

Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad

A brief discussion of the narrative and the main characters.

Note: This is intended as a supplement to the books and articles I've already uploaded to LCWU's online portal.

Introduction- Conrad's stature as a novelist and Heart of Darkness:

Conrad, a Polish-British novelist and one of the greatest Modern writers was born in 1857 in Berdychiv, Ukraine, then a part of the Russian empire. He didn't speak English fluently until he was well in his twenties-a remarkable fact considering his exceptional grasp on the language. English was Conrad's third language after Polish and French. Given this, Conrad realized himself as uniquely positioned to talk about things that wouldn't be part of the experience of the average Englishman.

Conrad is often credited and many times discredited for the way he talks about the experience of colonization. His novel, Heart of Darkness is a commentary on the experience of imperialism, colonization and the metaphors of darkness and ultimately how everything ties to the human experience.

Edward Said, a lifelong admirer of Joseph Conrad wrote in Reflections on exile (2002):

The greatest single fact of the past three decades has been, I believe, the vast human migration attendant upon war, colonialism, and decolonization, economic and political revolution, and such devastating occurrences as famine, ethnic cleansing, and great power machinations... Exiles, émigrés, refugees, and expatriates uprooted from their lands must make do in new surroundings, and the creativity as well as the sadness that can be seen in what they do is one of the experiences that has still to find its chroniclers, even though a splendid cohort of writers that includes such different figures as Salman Rushdie and V.S. Naipaul has already opened further the door first tried by Conrad. (xiv)

The fact that Said's postcolonial theory hinges on the same things as Conrad mentions in Heart of Darkness is not merely a coincidence. In Conrad, Said found a kindred soul, who had gone through exile, and witnessed the horrors of imperialism and had chosen to document in Heart of Darkness,

the extent of human depravity and perversion. Indeed, Conrad provided a worldview that Said could easily claim as his own. Said states:

You know, there are two great presences in my life intellectually: one of them literary, which is Conrad, the other one musical, which is Bach. With Conrad, of course, it's the whole: I don't know a better, more encyclopedic description of the world from which I come than is provided by Conrad's novels ('Traveling' 291)¹

Of course the fact that Conrad is seen in a semi divine light by Said is one of modern literature's greatest ironies. After all, Conrad was accused by Chinua Achebe of reducing all Africans to 'limbs and rolling eyes' and of the image of Africa as "the other world," the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality.²

Conrad, as obvious from the above examples is a polarizing figure. His *Heart of Darkness* had garnered praise and criticism alike but more importantly it was one of the first works of fiction to zoom in on the darker side of colonialism and imperialism.

Heart of Darkness- Points to consider.

Before we undertake to discuss the novel, a short summary of the work is in order. Written in 1888-89, "Heart of Darkness" is both the story of a journey and a kind of morbid fairy tale. Marlow, Conrad's narrator and familiar alter ego, a British merchant seaman of the eighteen-nineties, travels up the Congo in the service of a Belgian trading company, hoping to retrieve the company's brilliant representative and ivory trader, Mr. Kurtz, who has mysteriously grown silent. Kurtz is a mythical figure and where he is stationed, everyone is in awe of him. He is for all intents and purposes, the flower of European civilization ("all Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz")-

¹ (Note: You can refer to What is Contrapuntalism? An Interview with Edward Said on Joseph Conrad in this regard <https://culture.pl/en/article/what-is-contrapuntalism-an-interview-with-edward-said-on-joseph-conrad#2>)

² Achebe, Chinua. "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'" *Massachusetts Review*. 18. 1977. Rpt. in *Heart of Darkness, An Authoritative Text, background and Sources Criticism*. 1961. 3rd ed. Ed. Robert Kimbrough, London: W. W Norton and Co., 1988, pp.251-261 https://polonistyka.amu.edu.pl/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/259954/Chinua-Achebe.-An-Image-of-Africa.-Racism-in-Conrads-Heart-of-Darkness.pdf

as Marlow states). A beacon of light and compassion, journalist, artist, humanist, Kurtz has gone way upriver and at times well into the jungle, abandoning himself to certain .disreputable. practices. Rifle in hand, he has set himself up as god or devil in ascendancy over the Africans. Conrad is notoriously vague about what Kurtz actually does, but it almost doesn't matter what evils are actually perpetrated by him. He probably has killed, maimed, and whipped people for a sport and has had numerous relationships with native women. In Kurtz, the alleged benevolence of colonialism has flowered into criminality. He has been commissioned to write a report by his seniors at the company he is employed by, and at the end of the report Kurtz writes: 'Exterminate all brutes'. Kurtz is finally taken aboard the ship Marlow is on and dies towards the end uttering the words, 'The Horror, the horror!'. He has meanwhile entrusted a few papers to Marlow for safekeeping that include various reports and personal memorabilia. Marlow goes back to take care of his personal belongings and to make sense of a narrative that has shaken him to the core. Marlow's voyage from Europe to Africa and then upriver to Kurtz's Inner Station is a revelation of the squalors and disasters of the colonial "mission"; it is also, in Marlow's mind, a journey back to the beginning of creation, when nature reigned exuberant and unrestrained, and a trip figuratively *down* as well, through the levels of the self to repressed and unlawful desires. At death's door, Marlow and Kurtz find each other.

The narrative employed for the novella is that of a frame structure. Marlow is not the one telling the tale originally. He is introduced to the readers as a brooding seaman fond of wandering, and is introduced as a seaman not typical of his class. That may refer to his propensity for telling tales, and philosophizing on political as well as metaphysical matters.

The complexity of the frame narrative is hinted towards the beginning of the text when the narrator states:

“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.”

This may refer to the narrative itself. Marlow's forthcoming narrative, that the readers will soon be acquainted with, is itself like a kernel, whose meaning for the most part lies outside. Marlow's entire narrative, while linear, isn't coherent and is full of ambiguities and ambivalence. The narrative hinges on the mystical and at times downright mythical figure of Mr. Kurtz and what he represents, but is also preoccupied with the discussion of the negative space; by situating Kurtz at the center of the narrative, he succeeds in alluding to the 'meaning outside the kernel' or the negative space in question, i.e, the very institution of imperialism itself.

The technique that Conrad employs with the narrative is also employed in the case of characters. Only two of the characters, Marlow and Kurtz have a flesh and blood quality to them. The rest of the characters are mostly two-dimensional and again act as the negative space to offset the complexities of Marlow and Kurtz.

Kurtz, at the heart of 'Heart of Darkness' profits more from speculation than actual certainty. He is described to Marlow by turns as brilliant, prodigious, ruthless etc and takes on an aura of semi divinity by the time Marlow actually meets him. Kurtz is from beginning to end, a complete enigma.

The way Marlow describes his last moments encapsulate his entire life in a nutshell:

Anything approaching the change that came over his features I have never seen before, and hope never to see again. Oh, I wasn't touched. I was fascinated. It was as though a veil had been rent. I saw on that ivory face the expression of sombre pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror--of an intense and hopeless despair. Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision--he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath: "The horror! The horror!"

Kurtz, it is tempting to insinuate is referring to his own depravity as the emissary of a company who had stripped the inhabitants of Africa of their dignity and humanity, but the horror he expresses is directed as much outwards, as inwards. Kurtz probably realizes towards the end that he has been no more than a petty instrument for the institution of colonialism itself to unleash a reign of terror and has willingly dirtied his hands doing the work of his superiors.

Marlow, in contrast to Kurtz, is not one to wilfully 'sin' if that indeed is what Kurtz did, but is content to sit back and ruminate on the causes of moral depravity in his own tale. He is adept as spinning yarn, as it is proclaimed towards the beginning of the novella, and is wise enough to keep him strictly out of the reach of his own tale. He doesn't get submerged in his own narrative, but still the episodes he has witnessed have had a tremendous effect on him. He witnesses acts of absolute brutality, and understands the impact of colonialism. It is interesting to note how he sees Kurtz as admirable and deplorable at the same time. However, he is not taken in by Kurtz's aura as the others are and it is reflected in how he lies to Kurtz's fiancée towards the end where he tells her that Kurtz had her name on his lips on his deathbed whereas the reality was starkly different. It is perhaps a desire on Marlow's part to refuse to accept the validity of Kurtz's narrative which is symbolically an act of defiance against a perverted symbol of authority.