangely reproduce a dream that Maru had: a house, a field of daisies and an embracing couple. With these three paintings, Head makes us depart from the realm of reality, to reach out for another, bigger and strange dimension, to which there can be no rational explanation; this is the 'magic' and 'wonder' that Head considers as part of the main effects a work of art must have, which calls us to broaden our vision and reach spiritual depth.

We can sum up Head's conception of art by saying that it is spurred by an uncontrollable energy, has the power to effect change, can be practical and spiritual at the same time. We clearly saw that Head's commitment as an artist is not limited to tribal or racial considerations, but is expressed in broader human, universal terms. This is what distinguishes her from her contemporaries, and accounts for the rather negative reception of her work. Her main interest is to address the humanity inside individuals, which she believed could bring about change and create better societies, based on equality and freedom.

We moved then to the analysis of the ending, which presented us with different reflections on Head, her subversive use of the romance genre, and her conception of change. We saw that critics were dissatisfied with the ending because of the naïve solution it brings to centuries of racism: marriage. Yet, through our analysis, we saw that Head manages to cancel such reading, and to create ambiguity through her use of the prolepsis. The role of the latter is in fact to put into question every conclusion we come to after our reading of the novel, such as the passivity of Margaret and the naively romantic marriage. It

does this through bringing a description of the setting with a brooding darkness, which dims the romantic view of Margaret's and Maru's married life, and through the mention of the presence of two rooms, which suggests the presence of Maru's rival for Margaret's love: Moleka. Maru's victory is not complete then, because he did not succeed to own the heart of his wife. Moreover, Margaret's passivity is suggestive of an inner strength, which is expressed in her power to impact on people, the way she does with Maru, Moleka, and others. Passivity, according to Head, is the medium through which 'the eternal' is expressed, and is not equated with its conventional meaning, which is lack of fortitude. Finally, the ending features the liberation of the Masarwas, presented as a result of the marriage; yet, it is in fact the result of a process of change that Margaret triggered the moment she openly assumed her Masarwa origin, and worked as a school mistress. Moreover, the change is not described in physical terms, as a revolution or real confrontation, but in psychological ones; the Masarwas are said to have quit a closed, dark room, breathed in the air of freedom, and knew that there is no going back in there. These two points suggest that change for Head is a gradual process that takes time, and that it has to start from the inside to be effective and lasting. Moreover, she suggests that change comes from the figure of an artist rather than some political figure, with shallow ideologies.

The ambiguity of the ending is due to the fact that we have to read it in relation with the prolepsis; otherwise, it would be confusedly naïve and shallow. The human soul is thus for Head the realm where the solution to all evils of the world can be found. This is what gives her commitment a broad, human dimension which transcends, but does not deny, racial boundaries. Head thus manages to affirm the moral and social functionality of literature, without sacrificing the sense of 'magic' and 'wonder' which directs readers towards broader perspectives.

Contrary to Bessie Head, Ngugi was famous for his devotion to the literature of commitment, which he expresses in his fiction as well as non fiction work. We saw in this chapter on Ngugi and his novel, *A Grain of Wheat*, that literature and society are closely linked, in the sense that literature is worldly, and that it is meant to reflect life within society. He assigns to the writer in the postcolonial context the task of helping the people regain confidence in themselves, through fighting off the denigrating images of the African perpetrated by Western literature. The aim is thus the restoration of a cultural identity through a return to the true history, remove the colonial distortions, and thus make people

ready to face the present and the future with more confidence. However, this does not necessarily make of Ngugi's works mere historical reports; on the contrary, his approach to literature is very personal and subjective. He records in his novels some major historical events of his people, but he also brings to the front his own personal experience of the events. Writing becomes at this point a process of understanding, through which Ngugi tries 'to find the meaning of it all'.

Ngugi had some major influences, such as Marx, who is to account for the social orientedness of his views, and Fanon, with his records of the psychological effects of colonialism on people. Indeed, we find socialism articulated in the concern that Ngugi expresses towards the common people, and his admiration for them. Similarly to Head, he considers the common people the ones able to struggle and bring about change. The influence of Fanon is detected in Ngugi's concern with the psychology of his characters. Besides, there were two Western writers who had a big influence on him: Lawrence and Conrad. Similarly to Head, Ngugi is attracted towards Lawrence for his broader vision, and for the importance the latter gives to the soul. On the other hand, Conrad influenced Ngugi with his psychological investigations into the minds of people, in search for the morality of action. This investigation involves the analysis of the causes and the psychological impact of action.

Ngugi's work is historical, since Ngugi strives to recreate images of the past in order to restore the denigrating stereotypes of the African people; it is socially oriented, in the sense that it is meant to talk on behalf of the masses and to the masses; it is psychological, in the sense that it strives to render the inner experience of individuals, and investigate the causes and consequences of their actions. The novel presents thus an interesting fusion between the private and the public which articulates Ngugi's all-embracing commitment. With *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi crossed the 'shadow line' towards a more mature phase- a maturity equated with a deep sense of disillusionment with the aftermath of independence. The goals are not reached, and the new African leaders are behaving like, and under the guidance of, the former colonial rulers. We found this sense of disenchantment in the novel, when characters are bitterly celebrating Uhuru, without real enthusiasm and happiness.

The characters are presented as living again in their minds the struggle for independence during their preparations for the celebration of freedom; we saw also that

they are individuals haunted by a tormented past and a strong sense of guilt. Our study of the novel involved the analysis of the main characters in interplay in the narrative, namely: Kihika, Mugo, Gikonyo, Mumbi and Karanja. Our purpose here was to bring to light Ngugi's investigation of moral action: its causes and consequences.

Kihika and Mugo were analyzed through a comparative perspective, because they are contrasted to one another as far as their personality, and the role they played in the struggle for independence, are concerned. This contrast is reflected even in the two modes Ngugi uses in their portrayal: the allegorical and the ironic. The allegorical mode is the one fit to represent the ideals that people have about the past, independence and moral principles. On the other hand, the ironic mode, with its questioning tone and skepticism, was meant by Ngugi to doubt those ideals through making them collide with the reality. Kihika is the leader of the Mau Mau movement for independence, which was very negatively represented by Western historians, politicians and intellectuals; they presented its members as savage murderers who delighted in the sight of blood, and who had no sense of organization, nor purpose. Ngugi writes back to this distorted image through the portrayal of Kihika as a heroic figure; he is an idealist and a man of action at the same time, who fights for freedom and dignity. Through moving speeches, he is able to convince people that violence is the only reaction possible in the face of indiscriminate oppression and ruthlessness. He shows that the movement is organized, and that it operates through high moral standards, such as: self-sacrifice and courage. His final death is heroic, since he resists torture, and chooses death instead of betrayal. The portrayal of Kihika is allegorical since he is the embodiment of the values he lived for, fought for, and died for.

The portrayal of Mugo is in contrast to Kihika; Mugo is a complex character who represents Ngugi's study into human nature and psychology. Through his investigation of the causes and consequences of his crime, the betrayal of Kihika, Ngugi proceeded through presenting an image of his past as an orphan left at the mercy of a drunkard aunt. He then moves on to show us Mugo as a grown up who tries to make a living for himself through working hard. Work serves as compensation for the low self-esteem of his childhood, as he finds solace and a comforting sense of achievement in it. Moreover, his longing for aloneness and privacy keeps him away from people. He does not participate in the struggle for independence, which seemed for him an event in another dimension of the reality. He compensates for this aloneness through his daily reveries about leadership and heroism;

contrary to Kihika, there is a marked discrepancy between idealism and reality in Mugo. Another trait Ngugi attributes to Mugo is his fear of action, and the possible consequences it implies; he is not able to make decisions, because of this fear, and prefers to be drifted by circumstances. All these elements brought together made it difficult, even impossible for Mugo to take the right decision the night Kihika came to his hut.

Indeed, Kihika's irruption into Mugo's hut, and life, is lived as a moment of interruption by Mugo, as he makes him quit the solitary and individual life he made for himself. His complete dissociation from his people and their struggle is clearly expressed in his reaction at this very moment; he wants to be left alone, because he did not get involved with any one, and describes the cause of his people as 'the folly of one man', who is merely a blood thirsty murderer. The moral choice between loyalty to Kihika and betrayal is quickly made, as Mugo seizes the opportunity to betray the latter to the white man for a reward. On his way to do so, Mugo again takes refuge in his self-deceptive reveries to distance himself from the real nature of his act, and avoid the torture of a guilty conscience. In addition, he convinces himself that the reward would enable him to climb the social ladder, and establish for himself a future. Ngugi shows that a guilty mind is the one that looks for as many arguments as possible to avoid hesitation and regret.

Yet, Mugo is brought by force to face the real nature of his act and its consequences by the violent reaction of the District Officer towards him. His falling down to the hard ground symbolizes his waking up from the deceiving reveries, and the confrontation with the reality. In this episode, Mugo goes through an intense nervous breakdown, as he is not able to steady himself, and the world around him keeps spinning. He ends up going out from the white man's office, refusing to take the reward, and even refusing to think on what just happened to him: 'He did not want to know what he had done'. Ngugi's message here is that conscience can be momentarily denied, but cannot be completely discarded. Since this moment, Mugo is said to live as an alienated, misunderstood hermit.

This drama of consciousness that Mugo goes through is depicted by Ngugi through the use of water symbolism. It starts with the drop of water that begins the novel, which, dirty and menacing, represents the torture of a guilty conscience, made worse by people's mistaken conception of him as a hero. Then comes the image of him drowning in a pool, which represents his fear to get involved with people. He is then presented as being at

the bottom of the pool without any sign of struggle, which suggests his acceptance of involvement, and the realization of the beauty of life within society. After this, Mugo has a vision of thick blood dripping from the wall of his hut; the drop of water that starts the novel is transformed into blood, which suggests an important shift in the drama of conscience of Mugo, who finally faces his act and its true consequences. This shift ushers in a profound inner change. Ngugi then moves the water symbolism from the subjective perspective, as it was manifested mainly through Mugo's dreams or visions, to the objective perspective, as we, and the people of the village, see him walk in the rain. The objective perspective suggests the end of his inner torture as well as the end of his alienation. It indicates also his final public confession and liberation from his guilty conscience.

Indeed, Mugo finally chooses to confess his crime on the day of Uhuru, instead of living in prosperity as a leader for the last of his life, because he learned that he is 'responsible for whatever he had done in the past, for whatever he would do in the future'. A final instance of water symbolism represents the inner peace Mugo reached after the confession: a drop of water entered his eye and melted down his cheek towards the ground, as opposed to the drop that threatened to pierce his eye at the outset. Mugo is now ready to meet the consequences of his action.

Ngugi thus investigates moral action through the character of Mugo: the background, the motives and the consequences. We do not see Mugo as a mere traitor to despise, but as a weak human being. Ngugi makes the reader understand Mugo, and thus engage him/her to benefit, just like Mugo, from his experience. In fact, Mugo is much admired at the end of the novel, for he is considered a brave man who turned away from glory and respect to expose himself. Self-sacrifice is the only way to make the lessons he teaches linger in the minds of his people; the latter come to understand, together with the readers, that positive involvement within the community is vital, and that one should be true to oneself and to the community. We observe that the novel does not end on a negative note, for Ngugi chooses to end it with a traitor, and not with the hero of revolution. It is Mugo at the end who is elevated to the stature of a hero who sacrificed himself, on his own will, for his own sake and for the sake of his people. Besides, Ngugi suggests that the goal of independence has not been reached, because there is too much reliance on the past revolutionary figures, together with a lack of insight and self-scrutiny that would allow individuals to prosper within a morally challenging present situation.

We came then to the analysis of the other three protagonists through whom Ngugi presents another investigation of moral action: motives and consequences. Gikonyo, Mumbi and Karanja, just like Mugo, are haunted by their past, and live with a guilty conscience. With Gikonyo, we saw that the dialectic of aloneness and community is at play, just as it was the case with Mugo; the difference is that Gikonyo willingly takes the oath, and embraces the struggle. Indeed, Gikonyo strongly expresses his faith in the cause, joins the movement, and does not seem to hesitate when it comes to the sacrifice of his own private life. However, this moral fortitude is put to the test: jail, loneliness, the fear of being forgotten have weakened him and he ends up foreswearing the oath, whereupon he is set free to return home. This yearning to return to the comfort of home, to Mumbi, proved to be too strong, and won over his sense of duty. Once home, the life he thought he could resume is not to be, and he is submerged with a deep feeling of disillusionment. Yet, Mugo's confession had an important impact on Gikonyo, because it taught him the necessity to be true to oneself and to the community as a whole. Indeed, the confession had a cathartic effect on him, because it made him look again at his own shortcomings and be humbled by them. Through Gikonyo, Ngugi suggests that moral betterment is possible only when one is able to face his/her own mistakes and assume consequences.

Through Mumbi, Ngugi explores another aspect of morality: the humane aspect; he explores how heroism and fragility are brought close together. Besides, Mumbi is the only character who does not experience a real fall from grace, because her betrayal was committed out of a momentary weakness, not vice. In addition, her role is pivotal in the moral development of Mugo, because her story awakened in him the love of people and life within the community, and pushed him to confess. Through this character, Ngugi suggests that human weakness does not necessarily diminish one's moral dignity.

Karanja brings to light 'the morality of the colonized African'. This entails a very low self-esteem mixed with a blind admiration of the white man. Contrary to the heroic speeches of Kihika that called for honoring duty, Karanja pleads for the importance of survival, and the strength of its urge. The instinct of survival pushes him to foreswear the oath and to join the home guards with the white man; he aligns himself with the enemy, and turns against his own people, whom he tortures and kills in cold blood for the whiteman. Moreover, Ngugi shows throughout the novel that Karanja is not able to identify with his people, contrary to Mugo. He quickly acquires a feeling of power that completely

cancels his conscience or sense of guilt. Hence, contrary to the other characters, who gained freedom from guilt and a tormenting past, Karanja meets a different ending: now that the white man is gone, he has no place within the community, and is left wondering, on his own, tormented by his past terrible acts against his people. The morality suggested through this is that the denial of one's people is the unpardonable sin, and that a lonely life is the worst punishment ever.

With the experience of these characters, Ngugi expresses his conception of change and the way he envisages a better future for his society. He suggests that it is within the human soul that lay the solution to the problems of postcolonial society, since he incites the readers to identify with the characters and go through a process of self-scrutiny to explore one's weaknesses as well as one's strengths to become better individuals. Besides, this individual moral betterment has long-term effects on society as a whole, because individuals are drawn towards the recognition of their duty towards it. The realm of the soul, just as it is the case with *Maru*, represents the basis of any conception of change. We saw in these novels that commitment can have broad and limited implications: it is broad because it is expressed in universal human terms, and it is limited, because the effects of change are seen on the immediate social environment. We saw that these novels are far from being simple social documents; on contrary, the protagonists are portrayed in humanistic, universalist terms rather than social, and can fit within different socio-historical circumstances. In addition, the aesthetic dimension is not sacrificed, as we saw the novelists' use of elaborate literary devices that are not meant to import meaning in a simple straightforward manner: ambiguity, complex symbolism, flashbacks, stream of consciousness, interior monologues. The authors wrote with a spirit of exploration and aimed for finding solutions to cope with a challenging postcolonial situation; they are not didactic, since they do not overly express specific codes of behaviour, but make the protagonists discover them through putting them to test. Commitment is not limiting in perspective, because the works have a clear human, universal dimension, and does not lead to the sacrifice of the concern with the aesthetic.

The novels we have studied allowed us to approach the issue we are concerned with from different angles, namely: the moral and social functionality of literature. We saw that writers from the Western world show a marked hesitation to articulate their points of view about their society- a Western society that lost faith in conventional morality. These

writers attempt to cope with this moral loss within the works they create through experimenting with complex aesthetic techniques, which are, in broad terms, ambiguity and aestheticism. The ethical claims are hinted at, indirectly suggested, and seem to be unwillingly acknowledged: justice, equality, trust, solidarity, bravery, self-sacrifice, restraint. The Western writers we focused on cannot deny these moral standards, because they are what define us as 'human'. Their unwillingness to take standpoints does not cancel the moral dimension of their works, but still engenders a spirit of questioning that calls for the involvement of the reader in the moral debates offered by the complex narratives. In contrast, the African authors we have dealt with are more willing to assume the moral and social role they can play. They impart moral standards through engaging the reader with the moral debates that they initiate. Society demands from them such engagement because it is in the process of re-structuring and repairing of its injured cultural identity. The ethical claims they express are the same expressed by their Western counterparts, because ultimately, local issues can become universal issues.

Responsible ethical criticism calls thus for a balance between the ethical and the aesthetic, and hence is neither monologic nor limiting. It is not monologic because it does not aim to teach a specific ideal or a moral code; our aim was to focus on the text and see what it expressed, instead of imposing on it pre-determined moral interpretations. It is not limited, because we accounted for the different aesthetic techniques used by the authors that either espoused or rejected certain moral standards. Ethical criticism is a necessary practice in literary criticism, because it allows us to explore the moral potential of literary works, which in turn leads us to reflect on what makes us act morally or not, and contributes to our own moral betterment.

Ethics is an inherent aspect of human nature, hence it cannot be put aside and ignored, nor replaced by some innovative theory, just like Lord Henry Wotton tried to do. Therefore, it must represent a major concern for literary critics, who should make out the ethical claims that literary works express, and hence articulate them for the reader. Ethical criticism puts to the front the moral debates offered in the text, and does not ignore the different aesthetic means used to express them. The moral engagement that this critical practice engenders in the reader is most needed in a modern world that witnesses a dangerous moral decadence- a movement away from what defines us as human.

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## موجز

هذه الأطروحة هي بحث في مجال المبادئ الأخلاقية في الآداب. الهدف هو دراسة الخطاب الأخلاقي في الكتابة الأدبائية وتبيان أهميته في النقد الأدبي. هذا الأخير واهتمامه بالبعد الأخلاقي في الكتابة التأليفية، أصبح يعتبر محدود و تقييدي في عصر حديث يرفض اللجوء إلى التقاليد الاجتماعية والمعنوية. هدف هذه الدراسة هو إعادة تكييف مطالب النقد الأدبي الأخلاقي في عصر حديث معقد، وذلك اتباعاً لنظرية جون كراب، الذي قدم نظرة جديدة للنقد الأدبي الأخلاقي، حيث أنه تفادى الدراسة المحدودة للنص الأدبي باعتباره للبعدين الأخلاقي والفني. هذا البحث يعتمد على دراسة ستة روايات من الآداب الإنجليزية والأمريكية والأفريقية. هذا مكننا من اعتبار التنوع التاريخي والاجتماعي واعطاء دراستنا نطاق واسع. هذا التنوع يساهم أيضاً في تبيان أن المحتوى المعنوي للنصوص المدروسة قابل للتغيير من مجتمع إلى آخر، ومن عصر إلى آخر. الروايات معتبرة من روائع الآداب وهي علا التالي: الحرف القرمزي لثانيال هاوثورن، مغامرات هكليري فين لمارك توين، صورة دوريان جراي لاوسكار وايلد، قلب الظلام لجوزيف كونراد، مارو لبيسي هاد، و حبة القمح لنغواي واينونغو. هذه الروايات موءلفة في عصور تلج بالتغيرات والانقلابات الاجتماعية والثقافية: النهضة الأمريكية ومشكلة الهوية الوطنية، نهاية القرن وفقدان الثقة في العرف في أوروبا، ما بعد الاستقلال والمناظرة من أجل الاستقلال الثقافي. السياقات التاريخية والاجتماعية المعقدة لهذه الروايات توفر مواقف تتحدى الشخصيات الرئيسية، حيث أنهم منعمون في جدالات أخلاقية مهمة، ومطالبون باعتراف فلسفة أخلاقية شخصية وتطبيقية. القيم الأخلاقية المستخلصة من هذه الروايات مستنتجة من دراسة عميقة للبنية الفنية المركبة مثل: الرمزية، التشبيه، السخرية، الصور الانطباعية والحوار الذاتي. القيم الأخلاقية إذاً ليست معينة من الأول أو خاضعة لانطباعات شخصية. الأطار المعنوي والفني يمثلون محور هذه الدراسة. في الختام نقول أن لا يمكننا التخلي عن البعد الأخلاقي والمعنوي رغم التقدم المحقق في مختلف المجالات، ومن الصعب اتباع سيرة شخصية وحرية غير مقيدة. البعد الأخلاقي والمعنوي جانب مهم في الطبيعة البشرية، ويجب الاهتمام به في النقد

الأدبي.

