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RESEARCH ARTICLE

DARKNESS IN CONRAD'S *HEART OF DARKNESS*

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**Abstract**

The text deals with darkness as a reference from which the novel can be interpreted both metaphorically and conceptually. With a keen observation and an eye to various images the entire novel is submerged and at times veiled in the perpetual metaphor covering Continents. Darkness encompasses the characters, their deeds, the geographical location and even the state of mind. In fact it has seeped into their very beings and an escape would be difficult. Towards the end of the journey there is a realization that there is a little bit of darkness in all of us and what matters most is the journey away from it and into light.

**Keywords:** Darkness, Symbols, Africa, Imperialism etc

In Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*, ambiguous as the title may sound; it assists the author in his aim of exploring the ruminations of evil through his narrative and connects the larger complexities of the narration to this title. Several critics like Cedric Watts have pointed out the number of paradoxes and ambiguities that this text encompasses and yet to analyse the title of this novel, several levels of investigation emerges out from the darkness that he implied in the title. The most obvious and well known implication of the title is the physical darkness of the Congo Basin and the journey into the centre of this Dark Continent where everything is hidden, unknown and so dark that it is difficult to imagine human life in this particular geographical location.

Darkness as a motif also runs through the entire narrative conceptually and is an important reference from which the novel can be studied. The '*heart of darkness*' refers not only to the physically dark location inside Africa, but also to a state of mind and to the grim consequences of imperialism. The text considers the deep jungle of Africa as the heart of darkness both for its untamed and hostile wilderness and for its supposed 'savages' -the black native Africans - who reside there, practicing certain non- European customs such as cannibalism (unknown to Marlow and to euro-centric view of life, therefore considered dark

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and evil- a notion inherently associated with darkness). However it is difficult to infer that this is exactly what Conrad meant, given that absolutely everything in the book is cloaked in darkness and veiled in duality.

This novel was one of the first ones to be written with a critique of imperialism and in that context, Africa is not the only dark country, England and Brussels because of their exploits on other nations and people, are all described as gloomy and somehow dark and corrupt, even if the sun is shining brightly on them. Darkness thus seems to operate metaphorically and existentially rather than specifically.

In critiquing the imperialistic and civilizing mission, darkness in the novel is also described as the inability of Man to see clearly. The white man in his self undertaken mission to set forth and civilize human beings refuses to acknowledge the existence of any other culture or any other way of living. The failure to see other human beings as anything else except wild and evil also means the failure to understand life outside the Euro-centric notion and the refusal to establish any sort of communion with such beings, therefore twice removing the Europeans from ever understanding the psyche of the people that they set out to civilise. Thus, the title also signifies the hearts of Europeans made up of the darkness of greed, power, authority and domination. The politics of colonization doesn't end with their desire to civilize but it goes on to become a symbol of their dark nature and their greed for material riches of Africa and their dark and evil aspiration of European domination over the entire human race. This perspective thus, works well to dispel the binaries of the imagery of light and that of darkness— despite being enlightened, the European could have as dark a heart as the physical darkness of Africa. The darkness in the title also has autobiographical connotations for Conrad. Even as a young boy, he had great desire to make a journey to the Congo Basin and it is often said that the depressing narrative in the *Heart of Darkness* is an inspired account of the horrible experiences that Conrad had had when he was living in those areas.

Both in the case of Kurtz's depiction in the novel and the prolonged illness that troubled Conrad on his return it is implied as if Africa's darkness is responsible for mental disintegration as well as for physical illness. This perpetual metaphor of darkness of the African jungle is not only because of no sunlight, thick foliage and impenetrable fog but because of the wilderness that it ensues which hinders men's senses and renders them metaphorically blind to their situations and surroundings. Africa, England and Brussels are all very dark and gloomy. Darkness pervades the entire theme of the novel, literally and metaphorically. The all pervading darkness as an important concept not only prevents the growth of the characters but also thwarts a healthy communication.

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The heart of darkness also suggests a confused and unenlightened state of mind, a state of profound madness where one cannot do good but one can only choose the lesser of a series of evils because there are no better alternatives. Darkness becomes a symbol of fear, hatred and symbol of the power of evil. Initially Marlow believes that darkness is there in the outside world or with the natives but finally realizes that it is within all of us including himself. The title is important because a deeper meaning runs throughout the story which has interpretations beyond the literal. The adventurous journey in and out of the African continent symbolises sin and redemption. It is like toying in the dark, getting used to the darkness all around and then desperately looking for some light. So it could be called a journey from darkness to light. The use of 'darkness' takes on different meanings and changes with the different context. At times it is referred to the unexplored places, the adventurous or even the mysterious. It even referred to the uncivilized or the untamed. Darkness has seeped into their very beings and any escape from it is very difficult.

The physical darkness of the forest is not only implied through the title but the biblical undertone, that unless there is light, man's growth and the process of civilizing him is not complete, runs throughout the novel and even as Conrad wishes to critique imperialism, this hierarchical notion is left unchallenged. The European man would believe that it is impossible for civilization and culture to penetrate a place where light itself cannot penetrate following from the stereotypes of the uncivilized tribes in Africa, a land encompassed by darkness. The disappearance of Kurtz in the darkness is an affirmation of mystery and darkness which the western mindset had believed and nurtured. Europeans still refer to Africa as a 'dark continent' and very little has been explored in hundreds of years. There is darkness in the theme also when Marlow encounters scenes of cruelty and torture in the name of civilization and imperialism. The Africans are treated like slaves in the name of trade and their existence reduced to mere objects. As the protagonist travels further in the story he starts understanding himself more and more. The realisation dawns that the 'darkness' has more to it than the Europeans who have come to civilize them. And the theme of darkness lurks beneath the surface of these 'civilized' persons. Towards the end of the journey Marlow learns that everyone has a little bit of darkness within them, and the journey is all about moving away from it and into the light.

The symbol of white sepulchre also has darkness confined within itself literally and metaphorically. The sepulchre is beautiful on the outside but it has trapped cruelty and evil inside. The river also plays an important role in connecting the darkness of the 'dark continent' to the open waters on the other end of the river. It is seen as connecting the good colonies with the dark interiors. The river also acts as a divider, separating Marlow from the natives and the evil designs of Kurtz.

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The description of fog in the novel is also a sort of corollary to the darkness and the unknown. Fog not only obscures but distorts; it gives one just enough information to begin making decisions but in no way to judge the accuracy of that information, which often ends up being wrong. Marlow's steamer is caught in the fog meaning that he has no idea where he is going and no idea whether peril or open water lies ahead and thus one gets further lost in the 'heart of darkness'. Marlow encounters endless fog not only obstructing the vision but also entrapping men and steamer alike. Fog generally symbolises confusion and Marlow and the crewmen are unable to make out anything and fall a prey to it. The novel is dark and the thick fog adds a cover of darkness to it.

If we analyse the title from the psychological standpoint then it is interesting to note that the heart of darkness could also be the Id, Ego and the Superego of the human mind which confronts the deep dark urges of Man. Deep into the narrative, Marlow is confronted with the negative side of the white man and his degradation. He refuses to connect the physical image of Kurtz with the man that he had revered. The dark side of man and the negativity that emerges from the realisation of the fact that dark, repressed emotions exist in white men too and thus they share something in common with the dark African tribes becomes extremely unsettling for Marlow and he makes a conscious effort to continuously deny the existence of dark human nature. At a symbolic level, not only is the heart of the Earth – Africa being penetrated by journey and exploration but also in the classical sense this human exploration and journey should penetrate darkness within us to 'know thyself'.

Deception through appearances and the difference between the real and apparent are also very crucial to the narrative style of this novel. For example, H. Miller refers to it as a 'process of unveiling' in which there is a relay of narrators and one narrator becomes the character in another's narration but no one voice or perspective is privileged as a guide to absolve the darkness of the plot. Multiple narrative voices are used in such a way that even the conclusion offers no resolve or any alternative and implies that the darkness cannot be removed, and finding answers is impossible.

Tudorov writes, '..... Knowledge is impossible; the Heart of *Darkness* in itself is obscure: this is the burden of the text as a whole'. Thus the way in which Marlow gives his perspective then goes on to find its limitations, the way in which Kurtz's story ends with the ambiguous phrase, 'the horror, the horror' and the way in which it is difficult to identify where Marlow's voice ends and Conrad's begins all symbolise a heart of darkness that does not get cleared.

Even towards the end of the narrative, the darkness in terms of the ambiguities and inconclusive narrator structure-remains and somewhere Conrad's intentions in not giving

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Marlow the insight or the perspective to seek or accept an alternative can be doubted. Conrad himself forms a cover of darkness which he does not clear till the end.

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