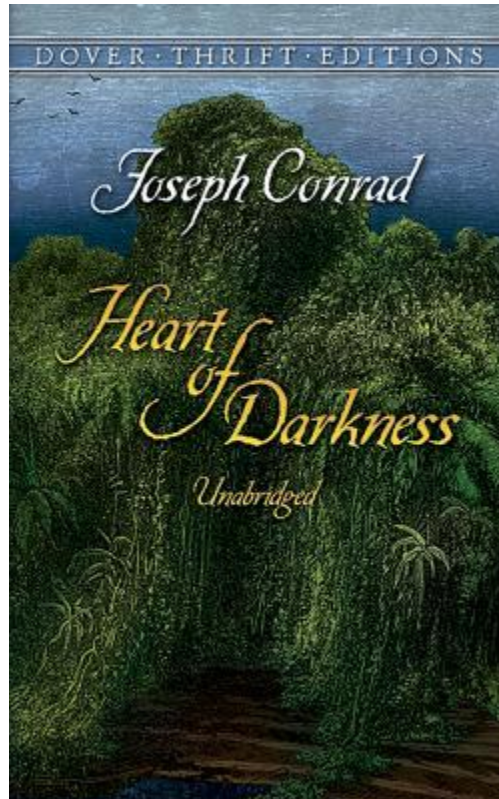


Subaltern Voice in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

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Abstract

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* dealt with many social problems mainly based on colonialism and racism. It focused on themes such as hypocrisy of imperialism. Throughout American history, African Americans have been discriminated against and subjected to racist attitudes. This experience inspired some Black writers, at least during the early years of African-American literature, to prove they were the equals of European-American authors. In American society, literary acceptance has traditionally been closely tied in with the very power dynamics which perpetrated such evils as racial bias. By borrowing from and incorporating the non-written oral traditions and folk life of the [African Diaspora](#), this study attempts to show how colonialism and racism reflected in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. *Heart of Darkness* explores the

issues surrounding imperialism in intricate ways. As Marlow travels from the Outer Station to the Central Station and finally up the river to the Inner Station, he encounters scenes of torture, brutality, and near-slavery. At the very least, the incidental scenery of the book offers a harsh picture of colonial enterprise. The impetus behind Marlow's adventures, too, has to do with the hypocrisy inherent in the rhetoric used to justify imperialism. The men who work for the Company depict what they do as trade and their treatment of native Africans is part of a compassionate project of evolution. Kurtz, on the other hand, is open about the fact that he does not trade but rather takes ivory by force, and he describes his own treatment of the natives with the words in some honest way. His wicked honesty leads to his downfall, as his success threatens to expose the evil practices behind European activity in Africa.

Keywords: Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, Post-Colonialism, Racism, Absurdity of Evil

Heart of Darkness

Discussion on the novel *Heart of Darkness* here is based on the post-colonial theory. Post-colonial theory could be divided into many parts, such as imperialism, subaltern, colonialism and racism. The first one is imperialism. As an imperialist here is white man. The real example is Mr. Kurtz. By offering many goods they brought, such as beads, cotton, and the materials from metal, they to get the reward in the form of ivory from that inland. Subaltern here is obscured as a colonized subject. In this novel, the subaltern are niggers, they are the blacks. Racism here looks down upon the other race. Here, the race is the niggers. They are assumed to be foolish and immoral. Even their attitude assumed the black people as animals. From the discussion above, it appears that Conrad actually wants to raise that event as a description of post colonialism in action at the time. In other words, Africa loses any identity or purpose of its own. Its only use is so that, in contrast, we can better understand Europe.

No Real Identities

In this novel Africans have no real identities or agency and they are nameless slaves, sick both in physical and spiritual health. They are dying of diseases and worshipping the evil and undeserving Kurtz. Africa, meanwhile, is portrayed as the backwoods, far from civilized society; it is only in traveling so far into the depths of nature that Marlowe comes to really understand the difference between the civilized and the uncivilized world. It is Kurtz' exploitation of his workers that is presented as the primary problem.

Kurtz

Kurtz is a monster, and the workers are victims. In the end, Marlowe is disgusted with what Kurtz does. It is the representation of European colonial power. It can be argued that *Heart of Darkness* participates in an oppression of non-whites that is much more menacing and much harder to remedy than the open abuses of Kurtz or the Company's men. Africans become for Marlow a mere backdrop, a human screen against which he can play out his philosophical and existential struggles. This kind of dehumanization is harder to identify than colonial aggression or open racism. While *Heart of Darkness* offers a powerful condemnation of the deceitful operations of imperialism, it also presents a set of issues surrounding race that is ultimately troubling.

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“In exterior he resembled a butcher in a neighborhood, and his eyes had a look of sleepy cunning. He carried his fat paunch with ostentation on his short legs, and during the time his gang infested the station spoke to no one but his nephew. You could see long with these two roaming all day with their heads close together in an everlasting confab.” (55)

Interiors and Exteriors

Comparisons between interiors and exteriors pass through *Heart of Darkness*. As the narrator states at the beginning of the text, Marlow is more interested in surfaces, in the surrounding aura of a thing rather than in any hidden nugget of meaning deep within the thing itself. This inverts the usual hierarchy of meaning: normally one seeks the deep message or hidden truth. Although social customs and explanatory justifications are shown throughout *Heart of Darkness* to be utterly false and even leading to evil, they are nevertheless necessary for both group harmony and individual security. Madness, in *Heart of Darkness*, is the result of being removed from one’s social context and allowed to be the sole arbiter of one’s own actions. Kurtz has no authority to whom he answers but himself, and this is more than any one man can bear.

Hypocrisy

Heart of darkness is an exploration of hypocrisy, uncertainty, and moral confusion. At the Outer Station, he watches native laborers blast away at a hillside with no particular goal in mind. The absurd involves both insignificant silliness and life-or-death issues, often simultaneously. That the serious and the mundane are treated similarly suggests a profound moral confusion and a tremendous hypocrisy. Words themselves fail to capture meaning sufficiently, and thus they must be taken in the context of their utterance. Another good example of this is Marlow’s conversation with the brick maker, during which Marlow is able to figure out a good deal more than simply what the man has to say.

“Poor fool! If he had only left that shutter alone .he had no restraint, no restraint-just like Kurtz- a tree swayed by the wind. as soon as I had put on a dry pair of slippers, I dragged him out ,after first jerking he spear outside ,which operation I confess I performed with my eyes shut tight. His heels leaped together over the little doorsteps; his shoulders were pressed to my breast; I hugged him from behind desperately. Oh! He was heavy, heavy; heavier than any man on earth, I should imagine. Then without more ado I tipped him overboard .The current snatched him as though he had been a wisp of grass, and I saw the body roll over twice before I lost sight of it forever. All the pilgrims and the manager were then congregated on the awning deck about the pilot –house, chattering at each other like a flock of excited magpies, and there was a scandalized murmur at my heartless promptitude. (89)

However, it is difficult to discern exactly what it might mean, given that absolutely everything in the book is masked in darkness. Africa, England, and Brussels are all described as gloomy and somehow dark, even if the sun is shining brightly. Darkness thus seems to operate

symbolically and existentially rather than specifically. Kurtz's intended and his African mistress function as blank slates upon which the values and the wealth of their respective societies can be displayed. Marlow frequently claims that women are the keepers of immature illusions; although this sounds condemnatory. In return, the women are the beneficiaries of much of the resulting wealth, and they become objects upon which men can display their own success and status.

In the novel, the white characters refer to them in animalistic terms. The Manager's uncle arrives with his own expedition. Marlow overhears them saying that they would like to see Kurtz and his assistant hanged so that their station could be eliminated as ivory competition. Some of the pilgrims go ashore to investigate. The whirring sound of arrows is heard; an attack is started. The Pilgrims shoot back from the ship with rifles. The helmsman of the ship is killed, as is a native ashore. Marlow supposes that Kurtz has decomposed in the mysterious attack. This upsets him greatly. In spite of Marlow's disappointment, the ship presses onward. A little way down the river, the crew spot Kurtz's station, which they had supposed was lost. They meet a [Russian](#) man who resembles a harlequin. He says that Kurtz is alive but somewhat ill. The natives do not want Kurtz to leave because he has expanded their minds. Kurtz does not want to leave because he has essentially become part of the tribe. After talking for a while with the Russian, Marlow has a very clear picture of the man who has become his fascination.

Talk to Kurtz on His Deathbed

Finally, he has the chance to talk to Kurtz, who is ill and on his deathbed. The natives surround his hut until he tells them to leave. While on watch, Marlow dozes off and realizes that Kurtz is gone. He chases him and finds Kurtz in the forest. Marlow manages to take him back to his bed. Kurtz entrusts Marlow with all of his old files and papers. Among these is a photograph of his sweetheart. The Russian escapes before the Manager and others can imprison him. The steamboat departs the next day. Throughout the novel Conrad explored the impact of colonialism and treatment of people by non- white in various places. *Heart of Darkness* is true that dark men in this tale tend to behave in ways more moral and more civilized than do white men. While starving cannibals on board keep their hungry eyes off their masters, darkness remains the place and mode of Marlow's terminal struggle with Kurtz.

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