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**To what extent are Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and William Golding's *The Spire* (1967) existentialist texts?**

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**English Dissertation: Full Year**

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## Introduction and Literature Review

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and William Golding's *The Spire* both interrogate the human condition and the consequences of transgression. This dissertation will endeavour to uncover how these novels mirror and differentiate from the philosophies of influential existentialists. Existentialism is the philosophy that our world has no preordained meaning and thus the human individual must act as a free and responsible agent for their actions. Literature has always been intrinsically linked with existentialism due to their shared concern of the human condition. As a result, Cooper argues that the proliferation of 'existentialist' fiction has led to 'misconceptions about existentialism'.<sup>1</sup> To avoid any misconceptions I will take a focused approach, reading Conrad and Golding directly alongside specific works of Nietzsche, Camus and Sartre. I will attempt to determine whether Kurtz and Jocelin, the transgressive figures of Conrad's and Golding's work respectively, abide by the philosophers' existentialist philosophies. Whilst there is little critical work written about Golding's relationship to existentialism, when conducting research, the work of Otto Bohlmann was especially pertinent to my study of Conrad. His work, *Conrad and Existentialism* (1991), provided a framework of how Conrad was influenced by Nietzsche, however, Bohlmann's focus was rarely concentrated on *Heart of Darkness* alone.

After a literature review exploring how existentialist notions have manifested into Conrad's and Golding's work, my focus will switch to how Nietzsche's philosophy can be found in *Heart of Darkness*. I will begin by establishing Nietzsche's belief that human thought is constantly evolving and that therefore humanity requires its next phase of evolution, the Übermensch. I will argue how Kurtz mirrors this figure as he rejects modern civilization to become a god of a tribe. As Nietzsche argues, an Übermensch

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<sup>1</sup> Jeff Malpas, 'Existentialism as Literature', in *The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism*, ed. by Steven Crowell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 291.

must learn the terrible truths of existence which most men could not bear. These truths mirror the whispers of the jungle that Kurtz wrestles with. The destructive capabilities of these truths will then be examined and the chapter will conclude with an exploration of the consequences of Kurtz's actions and his failure of embodying Nietzsche's Übermensch.

Chapter Two will explore how *The Spire* relates to the philosophies of Camus and Sartre. The nature of absurdism will be examined, a later development of existentialist philosophy that emphasises the meaninglessness of existence. The focus of the chapter will be on how *The Spire* deals with the disparities between existence and essence, and knowledge and understanding. The way Jocelin perceives these dichotomies contrasts with the opinions of Camus and Sartre. I will explore how Jocelin's perception of the world conceals his true motivations for building the spire, the source of tragedy in the novel. This dissertation will conclude by discussing how, in both novels, when the shackles of either social or psychological restraint are lost, men can become greater versions of themselves. This, however, comes with varied consequences.

In order to begin an analysis of either novel, it is necessary to contextualise both Golding and Conrad within existentialist theory and criticism. There is an abundance of terms with which critics have attempted to classify William Golding. Some believe that he is a 'metaphysical writer',<sup>2</sup> whereas others define him as a 'moralist'.<sup>3</sup> The term 'existentialist', however, is not commonly associated with Golding. Investigations into the links between his work and existential thought exist, although this is rarely the sole focus of criticism. Claims have been made that Golding's *Free Fall* was directly inspired by Camus' *The Fall*, in both name and absurdist nature.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, associations

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<sup>2</sup> F.R. Karl, *The Contemporary English Novel* (New York: Noonday Press, 1972), p. 254.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Hynes, 'Articles, Interviews and Essays' in *Critical Essays on William Golding*, ed. by James R. Baker (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1988), p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Crawford, *Politics and History in William Golding: The World Turned Upside Down* (London: University of Missouri Press, 2002), p. 106.

between Golding, Camus and Kafka have been asserted due to Golding's novels being premised upon 'strong moral assumptions ... [that] suggest a shape in the universe'.<sup>5</sup> Hynes' claim that Camus imagines 'a shape in the universe', however, is problematic. As an absurdist, Camus emphasised the meaninglessness of life and its finality with death. The only shape Camus may have envisaged is life as a perpetual circle, repeating indefinitely the routines that erode us like Sisyphus at the bottom of his mountain.

A more convincing approach focuses on the gentleness of Golding's primitives in *The Inheritors*.<sup>6</sup> Their view on morality arises out of a realisation that they do not understand their past or future. This echoes Camus who says 'What can a meaning outside my condition mean to me? I can only understand in human terms' and to understand something outside of one's own human experience is not possible.<sup>7</sup> This philosophy of knowing opposes Jocelin's hubristic notions of completely understanding God and a vision of light that inspires the catastrophe in *The Spire*. Thus, within the novel it can be argued that Golding touches upon an existential notion: the human condition. Questions of how much one knows, about oneself and the world around one, dwell beneath the surface of the novel like the spire's pit – an omen of mankind's innate darkness that can be covered over but never removed.

Golding never explicitly states that his novels are an investigation into the human condition. Instead, the premise which he provides for his work is 'the progress of the individual towards [...] ethical – integration'.<sup>8</sup> Boyle asserts that this concern aligns him with 'Camus, Sartre and Tillich, who celebrate the human and eschew both the atavistic security of traditional theology and mechanistic replacement'.<sup>9</sup> If Golding does celebrate

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<sup>5</sup> Hynes, 'Articles, Interviews and Essays', p. 15.

<sup>6</sup> Ted Boyle, 'Golding's Existential Vision' in *William Golding: Some Critical Considerations*, ed. by Jack Biles and Robert Evans (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2014), pp. 25-6.

<sup>7</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 37.

<sup>8</sup> Boyle, 'Golding's Existential Vision', p. 22.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

the human like the existentialists, he does not appear to do so in *The Spire*. Whilst Camus and Sartre find 'nothing at the centre of the universe' and existence, Golding is said to find 'evil'.<sup>10</sup> The imagery in the spire constantly negotiates between the polarities of light and darkness, good and evil, which casts doubt on this evaluation. Evil exists in man but that doesn't translate to its existence at the centre of the universe. After all, the 'ethical integration' Golding speaks of appears to occur within Jocelin in his revelations before his death which can be viewed as a repentance of sorts. Nonetheless, the most convincing argument for his relation to existentialism is his tendency to instruct 'by negative example',<sup>11</sup> something that Golding and Conrad have in common.

Relating the work of Joseph Conrad to specific philosophies is an ambiguous business. Several scholars have attempted to define the nature and extent of his indebtedness to specific existentialists. Conrad's belief that 'all values were "based primarily on self-denial"' resembles the philosophy of Schopenhauer.<sup>12</sup> Since Schopenhauer was a primary influence upon Nietzsche this results in tentative links being made between Conrad and both philosophers. As Watts notes, such connections are found between Conrad and Nietzsche in their shared sceptical solipsism in response to burgeoning scientific empiricism in the nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup> Watts claims Nietzsche anticipated Conrad's scepticism when he wrote 'Truths are illusions of which we have forgotten that this is what they are.'<sup>14</sup> Perhaps Schopenhauer's, and later Nietzsche's, declaration that beliefs are themselves forgotten 'illusions' is manifested in the Buddha-like figure of Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, weighing up the terrible knowledge that opposes the truths he

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<sup>10</sup> Michael Cole, 'Existentialism and Selected Contemporary Novels in English', Thesis for the Degree Master of Arts, McMaster University (August 1975), p. 22. <<https://macsphere.mcmaster.ca/bitstream/11375/9803/1/fulltext.pdf>> [accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2019].

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Kirschner, *Conrad: The Psychologist as Artist* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1968), p. 277.

<sup>13</sup> Cedric Watts, *A Preface to Conrad* (London: Longman, 1982), p.80.

<sup>14</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Press, 1968), p. 47.

thought he once knew about civilisation and barbarism. Nonetheless, studies relating Conrad's work to existentialists, such as Nietzsche, have never gone beyond 'speculation'.<sup>15</sup> Quantifying Nietzsche's influence upon Conrad remains difficult because the former's impact 'was immediately felt in all Western countries' and art.<sup>16</sup>

Literature directly comparing Conrad to Nietzsche is scarce. Their contrasting responses to pity have been discussed in relation to the character of Stevie in *The Secret Agent*, but this was done with one eye on Dostoevsky and the other on the trio's biographical similarities.<sup>17</sup> Otto Bohlmann's extensive study of Conrad's work in relation to a range of existentialist philosophy is so wide-ranging that it overlooks Nietzsche's influence on particular works by Conrad. It is therefore important for a focused study to be conducted between a work by Conrad, in this instance *Heart of Darkness*, and the philosophy of Nietzsche. Extending beyond anecdotal detail into analysis, I intend to evaluate whether or not *Heart of Darkness* can be classified as an existential text.

Despite its breadth, Bohlmann's work does provide a framework to discover which philosophical concerns of Nietzsche have previously been engaged with by Conrad. As I have already mentioned, Nietzsche contended with the certainty of truths. In *The Will to Power* he declares that 'The world seems logical to us, because we have made it logical',<sup>18</sup> but the reality remains that the world is only 'change, becoming, multiplicity, opposition, contradiction, war'.<sup>19</sup> Whilst Bohlmann broadly states that this is mirrored by the 'neutral disorder'<sup>20</sup> at the heart of Conrad's fiction, this Nietzschean world of

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<sup>15</sup> Butte, G. 'What Silenus Knew: Conrad's Uneasy Debt to Nietzsche', *Comparative Literature*, 41:2 (1989), 155-169, p. 155.

<sup>16</sup> Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), p. 309; quoted in Michael John Di Santo, "'Dramas of Fallen Horses": Conrad, Dostoevsky, and Nietzsche', *Conradiana*, 42:3 (2010), 45-68, p. 46.

<sup>17</sup> Di Santo, "'Dramas of Fallen Horses'", p. 46.

<sup>18</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), p. 283.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 315.

<sup>20</sup> Bohlmann, O., *Conrad's Existentialism*, (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 15.

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'opposition, contradiction, war'<sup>21</sup> is fully realised in *Heart of Darkness*.<sup>22</sup> Bohlmann does manage to identify the manifestation of Nietzsche's belief that knowledge of the nihilistic truth of existence is destructive in *Heart of Darkness*. 'The more deeply one looks into it, ... [the more] meaninglessness approaches!'<sup>23</sup> is a directly existential concern of Marlow's when he realises how he resisted taking the final psychological step, whereas Kurtz 'had stepped over the edge.'<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 315.

<sup>22</sup> Bohlmann, *Conrad's Existentialism*, p. 15.

<sup>23</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 326.

<sup>24</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. by Cedric Watts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 179.

### ***Heart of Darkness and Friedrich Nietzsche***

Although Butte has declared that previous links made between Conrad and Nietzsche have been tentative, Conrad's letter to Helen Sanderson indicates his awareness of the German philosopher's work. He informs her that 'The unrest of human thought is like the unrest of the sea, disturbing and futile',<sup>25</sup> referring back to Nietzsche's description of the world as ripe with 'opposition [and] contradiction'.<sup>26</sup> The maritime imagery here helps to illuminate the concept of an ideologically unstable world in which societal beliefs are constantly changing. Especially in the modernist world in which Conrad worked, beliefs would arise and gain momentum until they were considered truths at the crest of the wave, only to crash emphatically in the wake of a new wave of scientific thought. Each established belief is eventually washed away like the tide. Thus, what humanity believes one day contradicts its future beliefs. Only religion provides stability, the church being 'like a rock in the midst of the ocean – unmoved', but in a Nietzschean world God is dead meaning that there is no sacred beacon to turn to.<sup>27</sup> In such a world, humanity's established morality, defined by the polarities of good and evil, can no longer exist as it has been conceived by Christianity. Hence, mankind must construct morality anew and with the feverish changeability of human thought, the world would be consumed in an eternal storm with no rocks left standing against the ferocity of the waves.

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<sup>25</sup> Joseph Conrad quoted in; Zdzislaw Njader, *Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 253.

<sup>26</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 315.

<sup>27</sup> Conrad quoted in; Njader, *Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle*, p. 253.

Whilst Conrad describes this 'mad individualism of Nietzsche'<sup>28</sup> as one of many waves that 'pass away and are forgotten',<sup>29</sup> trickles of Nietzsche's thought are manifested throughout *Heart of Darkness*. Nietzsche's desire for a further step in human evolution, this 'altruism of the next man tainted with selfishness and pride' that Conrad describes, may be evident in the character of Kurtz.<sup>30</sup> Throughout Marlow's journey, he hears rumours of Kurtz's magnificence. He is 'a remarkable man'<sup>31</sup> and 'a universal genius', he represents the height of modern man: efficient, intelligent and charismatic.<sup>32</sup> His written report demonstrates his altruism but introduces the opposing forces existing within him. All seventeen pages were 'vibrating with eloquence'<sup>33</sup> until they were undercut by a frantic scrawled post-script: 'Exterminate all the brutes!'<sup>34</sup> Whilst acting as an example of why Kurtz may be considered Nietzsche's 'next man', the report also introduces one of the novel's critical dichotomies, one in which barbarism confronts civilisation.<sup>35</sup>

Kurtz once belonged solely to the side of civilisation. It is said that 'All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz', Europe being the supposed pinnacle of civilisation at this height of modernist progression.<sup>36</sup> This much is true, as both Kurtz and Europe have an underlying darkness. Europe's darkness is implied when Marlow describes Brussels as a 'whited sepulchre', pristine and clean – the white of enlightenment is but a thinly veiled façade that reveals the sterility within.<sup>37</sup> Europe's civilising mission in Africa brings only a superficially enlightened torch to the place of darkness, and with it comes violence, oppression and bloody heads on spikes. The polarities of whiteness and

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 169.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 181.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 155.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Conrad quoted in; Njader, *Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle*, p. 253.

<sup>36</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 154.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 127.

darkness are confused imbuing Conrad's sphere with 'opposition, contradiction, war', a sphere which Nietzsche envisages.<sup>38</sup>

An insidious darkness also lingers within the 'white patch' of Africa.<sup>39</sup> Whilst Marlow notes that Africa had 'become a place of darkness' because of the inhuman process of European colonialism, a darkness resided there beforehand.<sup>40</sup> It lies within the jungle, the symbol of the wild that opposes civilised society. In its mystery, Conrad projects agency onto the African wilderness. This darkness sought an affinity with Kurtz, sensing 'something wanting in him [...] underneath his magnificent eloquence.'<sup>41</sup> He desired more than the normal man and this underlying desire led him to the jungle. The jungle represents what the European man does not know. It is dark and barbarous, leaving breadcrumbs to those who look for them to follow into the heart of darkness that holds an unknowable truth. Ironically, the coloniser is colonised by the land; the land itself achieves a 'fantastic invasion'<sup>42</sup> of Kurtz, whispering 'things about himself which he did not know'.<sup>43</sup> These things become etched into Kurtz's consciousness and lead to his later barbarity. With these new truths he ascends into his own diabolical godly status over the tribesmen, who 'adored him'.<sup>44</sup> His look upon his death bed transcends Marlow's comprehension; he looks 'as though he wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the men before him'.<sup>45</sup> Whatever the whispers told Kurtz they ignited a consuming desire and an abandonment of any previous European desires. He turned away from Western thought and civilisation and instead sought to design a new fate for himself, a new space of consciousness – one detached from the rest of humanity. Kurtz thus achieves the primary goal of modern Western man: progress. But he does so through the darkness

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<sup>38</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 315.

<sup>39</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 108.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 162.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 166.

residing in what was previously thought of as a 'white patch' before it was contaminated by colonialism.<sup>46</sup> Kurtz and the novella's settings share a concrete ambiguity in which civilisation and barbarism are intertwined.

It is the existence of a man such as Kurtz, one 'you can't judge [...] as an ordinary man', that makes Marlow re-evaluate what he knows.<sup>47</sup> Marlow, the European man, may be compared to the ship that he sails on along the river in the Congo. The further the ship ventures into the jungle the more it is destroyed, as pipes begin to leak and natives attack to the sound of deathly drums. Conrad dramatizes the fragility of the ship as an embodiment of civilisation, the ship itself being a microcosm of civilisation whilst Marlow is a representative of it. This concept echoes Conrad's belief that Nietzsche's ideas batter away at institutions, such as the church. Whether the new intellectual possibilities arise from the jungle or Nietzsche's pen, they disrupt the certainties of civilised thought. These new intellectual possibilities are one with the idea of temptation. The river reminds Marlow of 'an immense snake uncoiled' revealing a possible Biblical allusion.<sup>48</sup> The whispers of the jungle mirror the snake's sibilant rhetoric in Eve's ear since both encourage a consummation of the forbidden, whether it is the eating of an apple or the submersion within the darkness of one's heart. The secrets of the jungle reveal themselves to Marlow as an invisible but 'intolerable weight oppressing [his] breast' as the snake's tail uncoils.<sup>49</sup>

These secrets are not dissimilar to the awesome truths that Nietzsche alludes to in *The Will to Power*. Bohlmann indicates that Conrad 'suggests that illusion and ignorance in fact save us from knowledge that paralyses';<sup>50</sup> such knowledge is the 'intolerable weight

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 108.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 166.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 108.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 169.

<sup>50</sup> Bohlmann, *Conrad's Existentialism*, p. 19.

oppressing<sup>51</sup> Marlow, despite his incoherence. He does not know what it is, only that it paralyzes him. It forces him into the 'nightmare of [his] choice' as he returns from his journey and meets Kurtz's Intended.<sup>52</sup> He refuses to reveal to her the nature of Kurtz's fall, his submission to barbarity and his subsequent realisation not only of the horror of his own existence but also of human existence. Marlow concludes that this knowledge would destroy her. Upon meeting her, a year after Kurtz's death, she is a spectral figure. She floats towards him, like a ghost in her all black attire, preserved in limbo by an 'ashy halo'.<sup>53</sup> She embodies the precarious balance between the novella's light and darkness, and Marlow recognises his words will tip the scale. As Nietzsche asserts, 'the deeper one looks, the more valuations disappear – meaninglessness approaches';<sup>54</sup> the nihilistic despair of the truths of existence, those whispered by the jungle, 'would have been too dark, too dark altogether'.<sup>55</sup> The Intended would have been crushed, her remaining spirit evaporated, if these awesome truths were revealed to her. She asks for 'something – to – to live with', implying the possibility of suicide if her submersion into darkness had been complete.<sup>56</sup> As Nietzsche says, the 'lie – and *not* the truth – is divine!'<sup>57</sup> The lie provided by Marlow gives the Intended meaning just as religion gives meaning to the lives of many. In Nietzsche's interpretation of the world, however, there is no god – so the divine has been assigned to that which creates the illusion of purpose. The secrets pervading the jungle in *Heart of Darkness* and the realisations achieved by both Marlow and Kurtz resemble Nietzsche's ideas about the power and potentially destructive force that lies in the subjective interpretation of reality.

Nietzsche's image of an Übermensch hinges on how one deals with the destructive truths of existence. He says that 'He who *seizes* the abyss with eagle's claws: he has

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<sup>51</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 169.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>54</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 326.

<sup>55</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 186.

<sup>56</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 186.

<sup>57</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 523.

courage',<sup>58</sup> meaning that to be an Übermensch requires 'grappling with one's deepest self'<sup>59</sup> which can only be discovered when the nothingness, or perhaps absurdity, of existence is accepted. An Übermensch must be psychologically stronger than the Intended who clings to the belief in a tender humanity. He must embrace the despair and overcome it. Nietzsche asserts that the truth that results in despair is that deep in the hearts of men are 'savage natural instincts', abhorrent to the moral standards of Conrad's European man, despite the underlying hypocrisy of colonialisation.<sup>60</sup> Man must therefore, like Kurtz, embrace 'an ecstatic affirmation of the total character of life', and embrace the Dionysian aspect of existence.<sup>61</sup> Kurtz exhibits this character. He commits primal acts of violence, strives madly for progress and goes native. The natives he lives among are said to have 'howled, and leaped'<sup>62</sup> like beasts but Marlow acknowledges that the sight of Kurtz awoke in him at 'the thought of their humanity'.<sup>63</sup> To adhere to such a way of life, in which the shackles of civilisation are broken, and man is therefore both free in mind and body, the only way to live is to be 'enchanted, in ecstasy, like the gods'.<sup>64</sup> Follico expands on this point, suggesting that Nietzsche meant that man must not just evolve, but 'become a god'.<sup>65</sup> In the jungle, Kurtz was as close to a god as one could think possible – it was his domain. Within it 'Everything belonged to him',<sup>66</sup> he was not contested but loved and in this place of darkness, 'He had taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land'.<sup>67</sup> It becomes clear that the notion of someone godly, in either Conrad's or Nietzsche's spheres, does not adhere to Christian guidelines. Instead, by embracing a Dionysiac existence, as Nietzsche commands, Kurtz inhabits the role of a

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<sup>58</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, translated by Thomas Wayne (New York: Algora Publishing, 2003), p. 222.

<sup>59</sup> Bohlmann, *Conrad's Existentialism*, p. 54.

<sup>60</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), p. 39.

<sup>61</sup> Bohlmann, *Conrad's Existentialism*, p. 37.

<sup>62</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 139.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967), p. 37.

<sup>65</sup> Arturo, *Art and Existentialism* (Eaglewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962), p. 55.

<sup>66</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 153.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 154.

more malevolent, consuming deity. Hubristic in nature, as he 'kicks himself loose of the earth', questions arise whether Kurtz can really be what Nietzsche would have considered an Übermensch, something necessary for the next step in human evolution.<sup>68</sup>

### ***The Spire*, Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre**

A study such as this elucidates the many opportunities to analyse Conrad's work against modes of existentialist thought. As in previous studies, comparing Conrad to Nietzsche is a question of influence. Significantly less work, however, has been done on Golding and existentialism. As Dick categorically declares, 'Golding acknowledges no debt to Existentialism.'<sup>69</sup> A difference of approach is therefore necessary for an analysis of *The Spire*. If I were to take the approach applied to Conrad, of comparing a central character to an existentialist's ideal of modern man, I could measure Golding's characters against Camus' concept of the absurd hero. For Camus, this hero is Sisyphus, he who, courtesy of Zeus, is trapped within the machinery of fate in a meaningless world yet somehow able to overcome it. By concluding that all is well despite the torment 'He is stronger than his rock'<sup>70</sup> and therefore 'His fate belongs to him.'<sup>71</sup> Jocelin, the protagonist of *The Spire*, does not accept his fate. He does not acknowledge the reality of the absurd. Instead, leaning upon the abstract conception of God to feign meaning, he succumbs to despair as he is unable to create meaning for himself. Thus, he is not a hero of the absurd. Such a reading, however, takes a reductive view of Camus' philosophy. Both he and Sartre sought to come to a greater understanding of the world and humanity's

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 174.

<sup>69</sup> Bernard Dick, *William Golding* (Boston: Twayne, 1967), p. 99 quoted in; Paul Crawford, *Politics and History in William Golding: The World Turned Upside Down* (London: University of Missouri Press, 2002), p. 106.

<sup>70</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 87.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

search for meaning within it. Their concepts of an idealised man were not as specific as Nietzsche's.

A thematic approach to their philosophies will therefore be a more fruitful endeavour for determining whether or not *The Spire* is an existentialist text. In order to engage with the entirety of Golding's novel, some context is required. Jocelin, the Dean of the cathedral, orders the construction of a spire. He believes that he has been ordered by God in a vision to erect the spire and bring the townspeople closer to God. Thus, against the warnings of his builders who claim that the cathedral's foundations are too unstable to build upon, Jocelin demands its completion whatever the cost. The cost is both human and spiritual. The servant Pangall dies in a pagan sacrifice, whilst his wife, Goody, Jocelin's 'daughter in god', dies in childbirth.<sup>72</sup> The father, the master builder Roger, resorts to drunkenness and Jocelin's health declines. What he deems to be an angel on his back is in fact tuberculosis. In the novel's final moments, Jocelin experiences revelations at the height of his madness and illness.

These revelations illuminate 'Jocelin's Folly'.<sup>73</sup> His conviction to build the spire was based upon false knowledge, which informs the reader of his method of understanding the world. In the novel's opening, Jocelin describes what he believes to be a 'clear and explicit vision'.<sup>74</sup> In the cathedral, 'The most solid thing was the light'.<sup>75</sup> He interprets the sunlight as divine validation for his plans. The possibility that the sunlight breaking through the windows is simply nature is lost on Jocelin. A brief thought that the mind 'deceives as easily as a child'<sup>76</sup> is forgotten because his vision 'operates at a level of

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<sup>72</sup> William Golding, *The Spire* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), p. 11.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

dangerous intensity'<sup>77</sup> as the light 'smashed' and broke through the window.<sup>78</sup> He convinces himself of the certainty that God is at work. Later in the novel, light breaks upon the altar making it 'a divided thing, a light in each eye'.<sup>79</sup> The vision of certainty could now be interpreted as one of uncertainty yet Jocelin refuses to recognise the existence of paradox in Golding's sphere. Thus, Jocelin sees only what he wants to see and he creates his understanding based upon a false interpretation. Camus has a different premise of human understanding. The philosopher states that 'What I touch, what resists me – that is what I understand.'<sup>80</sup> For Camus, there is an element of hubris in believing one can understand that which is not human. Jocelin, however, convinced of his special connection with God, believes that he understands what he does not touch. His certainty opposes Camus' reconciliation with his own uncertainty as he declares 'I don't know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it.'<sup>81</sup> For the philosopher, contemplation of what one knows can lead to a greater understanding of that which is human but nothing else.

Jocelin creates understanding from that which he does not see. Whilst looking at the beams of light, he notices 'grains of dust' that 'bounced all together, like mayfly in a breath of wind'.<sup>82</sup> From the arbitrary movement of the dust he conjures the image of the mayfly. The mayfly does not exist, but Jocelin's vision breaths it into existence. As Granofsky notes, the dust 'makes visible what is normally unseen'.<sup>83</sup> It mirrors Jocelin's way of knowing; he sees things that are not there and puts his faith in them. The entire construction of the spire is based upon Jocelin projecting his own meaning onto things that he simply perceives. By doing so, and in the process contradicting Camus' mode of

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<sup>77</sup> Mark Kinkead-Weekes, and Ian Gregor, *William Golding: A Critical Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), p. 203.

<sup>78</sup> Golding, *The Spire*, p. 9.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>80</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 38.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> Golding, *The Spire*, p. 10.

<sup>83</sup> Ronald Granofsky, "'Man at an extremity': Elemental Trauma and Revelation in the Fiction of William Golding', *Modern Language Studies*, 20:2 (1990), 50-63, 58.

understanding, Jocelin enacts his travesty of faith. The refractions of light that Jocelin projects meaning onto echoes Camus' statement that 'as soon as thought reflects itself, what it discovers is a contradiction.'<sup>84</sup> As becomes evident in the altar scene, there is a duality of light. Everything in the novel is divided – where there is light there must also be darkness. Jocelin remains ignorant of such dualities, however: he focuses on the absoluteness of his vision, ignoring the warnings about the pit to fulfil his dream of the spire. Jocelin therefore does not reflect upon his thoughts and fails to see Camus' contradiction.

Sartre believes that humanity has an even worse grip upon understanding. In *Nausea*, the protagonist Roquentin wrestles with how he understands things. In a world in which one believes that one can understand one's surroundings, 'the diffused lighting [in *Nausea*] that allows for this conception of the world becomes, for Roquentin, a sinister fog.'<sup>85</sup> Whilst light may reveal, it can also refract, reflect and become clouded. The fog disturbs one's understanding and represents that which one does not know. It shows that the meaning we attach to something as it is revealed to us is not absolute. This rumination over the disparity between perception and understanding is developed further in Sartre's image of the chestnut tree. When examining the tree Roquentin realises that 'Words had disappeared, and with them the meaning of things'; he simply perceives it.<sup>86</sup> Through the use of defamiliarisation, both reader and narrator are detached from viewing it as a tree and instead see it as a 'black, knotty mass, which was utterly crude'.<sup>87</sup> Roquentin can only view it as a physical entity, appalled by its materiality. This is a meditation upon how mankind conceptualises the world. We use language, our own mechanism, to project understanding onto what is around us. Language fails to inform us why it is a tree; it simply tells us that it is. For Sartre, the

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<sup>84</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 14.

<sup>85</sup> Alistair Rolls and Elizabeth Rezniewski, 'Uprooting the Chestnut Tree: *Nausea* Today', in *Sartre's Nausea: Text, Context, Intertext*, ed. by Alistair Rolls and Elizabeth Rezniewski (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), p. 10.

<sup>86</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. by Robert Baldick (London: Penguin, 1963), p. 182.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

chestnut tree becomes emblematic of absurdity. Thus, Camus understands what he touches, Sartre can feel things but does not believe he can understand them and Jocelin believes he understands that which he cannot feel or see.

Sartre's philosophy of human understanding relates to his notion of the fault-line that exists between existence and essence. As Roquentin looks at the tree he is hit with an intense feeling of nausea. This indescribable sensation arises out of the recognition that natural entities, viewed through this lens of objectivity, have no essence. Manmade items, such as a penknife, have essence because man, the creator, had a conception of their purpose before they were created.<sup>88</sup> In this instance, man acts as artisan but in nature there is none. Language, the medium through which mankind attempts to attach meaning and essence to things, fails when Roquentin considers the tree. Thus, in nature everything exists but nothing has essence. While Sartre sees no symbolism in the world, Jocelin sees it everywhere enabling him to make sense of the world. The light is a vision from God, the heat in his back is an angel and so on. Jocelin's faith in symbols can be represented through the way in which he understands the discrepancy between existence and essence. Returning to the early passage where the sunlight blasts through the stain-glass windows, Camus' notion of reflection becomes important again. In the passage, Jocelin is transfixed by the light, believing that it is a message from God. The light itself is refracted through windows that depict the fabricated fable of God. Thus, the light, that which has existence, is ascribed essence by Jocelin as it is refracted through something that is representative of an abstraction that has no evidence for its existence. Jocelin projects essence onto the light because he believes that God sanctions this. Jocelin's entire philosophy is that God has given every existing entity essence. Without the reflection of thought that Camus deemed necessary, this belief infuses Jocelin's will to complete the spire because he believes its completion to be his essence. This faith drives the entire tragedy of the novel.

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<sup>88</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, trans. by Philip Mairet (London: Methuen, 2007), pp. 27-8.

For Golding, Jocelin's travesty of faith is not as straightforward as a misinterpretation of essence. Unlike the work of Sartre, Golding's fiction is permeated with imagery, presenting his readers with the same task as Jocelin: interpretation. Sartre's single use of imagery is the chestnut tree – that which encompasses the notion of absurdity. For Roquentin, this symbol causes a 'revelation'.<sup>89</sup> Jocelin has his own revelations in the final chapter of *The Spire*, but the purpose of Golding's imagery is to present many different meanings in addition to those perceived by the reader and Jocelin. The first is a psychological revelation that allows Jocelin's own nature to be revealed to him. Upon seeing 'a tangle of hair, blazing among the stars'<sup>90</sup> Jocelin utters the name 'Berenice' to Father Adam.<sup>91</sup> The priest misinterprets this name as referring to Saint Berenice, providing another instance where the faith in God leads to a failure of human understanding. The implication is that Jocelin is talking about the legend and constellation dedicated to Queen Berenice II of Egypt who devoted her hair, her greatest feature, to sexual love and erected it to the stars. The hair resembles the red hair of Goody Pagnall as 'the great club of the spire is lifted towards it.'<sup>92</sup> This confirms Jocelin's profane lust for Goody, suggesting that his spire is a mechanism for keeping her in his grasp whilst the construction continues. This realisation compounds the earlier revelation that Jocelin's appointment as Dean of the cathedral was only a result of his aunt's sexual favour with the previous king. Simultaneously, Jocelin has learnt about his corrupted human nature whilst his spire has morphed from a glorification of God into an erect phallus. The spire has been stripped of its essence as it becomes a mirror image of himself; it simply exists as a result of arbitrary human nature as opposed to being the will of a higher power.

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<sup>89</sup> Sartre, *Nausea*, p. 182.

<sup>90</sup> Golding, *The Spire*, p. 221.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

This vision ignites another that displays the nakedness and absurdity of mankind. He is faced with the image of humanity, all naked 'bound in their pipes or struts.'<sup>93</sup> All clothing, a human construct of respectability and modesty, is stripped away. As the absurdity of existence is revealed so too is the absurdity of this convention. The 'pipes or struts' could be our bones, the random molecular structures that hold us in place, underwriting our existence. The important aspect is that that is all we are. There is no soul, no essence, nothing but the product of an erratic indifferent universe. This realisation causes Jocelin to think '*How proud their hope of hell is. There is no innocent work.*'<sup>94</sup> The idea of hell, just like God, is an abstraction through which the religious direct their lives in a certain way. To affirm that there is an existence beyond the one we know requires an abandonment of scientific logic. As Camus says, 'I can only understand in human terms'.<sup>95</sup> To claim understanding beyond the human therefore limits one's freedom for the sake of abstractions and the subsequent reassurance they appear to provide. Whether it is to gain instant benefits or for the sake of hoping that one will benefit in another life, all work is done for personal gain. The lack of '*innocent work*' compounds the realisation that within man lies a selfish congenital darkness. For Jocelin, 'Only the present knowledge was a kind of freedom', so only an understanding of absurdity brings liberation.<sup>96</sup> Until this point, he believes his ability to transcend lies in the devotion to manmade conceptions that point beyond truth. Now, Jocelin can transcend this idea as he has reconciled himself with absurd truth – for the first time Jocelin has been able to construct meaning for himself.

The final meaning he delivers is '*It's like the appletree!*'<sup>97</sup> As previously stated, Golding's imagery is primed with ambivalence to encourage multiple interpretations. Firstly, the apple tree may be a culmination of Jocelin's experience. It encompasses nature's

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 222.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 38.

<sup>96</sup> Golding, *The Spire*, p. 221.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 223.

unalloyed beauty whilst it is 'complex, twining, engulfing, destroying'.<sup>98</sup> It confirms the duplicity of all existence, especially man. Meanwhile, the references to Eden are inevitable. Eve's choice to take the apple was driven by human desire just like Jocelin's choice to continue building the spire. Both faced the consequences. This could be said to exhibit the very foundations of existentialism, the philosophy that emphasises the existence of the individual person as a free and responsible agent. Jocelin now realises that the responsibility lies with him as he acts as both Eve and the snake. Where he once held God responsible for his vision due to his belief that God bestowed essence on all things, including himself, Jocelin now recognises the absurdity of that belief. Thus, only he can create his own essence and fate.

Perhaps, however, the apple tree's enigma is supposed to be representative of Mankind's search for meaning. This notion can be related to both Camus and Sartre. Camus confessed that it was 'impossible'<sup>99</sup> for him to understand a condition outside his own. The reader must also confess that they cannot fully understand a meaning created by an author who did not intend for that meaning to be concrete. Neither reader, Camus nor Jocelin can satisfy an 'appetite for the absolute'.<sup>100</sup> The very search for these meanings is absurd. As Sartre recognises with the chestnut tree, its meaning cannot be comprehended by language. As Jocelin sees his vision of the apple tree he tries to comprehend with 'words of magic and incomprehension'.<sup>101</sup> Magic, as well as the divine and language, is an example of man attributing something we do not understand to fictitious creations that appear to make sense of a meaningless world.

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 194.

<sup>99</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 38.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Golding, *The Spire*, p. 223.

## Discussion

*The Spire* and *Heart of Darkness* both deal with the truth of the hidden urges within men that only surface in post-salvation epiphanies. In both cases these urges have been repressed by their respective societies and Jocelin's and Kurtz's endeavours break free of society's accepted boundaries. The act of transgression itself is in neither case condemned. What is condemned is how the exercising of free will was pushed to ruthless extremes, enacting tragedy, and how the transgressors cloaked their deeds behind the veils of questionable ideologies, whether that be religion or colonialism. Conrad and Nietzsche deal with how man evolves after accepting a nihilistic existence – one Sartre would describe as being without essence and one he and Camus would define as absurd. Whilst *The Spire* also deals with solipsistic progression, it mediates more upon questions around how man knows and understands both the universe and himself.

Both texts instruct by negative example but to varying effects. Despite Kurtz's realisation, Conrad appears to argue against Nietzsche's philosophy. By vaguely echoing Nietzsche's outline the Übermensch, Conrad highlights the depravity of its consequences. Nonetheless, Conrad stresses the allure of a transgressive figure, such as Kurtz, who retains the loyalty of Marlow, the everyman. Golding's stance on the philosophy of absurdism is less straightforward. He appears to agree with Camus and Sartre in their notion that Mankind cannot be so arrogant to believe that it can understand the meaning of existence. Nonetheless, Golding does not indulge in the idea of a nihilistic world as much as Conrad. The former's pervading ambiguity dictates that not one single reading of *The Spire* can be correct, hence, to come to a Nietzschean conclusion that 'God is dead' in Golding's sphere would be reductive, especially considering that Golding was a religious man. The ultimate focus in Golding is upon the importance of knowing one's self and not shifting the responsibility for one's thoughts or actions onto others. Such a statement would be one endorsed by all three existentialists discussed.

### Conclusion

This dissertation has intended to show how existential philosophies have manifested in *Heart of Darkness* and *The Spire*. In both novels, the characters in question are condemned and die. It can be argued, however, that both are somewhat redeemed because of their revelations about their actions. Whilst Kurtz acknowledges the atrocities he has committed, Jocelin acknowledges his ignorance and sinfulness. Through Kurtz's atrocities, Conrad warns against the consequences of Nietzsche's model of the Übermensch. Golding, however, does not actively reject the secular philosophies of Sartre and Camus. If anything, Golding endorses their critical exploration into humanity's ignorance and arrogance.

To develop this dissertation, the novels could be compared to another existential philosopher, such as Schopenhauer. This could elucidate the breadth of existential attitudes that Conrad and Golding indulge in. Nonetheless, such a study would not be able to absolutely determine whether the novels in discussion could be considered existentialist texts. The term existentialist has been attached to a plethora of literature and thus, its significance has been lost within literature. A more comprehensive study should therefore analyse what characteristics a novel must have to be considered existential.

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