In this critical assessment, Karen McDonald compares the narrative voices of Francis Ford Coppola’s 1979 movie *Apocalypse Now* and Joseph Conrad’s novella *Heart of Darkness*. After a thorough, original analysis of both artists’ use of their respective media, characterizations, and narrative techniques, McDonald concludes that although the artists employ different strategies, they reach similar conclusions about “the black center of the human soul.”

**Willard vs. Marlow: The Differences in the Narrative Voices of *Apocalypse Now* and *Heart of Darkness***

When *Apocalypse Now* finally came to the screen in 1979, it had already gone through so many changes and adjustments that most of the similarities it had once had to *Heart of Darkness* were noticeably absent. The script that John Milius originally crafted took some liberties with Joseph Conrad’s novella, but once Francis Ford Coppola started working with the film, a series of events including casting problems, visionary differences, and shooting difficulties altered what had begun as a modern interpretation of the ideas present in *Heart of Darkness* into a film which so faintly echoes the book that Conrad is not even mentioned in the credits. Much speculation exists trying to pinpoint exactly how and when the deviations occurred. William Hagen observes that

> In wanting to improve the Milius script, especially after the Du Long Bridge sequence, [Coppola] turned to *Heart of Darkness* and the somewhat improvisatory method itself. However, by not working out the precise relation of *Heart of Darkness* to the conception of the film in the script form, Coppola insured a less faithful adaptation. (300)

This imprecision on Coppola’s part may have drastically changed the heart of the novella, but it did result in a highly acclaimed motion picture, regardless of the tribulations experienced in the process. Ultimately, the reason for the differences between the story presented on the screen and that which exists in the book is the chasm between Coppola’s and Conrad’s visions. Robert LaBrasca also recommends that we bear in mind that

> one work is the product of a single consciousness in reflection, while the other required an army of creative minds, functionaries and drudges, along with $31 million of the world’s resources. (289)

Beyond the different journeys taken to bring these stories to the public, beyond the variations in the settings and periods of the stories, after the audiences have
absorbed the central themes of the movie and the book, after the visions of both Conrad and Coppola are set aside, the real differences between *Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now* are due to the distinct voices of the narrators.

From the beginning of the movie it is apparent that Capt. Willard is Coppola's version of Conrad's Marlow. Though the only character to retain his name in the transition from page to screen is Kurtz, the change of Marlow into Willard signals a major adaptation in the story. Since Marlow is the central character of *Heart of Darkness*, he sets the tone and voice of the entire novella. The same is true of Willard in *Apocalypse Now*. Among the changes that significantly alter the story are the differences in narrative voice, especially the focus on the audience present in *Heart of Darkness*, which is created by the presence of the framework narrator, and the absence of an apparent audience in *Apocalypse Now*.

Conrad's novella not only tells a tale of greed and power struggles, but it also provides an audience so the readers see how the author expects them to react to Marlow's tale. The framework narrator opens the book with great, verbose description, but by the end he is succinct in his agreement with Marlow's worldview. This change, coupled with the occasional interjections made by the four men who hear Marlow's story, clearly demonstrates Conrad's intention not only that Marlow's experience send a message, but also exactly what effect that message is supposed to have.

The framework narrator begins the novella with both a very descriptive and a congenial voice. His attitude is immediately seen in his descriptions of the men on board the *Nellie*. The first man to fall under the narrator's lens is the Director. This authority figure is thought of "affectionately" and seen as "trustworthiness personified" (Conrad 7). The other passengers are also detailed by the narrator, who sums up their relationship by saying "Besides holding our hearts together through long periods of separation [the bond of the sea] had the effect of making us tolerant of each other's yarns - and even convictions" (Conrad 7). This sentence relates the group's ability to humor one another though they may have very different perspectives and opinions. The group's indulgence is specifically applied to Marlow shortly after the narrator speaks of how tolerant they are of each other. Two passages especially display how the narrator views Marlow:

He was the only man of us who still "followed the sea." The worst that could be said of him was that he did not represent his class... His remark did not seem at all surprising. It was just like Marlow. It was accepted in silence. (Conrad 9)

The first passage demonstrates the narrator's opinion of Marlow. While Marlow is seen as a good man, his companions know his faults and understand that he is not perfect. The second passage goes on to prove that the group is
tolerant of him, especially when a remark is "just like Marlow." Obviously, the narrator neither disdains nor dislikes Marlow, but he does not truly understand or agree with him, either; however, the narrator's congeniality is as apparent in the description of Marlow as in that of the other men. This congenial attitude is also seen in how the setting is described.

After introducing the Nellie's four passengers the narrator uses poetic language to colorfully depict the story's setting:

The water shone pacifically, the sky without a speck was a benign immensity of unstained light, the very mist on the Essex marshes was like a gauzy and radiant fabric hung from the wooded rises inland and draping the low shores in diaphanous folds. (Conrad 8)

The attention that is paid to the details of the landscape and the picturesque way in which it is described tell the readers that this narrator is not so preoccupied with inner demons that he cannot take notice of and appreciate his surroundings, which places him in direct contrast to Marlow and his tortured philosophical musings.

From the moment Marlow begins to speak, we can hear the lack of physical description and congeniality in his voice in contrast to the narrator's. It is not surprising then, after reading the entire tale, to find that the narrator ends his framework narrative in a much more succinct and disheartened state than he began it. Instead of a complement to the two and one half pages of descriptive text that open the story, a mere one paragraph closes it. While this short paragraph does contain physical description, the last sentence displays the narrator's change of heart from congenial passenger to Marlow's comrade in cynicism and affliction:

The offering was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky - seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness. (Conrad 76)

Waters that at the beginning of the novella had "shone pacifically," "flowed sombre" by the end; the sky, instead of being "a benign immensity of unstained light," offers "a black bank of clouds"; the "diaphanous folds" become simply "an overcast sky." These changes in how the narrator describes the scene clearly illustrate that the narrator himself has changed, abandoning his lighter mood and joining Marlow in his darkness.

Because of the anonymity of the narrator, the change that he undergoes can logically be applied to Marlow's entire audience. By having the entire group consist of only four men--Marlow and his three listeners--all of whom share the bond of the sea, Conrad draws his readers to the conclusion that these
men have much in common. Though Marlow is the only one with a name, the Director receives enough attention to become distinct, but neither the Accountant nor the Lawyer is outstanding. One of these two characters is the narrator; however, which one is speaking is never revealed. It is this ambiguity that allows us to accept the narrator as the spokesman for Marlow’s audience, thus demonstrating that not only the narrator but the whole group comes to understand Marlow and his worldview. However, that the narrator speaks for all three men is not the only indication that all of them come to believe as Marlow does.

At several points in Marlow’s narrative, his audience interjects comments that demonstrate its opposition to some of Marlow’s tale and his style of telling it. Near the beginning of the story the audience makes several comments about elements of the story. At one point the narrator relates that one voice growled “Try to be civil, Marlow” when he made an editorial comment about the “monkey tricks” they all perform for “half a crown a tumble” (Conrad 36). Marlow’s entire tale is a commentary on their way of life, so it is natural that his audience react against it, just as Marlow himself initially did. The surprise is not that they indulge Marlow and allow him to tell his story. Neither is it surprising that they interject with objections when they feel affronted. What is surprising, though, is that as the story progresses the comments become less frequent; that the men stop feeling professionally affronted and start feeling personally responsible; that they come to understand Marlow’s darkness.

This darkness is not inherent in the events surrounding Kurtz’s death; rather, it is Marlow’s analysis of and comments on those events. Since Marlow’s audience is three men on a boat years after the occurrences he relates, his story is in the past tense. The amount of time that has obviously elapsed also means that Marlow has had time to reflect upon what happened and attempt to make some sense of it. In fact, his story is made up of more images and impressions than actual, clear events, making Heart of Darkness a very personal and emotional exploration into the significance of a very life-altering episode.

Conrad’s use of the narrative framework is the key to understanding how he wanted Heart of Darkness to be seen. The novella was intended to be a commentary on the imperialistic exploitation of Africa, so he provided Marlow with an audience of his fellow tools of exploitation. By manipulating the reactions and thoughts of Marlow’s audience, Conrad supplies an example of how he would like his own audience to react: listen to the story; slowly abandon rationalizations; engage in self-examination; admit responsibility, and understand that the darkness is in each one of us. This technique works well for Conrad, but when Coppola began his film adaptation he discarded the framework narrator and turned to other means of relaying his message.
In adapting the book for the medium of film, Coppola hoped to portray the same message and idea that Conrad imbedded in his novella. By using one of the hottest moral controversies of the time—the fighting in Vietnam—as a substitute for the controversial exploitation of Africa that is Conrad’s vehicle, Coppola attempted to show the timelessness of Conrad’s observations on human nature. According to Hagen, though, Coppola made

the rather romantic assumption—which is, in fact, a misreading of the novel—that experience itself will immediately dictate certain discoveries. He forgets the years of reflection Marlow has given to his experience, the “recollected in tranquillity” that Wordsworth argued must follow “the spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions” if they are to be shaped into art. (301)

By cutting out the framework narrator and depending solely on the images on film to relay his message, Coppola moves the story from Marlow’s intimate introspection, related almost unconsciously to his small audience, to Willard’s unpremeditated observations of the events surrounding his mission. Though the story is centered around Willard’s experiences during the journey up the river to terminate Col. Kurtz’s command, we do not see solely through Willard’s eyes. Instead we see what happens around Willard, sometimes how other characters react to the occurrences during the movie, and, thanks to the narration added after filming, we hear some of his thoughts. Without the framework narrator *Apocalypse Now* offers an undistilled account of “the horror” with few meditations and no explicit indication of Coppola’s desired effect.

Unlike Marlow, as Capt. Willard travels on his journey into the heart of Col. Kurtz’s darkness, he speaks directly to the viewing audience. Within the first nine minutes of the movie, after scenes of fire and battle superimposed over Willard’s face, he tells his audience that “I wanted a mission and for my sins they gave me one . . . I t was a real choice mission and when it was over I’d never want another one.” This immediately establishes that the tale about to be related has already happened, that Willard is looking back on this mission, just as Marlow does. In a sense, this implies that the heart of the tale will be devoted to exploring why he would “never want another one.” What actually happens is not an explicit explanation like Marlow’s, but a subtle presentation of important events. It also shows that these experiences have changed him drastically. For an experienced military assassin to say he never wanted another mission proves that something affected him deeply on this mission. His state of mind about the mission is also seen when he says “Everybody wanted me to do it. Even him . . . Even the jungle wanted him dead and that’s really who he took his orders from anyway” (2:21). These two quotes, though, are the only places that it is apparent that Willard is looking
back on his mission with any amount of contemplation on the deeper issues. The voice-over narration may be in the past tense with some philosophical musings, but the power of the visual images imposes the present tense on the film.

If Coppola had set up a framework narration, then the fact that Willard is remembering these events would be more apparent; however, since the voice-over seems secondary, the pictures' presence overpowers the words' past tense. *Apocalypse Now* sweeps the viewers along with Willard as he travels deep into the jungle to eliminate Kurtz. As we move up the river with Willard, he may relate his tale in the past tense, but due to the visual aspect of film, Willard's words are not the primary vehicle in relaying the events of his journey. Instead, the narration is merely a supplement to the pictures. Because the audience sees what is happening, without relying solely on the narrator's narrow perception as they must with *Heart of Darkness*, they see a more objective view of the events, without the self-censoring that Marlow allows himself. While Marlow's tale is filled with analysis and attempts at understanding that proffer a worldview to the audience, Willard's story is a more complete depiction of the actual events without the subjective analysis. It may seem natural that film, with its visual as well as audio characteristics, would present a more objective portrayal, but Coppola enhances this aspect by not only how he filmed the scenes, but also in the development of minor characters.

In *Heart of Darkness* there are several passages where Marlow specifically tells his audience that he is editing something out—"No use telling you much about that" (23); "Oh, those months! Well, never mind" (26). There are also many scenes where he does not give much description, leaving his audience to fill in the blanks. Coppola makes full use of the dynamics of film to show what is occurring around Willard instead of having him relate these events with a series of impressions. When Kilgore's cavalry unit attacks a village at the mouth of the Nung River, we do not see the battle solely from Willard's point of view. In fact, Willard is not seen much in this episode of blaring music and dangerous exchange of fire. We are shown deaths and maneuvers from both sides of the engagement, things that Willard could not have seen from his seat aboard Kilgore's command ship (0:30-0:42). Scenes like this make the movie much broader in scope than the book is, with Willard's role as narrator thereby made less significant than Marlow's. When contrasted to a similar scene in the book when "a man-of-war anchored off the coast . . . was shelling the bush," the different styles can clearly be seen. After some minor physical description, Marlow elaborates on the event:

In the empty immensity of earth, sky, and water, there she was, incomprehensible, firing into a continent. Pop, would go one of the six-inch guns; a small flame would dart and vanish, a little white smoke would disappear, a tiny projectile
would give a feeble screech—and nothing happened. Nothing could happen. There was a touch of insanity in the proceeding, a sense of lugubrious drollery in the sight . . ." (17)

The “pop,” “little white smoke,” and “feeble screech” that Marlow witnessed from a distance is not so greatly different from what Willard would have seen from his vantage point during the beginning of the air assault. Coppola, though, decided to submerge the film audience in the horror of the battle even though Willard would not see it as they did. This technique, coupled with Kilgore’s “I love the smell of napalm in the morning” speech and the surreality of having Wagner’s “Ride of the Valkyries” as the precursor and background music of the attack, demonstrates to his audience the insanity inherent in such proceedings, while Conrad’s printed word had to explicitly state it as one of Marlow’s observations. Both techniques are effective and relay similar messages to their respective audiences.

Another way in which *Apocalypse Now* is more objective than *Heart of Darkness* is in the development of minor characters. As mentioned earlier, the breadth of the filmed scenes dissipates the focus from Willard as narrator. With this in mind, the natural conclusion is that some of the other characters receive attention as well. One of the most telling points is that while Marlow describes the people around him, their names are not important, so, other than Kurtz, their names are not chronicled. In the movie, however, many of the characters have names: Luke at the meeting when Willard gets his assignment; Kilgore; Chef, Lance, Clean, and Phillips on the boat. Along with being named, these characters are developed. They are still only minor characters, but the audience gets to know them. Not only do they add to the storyline, but they also help shift the sole responsibility of eliciting emotions from the audience away from Willard as the narrator. When Clean is shot and killed while listening to a tape from his mother (1:35), the audience feels sorrow without Willard needing to relate how he felt at the time. In *Heart of Darkness* the audience must be told how Marlow felt and what observations he has before they know how to react. Conrad tells; Coppola shows.

With more characters with which to relay the whole spectrum of emotions, Willard is not the only one we see affected by the trials of the journey. Both Lance and Chef survive to enter Kurtz’s compound with Willard. Along the way we see Chef, who is “wrapped too tight for Vietnam” (0:22), suffer through an encounter with a tiger that has him terrified to leave the boat. The irony is that if he had left the boat with Lance and Willard, he probably would have survived as they did. In *Heart of Darkness*, it is Marlow that stays on the boat while the Manager and his contingent go onshore to retrieve Kurtz (53). We also see Lance turn to the attraction of the natives’ way of life to escape the horrors he has witnessed in Vietnam. His escape starts with his use of rugs and ends in his participation in the villagers’ ritual sacrifice of the bull. One
step on Lance’s escape from his reality occurs just after Clean’s death. Here Lance gives in to his desires and joins his voice with the screams coming from shore (1:39). Marlow fights these same urges on his journey, too, but he resists them:

They howled and leaped and spun and made horrid faces, but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough, but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise . . . You wonder I didn’t go ashore for a howl and a dance? Well, no—I didn’t. Fine sentiments, you say? Fine sentiments be hanged! I had no time. (37-38)

Marlow tells his audience about resisting the urges. He relates his thoughts on both his desires and his decision to resist them. Willard does neither. He does not have to. By showing Lance giving in to these urges, Coppola removes the need for this type of introspection. By having Lance as a minor character, Coppola allows himself the latitude to show the temptation without having to have Willard discuss it. Once again, Coppola shows while Conrad tells.

The inherent properties of film dictate much of how the story of Willard’s descent into darkness is portrayed. Instead of a framework narrator, Willard speaks directly to the viewing audience. Instead of bearing the weight of relating all that happens, Willard’s character is supported by a small cast of minor characters. These minor characters help show how the descent affects Willard, plus other important aspects like the insanity of war. All of this frees Coppola from the constraints that Conrad conquered to tell the tale through Marlow; instead, he shows what happens to Willard and also what happens to those around him.

With the fate of the minor characters helping to demonstrate how pervasive the heart of darkness truly is, Coppola is able to apply the change that Willard undergoes to the world at large. This is the same result gained by Conrad with the use of the framework narrative and the anonymity of the narrator. Both artists created works that expound on the black center of the human soul. Though they used different media, different characterization, and different narrative techniques, the results are very similar.