

IBDP Extended Essay

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English B HL

Category 3: Literature

Symbolism in the Expression of Evil and Imperialism

How does Joseph Conrad use symbolism in order to convey messages of evil and imperialism in the Heart of Darkness?

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I. Introduction

We live in societies that we deem civilized, safe and just, and yet it does not matter how perfect our civilizations have been structured there will always be a factor that interlopes and distorts our societies. This factor is the lascivious and violent human mind, because no matter how peaceful an environment is, humans will always have strong tendencies to commit atrocities and vicious acts of hate. Humans are savage beings; we have always been like this and we shall always be this way.

This flaw in the human mind has been the topic of most Joseph Conrad novels, he was an expert on the instinctual barbarity that humans possess, through his novels he has tried to decode the enigmatic engine room that still bamboozles scientists with its vast limits and capabilities. Heart of Darkness is the strongest weapon in his arsenal as this novel expertly examines the extent of human cruelty through themes such as colonialism, racism, and slavery, he depicts these as a tarnishing phenomenon that has resulted in petrifying consequences that has scarred the world, a wound that remains today, a wound that has not yet healed. Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness is not simply a critique of colonialism in the Congo Free State¹ (Pakenham 1992. 253–5); it is an examination of the human tendency toward self-endangering corruption.

These themes are represented by metaphors that are ever present throughout the entire novel .In this essay the literary devices that Conrad employs in order to represent these themes of

¹ Vassal State of Congo established by King Leopold the II in 1885 lasting until 1905.

imperialism, darkness, and evil such as metaphors and symbolism shall be discovered, as to understand how Conrad conveys his message about the human tendency toward corruptibility and an innate inclination towards violence, one must understand the symbols that Conrad uses, as his message within the book goes far deeper than the violence as Conrad examines an ongoing fight inside each man for sanity. He perfectly captures the state of desperation of European monarchies and their sadistic operational methods in colonies, despite being relatively short, a 38,000-word adventure novella, it has established itself as a philosophical and psychological thriller, a masterpiece.

Joseph Conrad

Joseph Conrad (born Jozef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski) born in Berdychiv, Ukraine on the 3rd of December 1857 was a Polish-British author. Generally regarded as one of the greatest authors of all time. He is commonly admired for the richness of his prose and his masterful ability of storytelling. He is seen as a master of English literature, a language that he could not speak until his twenties. His stories are mostly inspired by his own experiences in the French and British merchant navies, and reflect a European dominated world with themes of imperialism, racism, and the human psyche.

II. The Horror

First, we must determine the evil figure in order to explore the symbolism used to express it. *Heart of Darkness* is a unique book in the sense that there is not a true protagonist, there is not a character who remains loyal to their cause and combats against evil tirelessly for the greater good. Kurtz is a rampant racist and a ravenous murderer, the Company are tyrants and treat their subjects (slaves) with barbarous cruelty and Marlowe is simply a tool of the Company. Each main figure is an antagonist. The motives behind the Company's ruthlessness is quite straightforward, it is nothing but greed, and Marlow does not have any ill intentions. However, the path that Kurtz chose, a path of horror and destruction, is unpredictable and represents the symbolic side of evil presented to us in the book. Once a noble and respectable man with the brightest of minds and the purest of souls became a bloodthirsty lunatic. As Marlow puts it: "I saw the inconceivable mystery of a soul that knew no restraint, no faith, and no fear, yet struggling blindly with itself." (Conrad 110) How does a man who is unbreakable, incorruptible, unyielding, become so unhinged? A conundrum this multifaceted and complex is most deserving of an in-depth analysis. Conrad most likely used Marlowe's journey to decrypt this question and one of the objectives of this part is to understand how he does this and decipher what he implies with Kurtz's mental condition.

Heart of Darkness begins atop the *Nellie*; Marlowe begins to tell a story of an assignment he did for a firm that is referred as The Company. Marlowe's assignment was to find the top Ivory trader of The Company, Kurtz, who has gone rogue and cut communications. Kurtz is referred to as an extremely distinguished man who has conquered every challenge he came across in his

lifetime. When Marlowe first sets eyes on Kurtz he sees a man who is ill, in more than one way. The cabin he surrounds is decorated with decapitated heads held up by stakes (Conrad 95). As Marlowe and the crew head towards the coast after taking Kurtz away from his tribe. As they progress through the river Kurtz blurts out his last words and dies, shriveled to a shell. “The horror! The horror!” (Conrad 115). We see a man, who is deemed as a revolutionary mind and a unique person, die non compos mentis, deranged, and demented beyond understanding. The great Sigmund Freud himself would be flummoxed if he tried to psychoanalyze Kurtz. Conrad has a very deep and yet simple message he wants to convey with Kurtz. No matter how strong willed and obstinate a person is, every man and woman are capable of being swayed to the path that Kurtz took, a violent and atrocious one.

The symbol Conrad uses for, not only Kurtz’s insanity but, the potential self-corruption for any human, is Marlow’s journey. When he first arrives at the mouth of the river, at the Company’s station, we see that this place has already been devoured by darkness, workers being paraded around the site in iron collars, underfed and beaten. “I could see every rib, the joints of their limbs were like knots in a rope” (Conrad 23) says Marlow. This is the first of the many instances where we witness the horror. Men, under the jurisdiction of King Leopold II (who will further be discovered in the next chapter) are able to murder and mutilate, this is social Darwinism at its finest. The application of Darwinism to society, the delusion that Europeans were under, applying intraspecific laws, specifically the “Survival of the Fittest” law, between races and trying to morally justify the unhinged violence that the Congolese people underwent. However,

the unpredictability of the human mind and the impact of societal institutions on maintaining order and the sanity of the general public is emphasized and demonstrated further up the river.

Marlowe's journey is a journey through the human conscience, it is dark, unpredictable and uncharted; and like the human conscience it is tantalizing, dangerous and repulsive, all at the same time. This idiosyncratic paradox, the erratic human mind, is a characteristic that separates us from every other species of animal. This peculiar case is perfectly portrayed in *Heart of Darkness*, the strange attraction that the jungle has, an attraction that took Kurtz away. In the movie *Apocalypse Now* (1979)², a Vietnam war movie based on the *Heart of Darkness*, the protagonist Captain Willard (counterpart of Marlow) says this in the opening monologue of the movie: "When I was here, I wanted to be there; when I was there, all I could think of was getting back into the jungle." The jungle is something that is in the background of all our minds, it is where we stray from our path, where we forget our morals. In the jungle, lies our dark and twisted tendencies.

When Marlow first sets eyes on Kurtz, we see that he is ill, weakened and malnourished. "I could see the cage of his ribs all astir, the bones of his arm waving." (Conrad 89). The jungle had wrecked Kurtz, his life and career had fallen apart yet, we later see that Kurtz is persistent not to leave. He has become one with the jungle, he has become one with his darker alter ego, he has become insane. The surroundings of his cabin was decorated with the decapitated heads of the

² 1979 Academy and Cannes award winning Vietnam war movie, often credited as the greatest war movie of all time. The movie is directly based on the "Heart of Darkness" by Joseph Conrad, directed by Francis Ford Coppola.

men he considered rebels (Conrad 96). He had annexed the area near the inner station, the tribe worshiped him as if he was a deity, some sort of a God.

Towards midnight Marlow is startled, he sets out for a stroll. An agent and several natives are guarding over the ivory that Kurtz had accumulated, Kurtz's followers observing the site from afar. Within the jungle a native ritual is taking place, the repetitious beating of a drum and men chanting has a euphoric effect on Marlow's senses, "narcotic" (Conrad 106) is the way that he puts it. As Marlow reels away from the trance state he is in, he goes to check Kurtz, who is missing.

Kurtz who is moribund, exhausted and depleted by his illness, in a state where he can barely speak let alone move, crawls back to the jungle. Here Conrad shows how strong these tendencies of violence are. Kurtz just pulled away from the darkness, once more wanting to return to his throne built on delusion. Kurtz's incessant want of wrath and violence, despite his health, is Conrad showing how people, once they get used to it, get addicted to violence.

This addiction of violence, is far more common than one might think it is. When looking back at Cpt. Willard's quote, ("when I was there, all I could think of was getting back into the jungle"), there is another example to highlight, and this is the high percentage of soldiers who want to return to the battlefield. For some it is to be patriotic, however for some part it is the adrenaline. Legal justification for violence is a common theme in both warfare and Kurtz's case in Heart of Darkness. Again with embracing our dark side, Conrad also draws parallels to Kurtz's nightmarish death and post stress trauma disorder (PTSD). George Santayana says "Only

the dead have seen the end of war.”, when one sees their own capabilities and the dark side of humans, people begin to question their sanity and have a battle within themselves. Those who experience the heart of darkness, take a path of perpetual torment, the main reason of the extremely high suicide rates in the military³. The “jungle” wherever it may be, is an environment where one man can unleash the darkness pent up inside of one, these “jungles” are places of darkness, these “jungles” are seductive places, tempting to the human spirit and human nature. Those who enter these “jungles”, experience the dark side of themselves, the dark side of mankind and the absence of anything humane. They become scarred, tainted for eternity. Their battle is never ending, only dead are not burdened with this battle within oneself.

³ USO. ORG Article about military suicide rates being at an all-time high.

<https://www.uso.org/stories/2664-military-suicide-rates-are-at-an-all-time-high-heres-how-were-trying-to-help>

III. Kurtz, King Leopold, and The Congo Free State

Conrad's criticism towards the barbaric authority of the European colonial is widely known, one can therefore safely assume that Kurtz represents the hypocritical nature of the Belgian state formed in Congo and their eventual downfall. The historical background is crucial here to comprehend the comparison between these two entities: King Leopold II's reign and Kurtz.

On the 5th of February 1885, King Leopold II of Belgium established the Free Congo State. Instead of controlling it as a colony, King Leopold occupied the state as a privately owned land. In his 23-year reign, lasting until 1908, he amassed a huge personal fortune while his brutal and inhumane methods caused the death of half the Congolese population, 10 million deaths (Twain, 12). His reputation as a remarkable revolutionary diminished drastically after European nations took wind of his crimes. The Belgian government recalled Leopold in 1908 to avoid further criticisms and a year later Leopold the "Builder King" passed away. Once a man who was revered and loved by the public, Leopold died in disgrace, despised by his subjects, his funeral cortege was booed by the crowd.⁴

One can notice immediately the similarity that Kurtz and Leopold had. Both were visionary heroes, Kurtz a genius who would one day attain one of the highest positions in society and Leopold, a man who had already attained the highest position in society; a monarch loved and cherished by his people and respected by the entirety of Europe, yet they both went insane, they both became dangerous, their methods unsound and their morals corrupt. These figures were

⁴ Keating, Dave (9 June 2020). "How Belgium is being forced to confront the bloody legacy of King Leopold II". New Statesman. Retrieved 16 June 2020.

already on pedestals relatively to others, both highly intelligent, powerful, and respected men, however when they obtained positions of power and no body of government to judge and prosecute them, they became vile, turned evil at their core. They are testaments to Conrad's message, that every human in their very core is rotten. They had gone there to bring civilization, to bring glory to themselves and their nation, to improve the natives. Kurtz had written on a 17-page paper to the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs; 'By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded' (Conrad 81). Instead of actualizing these noble ideals, Leopold II exploited Congo, killed millions, spearheaded an ethnic cleansing and enforced a sadistic rule, the Free State authorities would run rampage, mutilating, and decapitating the local population, all for his personal enrichment. Kurtz went insane, towards the end of his 17-page report, he wrote 'Exterminate all the brutes!' (Conrad 82). Even though he kept sending ivory, his derailment had no cause, that is the main difference between Leopold and Kurtz. Kurtz's derailment was caused by the absence of civilization, absence of regulation and invisibility to the eyes of the government, contrary to this Leopold caused the derailment of his men. He was the government; he was the regulator and yet he acted as if he was blind. As long as he could exploit Congo for rubber and ivory, he would allow his men to commit the nastiest of crimes. One could say that Kurtz is a victim, a malfunctioning gear of Belgium's death machine. Conrad also uses a drawing that Kurtz made. A blindfolded woman holding a torch. This symbolizes the European mission to bring civilization to, to bring light to those who are in the dark, and yet the woman (Europeans) themselves are uncivilized and savage, they themselves are in the dark. Conrad tries to emphasize the fact that Europeans will inevitably burn, if not have already burnt the inhabitants. Similarly, to the woman, Leopold remained oblivious and blind to the course of action and methods in African vassal states.

IV. The Company's Inner Rivalry and European Hypocrisy

Conrad uses The Agents of the Company, a Belgian ivory trade company, to not only display the dark side of humans, but also the dark side of the old continent, Europe and their inhumane methods of colonization starting from the late 15th century. Colonization had been occurring ages before; however, the people were allowed to keep their livelihood and freedom. When European colonization started after the discovery of the Americas, an era of intense exploitation started. The Europeans would appear to the locals as supernatural benefactors, and then they would start to take their resources, enslave the people and dry the land. Any kind of insurrection would be met with swift retribution and making mistakes had heavy consequences. The Belgians would cut the hands of the locals, abandon them in sickness and let them die. These actions would benefit Europe on an economic level, however their actions have left them a permanent mark of disgrace. Europe ceased to be a great continent full of science and hope, but a place of war and violence. Europe and Kurtz's short lived tenure have many similarities between them as Conrad tries to show that Europe has become a place of darkness with Kurtz's descent into darkness as a symbol. Conrad also displays the absurd turmoil and animosity between European governments towards the beginning of the 20th century, using the heated rivalry between the Company's agents, and the hypocrisy of the Company's policies.

As Marlow settles on the mouth of the river, Conrad shows us a broken image of Europe. The good Samaritans, the greatest continent on Earth, is in desperation, and desperation leads to insanity. As Kouta Hirano puts it: "Man cries, his tears dry up and run out. So he becomes a devil, reduced to a monster.", the desperation caused by competition. Men being worked to death, transported in chains and collars and the indifference to the health of the locals. (Conrad

23) Desperation has caused men to turn blind, have corrupted morals; their superiors having no respect for regulations and laws. We have an entity that has surpassed everyone, yet still wildly competing, an entity that is in war within itself. Similarly, to the aforementioned examples of men fighting a battle of sanity within themselves, Europeans have experienced the heart of darkness and are in a battle within themselves, not for sanity but the satisfaction of being the best within their own faction, being better than their allies, a futile and self-destructive rivalry, that brought the end of the vast European empires.

This rivalry is better emphasized further along the river, when Conrad showcases the rivalry among the agents of the company. His tool for showcasing this vain rivalry and the insecure European states, he uses the manager of the outer station. The manager is used to convey the message that people who are met with darkness and absence of regulation can not only become insane, but can become drained and cease to become human. Lose everything that makes us an individual. He babbles a lot but about nothing meaningful, he has lost any kind of remorse or ethical consideration, he has become the embodiment of the Imperial mindset, Machiavellism incarnate. A thought process which prioritizes the individual and their glory, willing to sacrifice the greater good to benefit. The manager is willing to let Kurtz die in order to secure his position, as he thinks Kurtz eyes his post. He sabotages the steamboat, which takes Marlow 3 months to repair. The manager would rather keep his role in the company, rather than saving possibly the most important man in the entire continent (Africa), the man who earns the most profit for The Company. This is how Conrad conveys his message, the ridiculous rivalry between European states, as similarly in the manager and Kurtz's case, it does nothing but benefit the individual and

weaken the employer of both these men, the Company. As in Europe the Belgian occupation and exploitation of Congo damaged the reputation of Europe and imperialist operations.

Conclusion

We are Kurtz, and Kurtz is us. Conrad wants to show how disturbing the minds of people are, how everyone has the potential to realize their dark and violent thoughts. Every man's soul is crazed and bloodthirsty, as at the center of everyone there is a lump of darkness, and the sheath of this darkness is what suppresses this darkness. This sheath helps us remain sane, for it is possible for everyone to become corrupted by delving into themselves. "But his soul was mad. Being alone in the wilderness, it had looked within itself and, by heavens I tell you, it had gone mad." (Conrad 110) Civilizations are nothing but caps, helping sheath our darkness. For the darkness in humans is everlasting and there is nothing that stops us from committing crimes. "We live in the flicker -- may it last as long as the old earth keeps rolling! But darkness was here yesterday." When moved away from civilization, when this factor is subtracted from the equation, we become engulfed by our darkness, and everything surrounding that lump of evil becomes dead, shriveled. The sheath becomes darkness and we become hollow at our center. "It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core." (Conrad 95) This is a reason why Heart of Darkness is such a brilliant novel. Conrad shows how easy it is to get devoured by darkness, even for the most valiant and noble of souls.

In the philosophical short novel, “The Prince”, Niccolo Machiavelli explains the importance of neglecting morals and ethics in order to vanquish your opponents and attain glory. Yet Machiavelli’s thought process is one that takes us to darkness, a very corrupt philosophy. Self-centered and distaining any humane-law. This thought process is one that is hypocritical, even though it aims for glory and grandeur, it is a thought process that is willing to impair your allies, your subjects and your own reputation.

This European hypocrisy is one that Conrad draws attention to. We see the Company condemning Kurtz, while they sanction operations that are far more severe. Kurtz’s counterpart in the movie adaptation of the book, *Apocalypse Now*, Colonel William Kurtz puts this situation perfectly. “We train young men to drop fire on people. But their commanders won't allow them to write 'fuck' on their airplanes because it's obscene”⁵. Even when being inhumane, the authorities want to rationalize the vilest things. Attempting to look pure, and helpful, the European authorities were the most destructive force in this era.

These are the reasons why this novel is regarded as one of the greatest books ever written. Congo symbolizes Kurtz’s soul, and Marlow’s journey is a safe passage. The steamboat, an observatory, as Marlow takes us, the reader, to the heart of darkness. This book is a voyage to the center of Kurtz’s damnation, we observe as his soul is tortured and perverted. Conrad shows that at the heart of every human lies calamity, and when we meet our own “jungle”, it is inevitable that we pass our tipping point and become insane. As literary critic Harold Bloom notes, *Heart of Darkness* is the most analyzed work of fiction of all time (Bloom 17), and it is because of the

⁵ The ending scene of *Apocalypse Now*, Kurtz speaking into a recorder as Cpt. Willard creeps behind him and eventually assassinates him.

aforementioned reasons. It presents us with irrefutable facts about the dark side of humans, it helps us to understand that you, your loved ones, your closest friends, everyone around you, when given the appropriate circumstances, are capable of the most nefarious acts.

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