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A Look into Ourselves:

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

*Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad is generally hailed as the first really modern novel. In the work, the narrator, Marlow, tells of his journey into Africa as the captain of a steamboat. His journey takes him deep into the African jungle where he first hears about and then meets a company agent named Kurtz, who has the highest level of ivory exportation of any agent, and achieves this through a strange mix of ruthlessness and idealism. *Heart of Darkness* deals with Marlow's journey into the complexities of human nature, as the imperialism he finds in Kurtz and the company by which they are both employed takes advantage of the resources and people of the Congo. The novella explores Marlow's fascination with this exploitation; he is both repulsed and drawn to Kurtz who represents the idealist gone corrupt. The story shows the struggle of good against evil, white against black, light against dark, with role reversals happening often. For example, the white imperialists, who are supposed to be bringing civilization to the African jungle, are motivated by greed and the novella questions whether or not they are bringing anything useful with their rape of ivory and blatant exploitation of the native people. The book uses the journey that Marlow takes as a symbolic representation of the discovery of self, but it is ambiguous as to what we are to do with that discovery.

The novella is based on Conrad's own experience in the African Congo. He once said that *Heart of Darkness* was "experience pushed a little (and very little) beyond the facts of the case" (Walker, X). In 1890, Conrad became the captain of a small steamship and saw firsthand the "scandalous imperial practices of the Belgian King Leopold II in the Congo. . .draining it of raw materials like ivory, while claiming to be suppressing savagery and spreading European civilization" (Damrosh, 2017). The whole plot, from the broken ship to the sick Kurtz, was taken from Conrad's journey. Perhaps this story gets its sense of immediacy from the personal connection Conrad had to the work. He was deeply affected by this trip and even commented, "Before the Congo I was a mere animal" (Walker, X). Although the reader should be careful not to confuse Conrad and his narrator, there is a close connection between the two.

*Heart of Darkness* has long been praised. Cedric Watts went as far as declaring, "*Heart of Darkness* is the best short novel I know, and in my opinion it is the finest and richest of Conrad's works" (Watts, 132). It is "at the heart of modern British literature" (Damrosh, 2017). It was so influential because it has the same appeal as mythical tales. It has been compared to Virgil's *Aeneid*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, and the *Odyssey*, among others. As the *Longman Anthology* points out, it "condenses in its pages an epic range of theme and experience, both the social themes of empire and cultural class, and the personal theme of the hero's quest for self-discovery" (Damrosh, 2017).

*Heart of Darkness* has had a powerful influence in the literary world and in shaping people's life views. Because it is told in first person, the narrative plays with the sense of time in the same way that appealed to those who later used the stream of

consciousness narrative. The novella deals with Marlow's epiphany of self-realization, a modern idea that Joyce develops further. The story also plays with multiple levels of symbolism, especially concerning the white/light and black/darkness motif. Although Conrad most likely never read Freud, his novella contains elements of his philosophy. Mankind is shown as psychically divided; although Marlow is fascinated by Kurtz and in some ways similar to him, he shows a kind of separation from him. Meeting him is not finding a friend with whom he interacts on a personal level. Rather, he causes Marlow to examine his own nature. Marlow is alone in his journey and has no one he trusts or can confide in, besides the audience. Marlow's experience is one of isolation and examination of his old values, which are not holding up under scrutiny. He has believed that imperialism was somehow justified in the good it brought the native people, but he can find very little evidence of this in his travels. In this way, the novel shows the modern characteristics of isolation and fragmentation; Marlow is searching for something to believe in. This is very indicative of what writers did after Conrad and after the modern catastrophes like WWI and WWII. In all these ways, *Heart of Darkness* was not only ahead of its time in literary style, but also in its seeking to redefine the world.

Albert J. Guerard is one of the most influential critics of Conrad's work. In his introduction to *Heart of Darkness*, he says that one of the themes of the book is that "in the unconscious mind of each of us slumber infinite capacities for reversion and crime. And our best chance for survival, moral survival, lies in frankly recognizing these capacities" (Guerard, 103). He describes Kurtz as "one of the greatest portraits in all fiction of moral deterioration and reversion to savagery as a result of physical isolation" (Guerard, 103). He believes that Marlow is the central character of interest and that his

looking into his deepest self is central to the “night journey” motif in the novella.

Guerard also comments that Conrad was “a pessimist as well as an idealist, yet his pessimism has a consoling solidity” (Guerard, 104).

Jerome Thale, another Conrad critic, compares the story to a quest for a grail, with Kurtz being the grail and Marlow the knight who seeks him. He argues Kurtz represents an “unseen apostle of light” who “becomes the alternative to the cowardly plunderers” (Thale, 351). Kurtz is described as a good man who has gone wrong. He believes that the story about the “deeper task of finding out what on is, of coming to grips with the existence of the self” (Thale, 352). Thale also talks about the symbolism in the light and dark, saying that “what is dark in ‘darkest Africa’ is not the land or the people, but the world introduced by the bringers of light and civilization” (Thale, 353). Thale compares the journey of Marlow into the Africa to the journey into the depths of the self. Thale concludes, using Marlow’s words, that the most we can hope in life is “some knowledge of yourself—that comes too late” (Thale, 356). This is at once pessimistic and optimistic. Thale concludes that the novella is about looking deep into the self and realizing all the darkness and complexity that being human implies.

One of the foremost authorities on Conrad, Frederick R. Karl, sees *Heart of Darkness* as a modern display of the absurdity of experiences and compares Conrad to Freud. He describes the novella as having “that discontinuous, inexplicable, existentially absurd experience which was to haunt his letters and his work” (Karl, 126). He says that the reason Marlow is repulsed by Kurtz is because he sees in him the very things he dreads in himself. Karl talks extensively about the way that the journey is a dream, comparable to the Freud analysis of dreams: that they are a place where inhibitions are

gone and the true self can be manifest. Kurtz is free from all inhibitions and his “savage career is every man’s wish-fulfillment” (Karl, 127). He also sees the novella as a not only concerned with moral issues, but how they play out in human behavior. He sees a sense of human waste in the story, symbolized by the ivory. It is an object that is not a necessity, but is a “social luxury,” “an object for the rich” (Karl, 128). It is for this art that “the Congo is plundered and untold numbers slaughtered brutally, or casually” (Karl, 128). He says that using ivory as the object that is so valuable to the imperialists plays us the horror of what they have done. The story is so powerful because it shows that “the dirty work of this world is carried out by men whose reputations are preserved by lies” (Karl, 130).

Cedric Watts, who wrote a critical book called *Conrad’s “Heart of Darkness,”* is another important Conrad critic. In his book, he discusses the symbolism of light and dark. He first explains that white (also light) has associations with purity and holiness, while black is associated with sin and evil. Conrad turns this symbolism around in his novel, making the “signal examples of corruption. . .not among the blacks but among the white men” (Watts, 133). Examples of the white symbolism are the ivory, the company headquarters’ city which reminds Marlow of “a whited sepulcher,” the bones of the dead and Kurtz’s bald head (Watts, 133).

The novel explores themes that are central to the human experience. One of these themes is that once we understand our inner self, it is too late to do anything about it.

Marlow says near the end of the novel, that you gain “some knowledge of yourself—that comes too late.” Through his journey into the dark of Africa, he comes to know himself. He admits while watching the “prehistoric man” from his boat that “what thrilled you was

just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar” (Conrad, 59). He feels a connection to the natives of Africa and recognizes that his culture and civilization is a thin veneer. Beginning to realize his own potential for darkness, he is unable to root out those feelings in himself.

Paradoxically, it seems the more he discovers about himself, the less Marlow feels he knows himself. He describes the jungle as appearing “hopeless and dark, so impenetrable to human thought, so pitiless to human weakness” (Conrad, 93-4). This description of the jungle is a description of his own heart. When he goes home, Marlow is changed. He says of those around him, “They were intruders whose knowledge of life was to me an irritating pretense, because I felt so sure they could not possibly know the things I knew” (Conrad, 120-1). Yet his self-knowledge does not prevent him from going to see Kurtz’s “Intended” and telling her lies about him, which makes him feel as though “the house would collapse. . .the heavens would fall” (Conrad, 131). Marlow may have achieved a higher self-knowledge than the average man, yet it does not seem to change his behavior.

Kurtz is similar to Marlow. His self-knowledge does not come until the very end of his life. Marlow describes the effect Africa had on Kurtz by saying, “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” (Conrad, 98). Kurtz’s last words, “The horror, the horror,” show that he finally realized his terrible capacity for depravity, and it was too late to take back all his crimes (Conrad, 118). Ultimately, self-knowledge cannot save us because it comes too late to make a difference.

This book is a great piece of literature, because it expresses the complexity of human nature. Not only does it express Marlow's experience within himself, it also examines the cost of European imperialism, and even beyond that. As Frederick R. Karl says:

What makes this story so impressive is Conrad's ability to focus on the Kurtz-Marlow polarity as a definition of our times. . . .The history of individual men can be read more clearly in the light of Conrad's art; for he tells us that the most dutiful of men, a Marlow, can be led to the brink of savagery and brutality if the will to power touches him; that the most idealistic of men, Kurtz, can become a sadistic murderer. . . .Conrad's moral tale become, in several respects, our story, the only way we can read history and each other. (Karl, 130).

*Heart of Darkness* is important, then, because it shows the cycles of history; brutality conquering civility and vice versa. This work should be studied for its complexity. It should be studied because of its influence on other authors and on our cultural mindset. It should be studied because it tells us about ourselves and our own hearts of darkness.