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Course Title: Other Themes in *Heart of Darkness*

Other Themes in *Heart of Darkness*

The novel lends itself to many interpretations and can be read from different angles. One of these facets is Marlow's gradual discovery of the reality of colonialism. Another is his exploration of human nature and probing into the unknown realities of the inner self.

Heart of Darkness is a voyage of self discovery. Conrad is able to reconcile two aspects of Marlow's experience: his confrontation with the reality of colonialism and an introspective voyage leading to spiritual change ("the changes take place inside").

***Heart of Darkness* as a journey into the self**

The actual physical trip evokes through symbolic language a metaphysical voyage into the human psyche and the discovery of the forces at war inside the human heart.

There are hints in the course of the novel as to these metaphysical considerations. Marlow's meeting with Kurtz is referred to in the beginning of the novel as

"the **farthest point of navigation** and the **culminating point of my experience**. It seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me -- and into my thoughts. It was sombre enough, too -- and pitiful -- not extraordinary in any way -- not very clear either. No, not very clear. And yet it seemed to throw a kind of light" (6). Marlow is an experienced sailor who has travelled the seven seas and five oceans so a trip in a river cannot be literally the farthest point of navigation. It is not geographically far but symbolically, on another dimension.

"The earth seemed unearthly" (42), beyond reality.

Marlow says "I was fascinated. It was as though a veil had been rent" (84) as if the curtain hiding Kurtz's subconscious has been removed for him to see his true nature before death.

Several references to dreams occur in the novel. Dreams are the manifestation of the subconscious as Freud claims.

"I did not see the man in the name any more than you do. Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me **I am trying to tell you a dream** -- making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that mingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is of the very essence of dreams..." (31).

"Confound the man! he had kicked the very earth to pieces. He was alone, and I before him **did not know whether I stood on the ground or floated in the air**".

"They had behind them, to my mind, the terrific suggestiveness of words heard in **dreams**, of phrases spoken in **nightmares**. **Soul!** If anybody ever struggled with a soul, I am the man."

The physical fight to bring back Kurtz to the boat takes the form of a psychological struggle in a dream, as if fighting with a soul.

"The mind of man is capable of anything -- because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future. What was there after all? Joy, fear, sorrow, devotion, valour, rage -- who can tell? -- but truth -- truth stripped of its cloak of time. ... He must meet that truth with his own true stuff -- with his own inborn strength" (39-40).

This evokes another level, beyond the reality of Africa, understanding the truth about human nature.

The experience evoked is not the simple prosaic trip on a river but some other voyage on a different dimension. The “**outer**”, “**central**” and “**inner** stations” which are actual halts in Marlow's trip evoke, through symbolic language, the three components of the human psyche, namely the **superego** that derives from outwardly acquired precepts, the **ego** which is central and the **id** as the inner hidden part.

“You can't understand. How could you? -- with solid pavement under your feet, surrounded by kind **neighbours** ready to cheer you or to fall on you, stepping delicately between the **butcher** and the **policeman**, in the holy terror of **scandal** and gallows and lunatic asylums -- how can you imagine what particular region of the first ages a man's untrammelled feet may take him into by the way of **solitude** -- utter solitude without a policeman -- by the way of silence -- utter silence, where no warning voice of a kind neighbour can be heard whispering of public opinion?” (58-9).

In society, the butcher's function is to provide meat and prevent cannibalism and the policeman's is to enforce order and deter crimes. In the wilderness when the individual is deprived of the usual support of society, he must rely on his inner strength for moral and spiritual support. There is a potential for good and evil inside every human heart. When nobody watches you and no one can tell on you, would you do good or evil?

Marlow is the privileged witness of Kurtz's discovery of his inner truth and the reality of his nature, facing his subconscious at the moment of death to gain knowledge of his own self.

“One evening coming in with a candle I was startled to hear him say a little tremulously, 'I am lying here in the dark waiting for death.' The light was within a foot of his eyes”.

But Kurtz could not see the light because he was on another plane, looking within himself just before death.

“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!**"” (85)

Kurtz discovers his horrible reality, what he has done and what he has become. He symbolizes man's capacity for evil whereas the cannibals who had been starving did not attack the whites but just asked to have the dead man to eat him. They were capable of controlling the strongest instinct, that of survival, while the so-called “civilized” Kurtz could not and has yielded to his brutal instincts of greed and domination. He even almost killed the harlequin for a little ivory.

This transformation from utter goodness to extreme evil is due to his lack of restraint

“They only showed that Mr. Kurtz **lacked restraint** in the gratification of his various lusts, that there was **something wanting in him** -- some small matter which, when the pressing need arose, could not be found under his magnificent eloquence”.

Marlow is Kurtz's alter ego and wonders if in the same circumstances he would not do the same. He comes back to Europe a changed man, irritated by the ignorance of the so-called civilized people, feeling that they could not possibly know what he knew.

“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. I have wrestled with death”.

But Marlow did not die though he came near to it, so he did not access knowledge about himself.

Other sub-themes in the novel include:

Man’s isolation, loneliness, alienation from society

“No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence -- that which makes its truth, its meaning its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. **We live, as we dream alone....**”

“**solitude** -- utter solitude”

This is major 20th century modernist theme. Man is no longer considered as a social being, living in terms of social manners and customs. He is a lonely creature with a life of his own, that he cannot share with others, just as he cannot share his dreams.

Man’s smallness in front of nature

embodied in the landscape description of the jungle. Nature is a presence that is at once fascinating and threatening

“I wondered whether the stillness on the face of the **immensity** looking at us two were meant as **an appeal or as a menace**. What were we who had strayed in here? Could we handle that dumb thing, or would it handle us? I felt how big, how confoundedly big, was that thing that couldn't talk, and perhaps was deaf as well. What was in there?”

“but it came in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream, remembered with wonder amongst the **overwhelming** realities of this **strange world of plants, and water, and silence**. And this stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace. It was the stillness of an **implacable force** brooding over an **inscrutable intention**”.

Untamed, pure nature is a force that man is too small to comprehend, for all his progress and technology.

“against the stream, crept the little begrimed **steamboat**, like a sluggish **beetle** crawling on the floor of a lofty portico. It made you feel **very small**, very lost”

The steamship which is a symbol of science and technology supposed to control nature is like a small helpless insect.

Atavism

The trip upriver is a return too the earliest beginning of the world, “the night of the first ages”. Marlow’s awareness of his kinship with the natives and feeling their common humanity echoes Sir James Frazer’s discovery about the hollowness of civilization and the universal dimension of human behaviour.

“They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of **their humanity -- like yours** -- the thought of **your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar**. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you -- you so remote from the night of first ages -- could comprehend”.