

Nothingness and Absurdity: Locating Existentialist Themes in *Heart of Darkness*

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Abstract:

Existentialism constitutes a philosophical paradigm positing the absence of preordained meaning in our world, thereby necessitating the human individual to function as an autonomous and accountable agent for their actions. The intrinsic connection between literature and existentialism is perennial, stemming from their mutual preoccupation with the complexities inherent in the human condition. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* cross-examines the human condition and the consequences of transgression. Several scholars have attempted to define the nature and extent of his obligation to some existentialists. The present paper connects the novel's thematic content with Existentialism—a pervasive but unmistakable undercurrent discernible in various forms throughout the work. The existential tenets concerning the predicament of knowledge, denoting the disjunction between abstract reasoning and tangible existence; the quandary of reality, encompassing the realms of being and becoming; the existential predicament of human existence in the world; and the issue of transcendence bridging the gap between humanity and the divine are all elucidated through the central protagonist in the novel. The objective of this paper is to elucidate that *Heart of Darkness* constitutes a noteworthy exemplar of existentialist literature. The contention advanced is that *Heart of Darkness* endeavours to convey the notion that what humanity perceives as reality perpetually constitutes illusion. Specifically, the work posits that the human being is inherently endowed with freedom of choice, wherein the sole valuation lies in the enactment of freedom itself, thereby, and engendering values. This delineates the quintessential preoccupation of Existentialism, aligning with the age-old admonition to fathom one's own essence.

Keywords: Existentialism, Absurdity, Darkness, Lie, Morality, Nothingness, Dread

Introduction and Aim:

Existentialism constitutes a philosophical paradigm positing the absence of preordained meaning in our world, thereby necessitating the human individual to function as an autonomous and accountable agent for their actions. The intrinsic connection between literature and existentialism is perennial, stemming from their mutual preoccupation with the complexities inherent in the human condition. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* cross-examines the human condition and the consequences of transgression. It has garnered a lot of scholarly scrutiny accorded to any other singular work authored by Joseph Conrad. Since its initial publication in 1898, the novella has been interpreted diversely: as a factual account of Conrad's experiences in the Congo; a straightforward narrative illustrating the dichotomy between Christian civilization and African barbarism; a spiritual horror tale wherein degeneration unfolds within a moral framework; an exploration of the primitive impulse, whose indulgence inexorably leads to the annihilation of the civilized self; a sombre narrative characterized by the absence of a final meaning; and finally, as a manifestation of Conrad's censure of highly capitalized and ostensibly benevolent imperialism. Several scholars have attempted to define the nature and extent of his obligation to some existentialists. Conrad's belief that 'all values were "based primarily on selfdenial"' resembles the philosophy of Schopenhauer (277). Since Schopenhauer exercised quite a lot of influence upon Nietzsche this results in links between Conrad and both philosophers. While this array of explanations furnishes readers with a profusion of intricately woven commentaries on *Heart of Darkness*, a comprehensive analysis has hitherto eluded scholars, one that seamlessly connects the novel's thematic content with Existentialism—a pervasive but unmistakable undercurrent discernible in various forms throughout the work. Existential philosophy places significant emphasis on the myriad journeys of inversion. *Heart of Darkness* can fittingly be characterized as a narrative of inversion. Assuming the role of an emissary, Marlow aspires to attain glory but ultimately confronts the realization that Kurtz's and his innermost selves are devoid of substance. The existential tenets concerning the predicament of knowledge, denoting the disjunction between abstract reasoning and tangible existence; the quandary of reality, encompassing the realms of being and becoming; the existential predicament of human existence in the world; the challenge of interpersonal communication between individuals; and the issue of transcendence bridging the gap between humanity and the divine are all elucidated through the central protagonist in the novel.

The objective of this paper is to elucidate that *Heart of Darkness* constitutes a noteworthy exemplar of existentialist literature by expounding upon what can aptly be denominated as the recurring motifs intrinsic to Existentialism, such as absurdity, nothingness, anxiety, freedom of choice, bad faith, and the distinctive and elusive intensity of dread apparent in various manifestations within the corpus of Existentialist philosophical discourse. It does not mean that Joseph Conrad himself adhered to an existentialist doctrinal framework or that his personal philosophical tenets encompassed pivotal elements of existentialist philosophy. Rather, the

contention advanced is that *Heart of Darkness* endeavours to convey the notion that what humanity perceives as reality perpetually constitutes illusion. Specifically, the work posits that the human being is inherently endowed with freedom of choice, wherein the sole valuation lies in the enactment of freedom itself, thereby, and engendering values. This delineates the quintessential preoccupation of Existentialism, aligning with the age-old admonition to fathom one's own essence.

Background:

Heart of Darkness unfolds a harrowing narrative set amidst the wilderness of the Congo, delving into the intrinsic 'darkness' embedded within humanity—an aspect typically concealed by individuals. Charlie Marlow, the intrepid voyager and renowned first-person narrator in Conrad's oeuvre, recounts his own "weary pilgrimage amongst hints for nightmares" (21). He describes himself as the Captain of a river steamboat at the Continental Concern and narrates the odyssey aboard in "a battered, twisted, ruined, tin-pot steamboat" (Conrad 41) ultimately reaching the desolate station of Mistah Kurtz in the obscure hinterlands of Africa, poetically denominated as "the heart of a conquering darkness" (Conrad 105). During his sojourn at the station, Marlow bears witness to the waning moments of the moribund Kurtz, marked by the haunting utterance, "The horror! The horror!" The voyage concludes with Marlow's return to Brussels, profoundly impacted by the ordeal. Back in Brussels, bearing a packet of letters and the portrait of Kurtz's beloved entrusted to him, Marlow confronts the Intended—Kurtz's grieving fiancée. Overwhelmed by an irresistible sense of compassion, he fabricates a falsehood, professing in his final words, "The last word he pronounced was—your name" (Conrad 110). Thus concludes the narrative.

Analysis:

The focal point of the narrative is commonly construed as Kurtz's dying exclamation, "The horror! The horror!" The interpretation of these words necessitates an exploration of their significance. It appears that this utterance constitutes a reaction to an intensely personal recollection of a dreadful experience, an emanation or discharge emitted by the abstract entity referred to as "darkness," mirroring its inherent nature. The words may also symbolize the inexorable constraints intrinsic to the human condition, encompassing elements such as fear, suffering, conflict, corruption, and mortality. Alternatively, as Marlow posits, it could be associated with a "stare that...was wide enough to embrace the whole universe, piercing enough to penetrate all the hearts that beat in the darkness" (Conrad 101). "The horror! The horror" also represents a stark condemnation of "darkness," as horror and darkness become inextricably intertwined. Despite the subjective and paradoxical nature of Kurtz's cry, it extends beyond the torment and tumultuous anguish of his own soul, resonating with Marlow's profound self-discovery and his broader insights into the collective human condition (Conrad 105). This awakening prompts Marlow to confront his perceptual experience of the "conquering" and "impenetrable darkness" in the Congo, epitomized in the grotesque and sordid figure of Kurtz. This formidable and overwhelming revelation undermines Marlow's adherence to a moral interpretation of the universe, compelling him to acknowledge darkness within himself, in others,

and throughout his surroundings. He says:

I had a vision of Kurtz [the embodiment of darkness] ... opening his mouth voraciously, as if to devour all the earth with all its mankind. He lived then before me; he lived as much as he had ever lived—a shadow insatiable of splendid appearances, of frightful realities; a shadow darker than the shadow of the night (Conrad 105).

Marlow learns that the core of man is not his “ethical self” but darkness and henceforth proclaims: “all the hearts beat in darkness.” As all his uncertain feelings about Kurtz fade away, he remains “loyal to Kurtz to the last, and even beyond, when a long time after I [Marlow] heard once more, not his own voice, but the echo his magnificent eloquence thrown to me from [my own] soul as translucently pure as a cliff of crystal” (Conrad 102).

The term “darkness” primarily connotes Kurtz’s descent into degradation, signifying a critical juncture in Western civilization which investigates the non-verbal, primitive, and frequently illogical undercurrents inherent in human behaviour and experience. Moreover, it is this very “darkness” that propels Marlow into the nightmarish realm of Nothingness. He notices a similar darkness in the working of the colonisers as well. He finds a gunboat shelling the shore:

Once, I remember, we came upon a man-of-war anchored off the coast. There wasn't even a shed there, and she was shelling the bush. It appears the French had one of their wars going on thereabouts... 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 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.... (Conrad 20)

The pursuit of meaning is overshadowed by a conspicuous and heightened sense of meaninglessness, wherein the horror resides in the gratuitous nature of existence in the world. And, as he proceeds he notices the grove of death:

It was a wanton smash-up. At last I got under the trees. My purpose was to stroll into the shade for a moment; but no sooner within than it seemed to me I had stepped into the gloomy circle of some Inferno. The rapids were near, and an uninterrupted, uniform, headlong rushing noise filled the mournful stillness of the grove where not a breath stirred, not a leaf moved, Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the tree leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair. They were dying slowly—it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now, nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation.... (Conrad 24)

And he sees a ferocious sight of the human heads drying on the stakes under Kurtz’s windows, he says:

I had been struck at the distance by certain attempts at ornamentation, rather remarkable in the ruinous aspect of the place. Now I had suddenly a nearer view, and

its first result was to make me throw my head back as if before a blow.... I saw my not ornamental but These round knobs were mistake. symbolic.... Only one, the first I had made out, was facing my way.... and there it was, black, dried, sunken, with closed eyelids a head that seemed to sleep at the top of that pole, and, with the shrunken dry lips showing a narrow white line of the teeth, was smiling, too, smiling continuously at some endless and jocose dream... (Conrad 82-83)

Darkness is revealed with thoughtful intricacy, employing the art of intense and essential documentation to evoke an overwhelming sense of obscurity and a sinister atmosphere. Absurdity, complete despair, hopelessness, moral degradation, lust, greed, starvation, and their ensuing repercussions are depicted as manifestations of darkness—the perennial force that sardonically observes all illusions within human existence, whether they pertain to faith, morality, or absolute values such as beauty and truth. This darkness can also be construed as the existential confrontation wherein humanity forfeits all hope and dignity, consequently succumbing to a sense of absurdity.

Darkness also produces absurdity. According to Jean-Paul Sartre, absurdity constitutes “an integral part of a rational plan” (16). As long as an individual glides across the superficial veneer of life, treating his plans and endeavours with earnestness, subscribing to the belief that life possesses a predetermined purpose or meaning, and harbouring the conviction that he is burdened with a mission or a genuinely significant task uniquely suited to his capabilities, the sense of absurdity remains elusive. Mundane objects of daily existence do not assume a sense of pointlessness or insignificance in his perception. Instead, he immerses himself in the trivial, the social, or what Martin Heidegger characterizes as “inauthentic existence” (329). However, upon introspective contemplation of his own temporariness, as Marlow does, this equilibrium undergoes a radical transformation. He laments in anguish upon recognizing himself as “gratuitous and derelict in a possibly impossible world, shelterless orphan deprived of the mother comfort of reason and necessity” (154). In such circumstances, an individual is inevitably beset by the profound sensation of absurdity or the perceived purposelessness of life.

Every facet of the darkness pervading the Congo contributes to Marlow’s deep sense of the absurd. Within his purview, elements of the world emerge denuded, disentangled from the once-ascribed meanings. Assuming the contemplative stance “in the pose of a meditating Buddha,” Marlow articulates an existentialist perspective, particularly resonant with Sartrean viewpoints, on life and the human condition: “Destiny. My Destiny! Droll thing life is, that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose. The most you can hope from it is some knowledge of yourself—that comes too late—a crop of unextinguishable regrets” (Conrad 100). This thematic locus encapsulates the novel’s core philosophy, evoking a paradigm increasingly aligned with existentialist tenets. For Marlow, existence is contingent, costless, and unjustifiable. Its futility stems from the absence of external justification, lacking an overarching purpose that imparts meaning or direction.

In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre describes the absurdity of existence as:

The possible is a structure [“mysterious arrangement of merci- less logic”] of the for-

itself; that is, it belongs to the other region of being. Being-in-itself is never possible or impossible. It is. This is what consciousness expresses in anthropomorphic terms by saying that being is superfluous (de trop)... Uncreated, without any connection with another being, being- in-itself is de trop for eternity (Ixvi).

In embracing futility as the paramount and normative prospect of existence, Marlow perceives himself as suspended over an abyss. He finds himself confronted with what Heidegger delineates as Nichts or 'nothingness': "[There was] an impalpable.... nothingness around" (Conrad 100). In this self-realization, Marlow undergoes what Heidegger identifies as a genuine acceptance of 'nothingness,' representing the inaugural stride toward an authentic mode of life. Heidegger employs the term 'nothingness' in two distinct senses. In the primary sense, 'nothingness' signifies a form of "gap" between an individual's consciousness and the realm of objects to which he is cognizant. The secondary sense of 'nothingness' alludes to a nearly existential state of absurdity, involving the "vanishing and evaporating of objects in the world" (Heidegger 229-230). Conversely, Sartre readily interlinks these notions, as he articulates:

Nothingness is complete emptiness, absence of determinations and of content.

The Being by which Nothingness arrives in the world must nihilate Nothingness in its Being, and even so it still runs the risk of establishing Nothingness as a transcendent in the every heart of immanence unless it nihilated Nothingness in its being in connection with its own being (21-23).

The self behind man and the world is nothingness or "original emptiness." It is the emptiness within man which he aims to fill by his own actions, his thoughts, his ideals, his perceptions and conventions. It is the possession of this emptiness in himself which makes it possible for a "Being-for-itself" both to perceive the world and also to act in it. If nothingness is not nihilated, man suffers from the sense of alienation. In the realization of nothingness, Marlow recognizes that he is alone, alienated, distinct from every other person and object in the world, no longer able to turn for support to anything in general:

I found myself back in the sepulchral city resenting the sight of people hurrying through the streets to filch a little money from each other, to devour their infamous cookery, to gulp their unwholesome beer, to dream their insignificant and silly dreams. They trespassed upon my thoughts. They were intruders whose knowledge of life was to me an irritating pretence, because I felt so sure they could not possibly know the things I knew. Their bearing, which was simply the bearing of common place individuals going about their business in the assurance of perfect safety, was offensive to me like the outrageous flaunting of folly in the face of a danger it is unable to comprehend. I had no particular desire to enlighten them, but I had some difficulty in restraining myself from laughing in their faces, so full of stupid importance (Conrad 102).

Marlow finds himself in a state of discord with the universe and those around him, who exist in a fallen or inauthentic condition. They remain engrossed in the immediate facets of day-to-day life, in the prevailing societal standards, beliefs, and prejudices; essentially, in an existence

characterized by inauthenticity. These individuals persist fervently in the pursuit of forged objectives, sustained by the misguided certainty of absolute safety. Marlow perceives this safety as a mere illusion, a superficial veneer, leading him to struggle in withholding laughter “in their faces.” For Marlow, every aspect of existence warrants collapse. He is thrust into a genuine state of alienation—an authenticity derived from the awareness that “nothingness lies coiled in the heart of being like a worm.” While isolation or loneliness may primarily manifest as a subjective sentiment, amenable to transcendence through psychoanalysis or other transformative methodologies focused on individual change, the alienation experienced by Marlow eludes transcendence without ascribing meaning or purpose to existence.

At this juncture, on the verge of alienation, Marlow grapples with anxiety (angst). Angst is not a specific affliction; rather, it emanates from his unsupported, unprotected, and alienated state in the world, a condition inherently disconcerting as it elicits a pervasive sense of dread. “Dread is the feeling that the ground beneath one’s feet has given away, that all security and certainty have vanished, and that not even God can be trusted any longer” (Roubiczek 60). Marlow has already encountered such a sentiment, expressing, “I wiped my forehead, my legs shook under me” during a moment of dread (Conrad 96). According to Sartre, in the state of dread, an individual is free to think and act in any manner of their choosing. This choice (en-soi) is ultimate, absolute, unconditioned, and free, encapsulating boundless freedom. However, the apprehension of this boundless freedom becomes overwhelming, leading individuals to frequently adopt the guise of “bad faith” to evade dread. Bad faith involves “seeing what one is and denying it; asserting that one is what one is not.” It constitutes self-deception, wherein the liar, by virtue of the lie, is paradoxically “in complete possession of the truth” that they are concealing.

Sartre writes:

In bad faith there is no cynical lie nor knowing preparation for deceitful concepts. But the first act of bad faith is to flee what it cannot flee, to flee what it is. The very project of flight reveals to bad faith an inner disintegration in the heart of being, and it is this disintegration which bad faith wishes to be. In truth, the two immediate attitudes which we can take in the face of our being are conditioned by the very nature of this being and its immediate relation with the in-itself... (70).

Bad faith is a certain art of concealing “an immediate, permanent threat to every project of the human being;” it is the equivalent of inauthenticity. Marlow is free to make an existential choice between “saving illusion” and the truth he knows. He chooses saving “illusion”:

I said with something like despair in my heart, but bowing my head before the faith that was in her [the Intended], before that great and saving illusion that shone with an earthly glow in the darkness, in the triumphant darkness from which I could not have defended her—from which I could not even defend myself.

I pulled myself together and spoke slowly,

The last word he pronounced was your name [a lie] (Conrad 108-110).

The deception Marlow perpetrates does not arise from any semblance of pity or compassion toward the Intended. Rather, it signifies Marlow’s acquiescence to an inauthentic existence, most

finely epitomized by the Intended. It does not adhere to a concept of “knowing preparation for deceit”; its essence lies in Marlow’s deliberate concealment of a reality with which he is acutely familiar, intending to veil the dread typically induced by meaninglessness or emptiness. Marlow affirms the truth within himself (“I pulled myself together and spoke slowly”) while concurrently disavowing it in his articulated words (“The last word... was your name”). He possesses a “complete comprehension” of both the lie and the truth he is manipulating. In Sartrean terms, Marlow is concealing an unpleasing truth or presenting a pleasing untruth (70). The lie amalgamates authenticity with its negation. Consequently, it is precisely within the lie that Marlow propels himself into “bad faith.” Through this state of bad faith, he fabricates the world’s existence for himself: “tottered about the streets—there were various affairs to settle” (Conrad 102). Nothingness is annulled, positing that man lacks a predetermined nature; instead, what he possesses is history. For man, existence precedes essence.

In the case of Kurtz, his essence is a reflection of his conscious choices. Formerly an idealist, he embodied generosity and held promises of nobility as a member of “the new gang of virtue.”

However, upon his sojourn in the Congo, he disengages from the moral realm, perceiving all virtues as mere facades. Roubiczek explicates this perspective, positing that “Morality is not what one claims it to be, the outcome of an absolute moral law, the conscious embodiment of real values, but an excuse, serving the particular purpose of hiding motives which ought to be recognized for what they are—ulterior motives. For their hidden purpose is the defeat of the strong by the weak” (27). A weak individual complies easily with moral values, while a robust one, possessing vigorous instincts, refutes them. The breakdown of morality is seen as a means to subjugate the healthy individual, and the dismissal of morality is posited as a prerequisite for the emergence of noble souls. Kurtz not only emancipates himself from earthly constraints but also dismantles the very foundations of morality. He manipulates lies, violence, and ruthless egotism with such mastery that he is categorically characterized as an evil and demonic entity. Unperturbed by remorse, Kurtz is depicted as “satiated with primitive emotions, avid of lying fame, of sham distinction, of all the appearances of success and power” (Conrad 98). This portrayal aligns with the Existentialist assertion that “Man must strive to become a beast of prey, the magnificent blond beast greedily roaming after booty and victory... The animal must emerge again, and go back to the jungle... It is the noble races which, whatever they went, have left in their tracks the concept of Barbarian” (Roubiczek 24). The relativistic maxim “Nothing is true; therefore, everything is permitted” encapsulates Kurtz’s worldview, as he convinces himself of anything without adherence to a fixed standard (Conrad 104). In Kurtz’s paradigm, good and evil are subjective and contingent upon the doer, transcending conventional moral dichotomies. This philosophical stance leads Marlow to affirm that Kurtz is a “remarkable man” and a “universal genius.”

Conclusion:

Heart of Darkness delves into the veracity of latent human impulses that only manifest after the epiphany of salvation. These urges, suppressed by societal norms, find expression through the endeavours of Marlow and Kurtz, which transcend the accepted boundaries imposed by society. Throughout the journey, Marlow affirms fundamental tenets of existentialism,

recognizing the inherent isolation of man in an alien universe. While man is an integral component of the universe, he remains fundamentally alone. The pursuit of security is foundational to the human concept, obliging individuals to comprehend the human condition through conscious decisions, the selection of values, and commitment. Conrad elucidates how essence is unveiled through isolation and individual experience, asserting that human essence is not dictated by societal impositions but emerges from individual self-discovery after enduring isolation. Furthermore, *Heart of Darkness* overtly manifests existentialist aspirations to jolt readers out of complacency and thoughtlessness, urging them to transcend blindness and facile make-believe to confront genuine life and its accompanying dread. This deliberate intent to awaken readers should not be misconstrued as a cause for despair or pessimism; rather, it serves to unveil the latent positivity in man.

Conrad strategically employs exotic settings such as the Congo River and the inner station to isolate characters and underscore existentialist themes. These dark locales symbolize the pervasive darkness enveloping each individual through their personal life experiences. Additionally, the recurring motif of fog serves as an emblem of doubt shrouding the human soul during its journey to self-awareness. Conrad meticulously explores the evolution of man after embracing a nihilistic existence, emphasizing the depravity of its consequences. *Heart of Darkness* implores individuals to recognize their inner strength, which acts as a guiding force to control savage instincts in every circumstance. Marlow's struggle against his primal instincts to resist succumbing to the call of the wilderness, exemplifies this internal struggle and serves as a testament to the human capacity for self-control.

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