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Course Title: Literary Analysis of *Heart of Darkness*

### **Analysis of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness***

#### **Setting**

The complexities of the setting are part of the innovations introduced by Conrad within Modernist experimentation.

##### Time:

All the events happened at **dusk**, half-way between day and night, a middle-way between light and darkness. The frame story starts at dusk and ends late at night but Marlow's trip took many months. Time is no longer linear but the narrative jumps to and fro with the use of flash-backs.

##### Place:

The novella also takes us back and forth, from one place to the other, even if the frame story takes place on the Nellie on the Thames River.

#### **Point of view**

Conrad asserted that *Heart of Darkness* is "experience pushed a little (and only very little) beyond the actual facts of the case." It draws heavily on autobiographical and historical elements and there are many correspondences between places, events and even persons as seen in Conrad's biography. Matadi, Kinshasa and Stanley Falls correspond to the Outer, Central and Inner stations respectively.

However, many changes were introduced, especially the unnamed narrator, to provide the necessary **distance** between Marlow's fictitious experiences and the author's real ones and to ensure **detachment** which is an essential characteristic of Modernist literature. As Joyce is reputed to have said; "the author should be like God in the universe, present everywhere but visible nowhere".

*Heart of Darkness* is given the quality of a tale of hearsay told to us by a first, anonymous narrator as it was told to him by Marlow, enabling Conrad to play with **multiple points of view**. In addition, the dream quality of the story adds another dimension; that of someone telling us someone else's dream.

#### **Characterization**

Only Kurtz, Marlow and his predecessor Fresleven are given names. They can be said to be reverberations of the same person: Marlow replaces Fresleven (walks into his shoes) and Kurtz is Marlow's alter ego (double) and his choice of nightmares. He identifies with Kurtz as they are both similarly described as "emissaries" of civilization and Marlow is Kurtz's privileged witness until his death.

The other characters are not given names but called after their functions. They are types rather than individual figures, symbolic representatives of Conrad's themes.

**Marlow** is the second narrator and the main protagonist. He is not simply a mouthpiece for Conrad who took pains to ensure detachment when dealing with autobiographical material.

- he is at the same time involved in the story (inside): the main subject of which is his progress in understanding both the reality of colonialism and the reality of human nature

- and a commentator (from outside) giving hints to the reader and through the skill of Conrad enables him to see more than he himself sees:

“My task, which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel--it is, before all, to make you see.” (Joseph Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*).

(see his physical description of the first episode; Marlow is not a typical European sailor) Marlow is a credible character, a fallible human being with normal capacity for good and evil and subject to change through understanding. The meaning of the novel grows out of his expedition and his return as a changed man to tell the story.

He is an exceptional seaman with an active imaginary mind and sees more than ordinary people. He has a capacity for moral discrimination: he sees at first the true nature of the faithless pilgrims, the accountant, Kurtz etc..

He obtains his post through recommendation like the ancient Roman colonist “had friends in Rome” and like Kurtz and the manager. Like Kurtz he is represented as “an exceptional and gifted creature”, “an emissary of light” but he is aware that this makes him “an impostor”, suggesting that one cannot serve colonialism without being corrupted by it.

There are contradictions in him. He “cannot bear a lie” yet, lies to the brick-maker, to Kurtz’s intended and tearing off the postscript from Kurtz’s report is also a kind of lie. Conrad creates a character with contradictions, not perfect or superior but sensitive and humane who rejects the whites’ exploitation of the natives and feels close to their “sheer primitiveness”.

As a narrator he is a voice (when night falls on the *Nellie* the other characters just hear his voice without seeing him) but unlike Kurtz who is also a voice (eloquence) he makes us discriminate between a gift used to give pleasure and edify (entertain and teach) and one used to exalt and deceive.

**Kurtz** represents the best and the worst of which the white man is capable. He is a special being, “an emissary of pity, science and progress”. Marlow admired his humanitarianism and idealism and was eager to meet him. Every one thought high of him (admiration of the Harlequin, envy of the pilgrims and adoration of the natives) but when Marlow saw the “dried human heads” on the poles surrounding his house, the image is destroyed: an absolute idealist turned into an utter savage, a universal genius, a civilizer transformed into a wild beast, more savage than the so-called savages themselves.

He symbolizes the moral bankruptcy of western civilization which is just a glittering varnish behind which lurks a barbarian savage, the embodiment of greed (ready to kill his saviour for a little ivory) the personification of evil, the epitome of egoism “My intended, my ivory, my station, my river”..

This transformation of virtue into vice is due to his lack of “restraint”, “there was something wanting in him – some small matter which, when the pressing need arose, could not be found under his magnificent eloquence”, hollow inside.

There are contradictions in him as well. His report full of “burning noble words” and “every altruistic sentiment” concludes with “Exterminate all the brutes!” He ordered the attack on the boat but is taken on board without difficulty; he leaves for the ceremony in the jungle but comes back with Marlow without a shout to call his tribesmen.

By wanting to become a god, a supernatural being and giving up all restraint, he has become a devil, a slave to the wilderness (in his heart and in the jungle) which he has intended to subdue. His final cry “the horror! the horror!” shows that he eventually understood the nature of his perversion but too late.

**The Accountant** spotless, neat, “white” in contrast to the dying natives, a “hairdresser’s dummy” is a robot without humanity symbolizing the heartless efficiency of western civilization. His indifference, egoism and vanity link him to Kurtz whom he admires.

**The Manager and the “faithless pilgrims”** Unlike Kurtz the manager is commonplace, ordinary having “no genius, no learning and no intelligence”. He keeps the routine going but originates nothing, he is never ill symbolizing his inner emptiness and amorality. He is evil, plotting against Kurtz with his uncle and the other agents (faithless pilgrims) with “their long stakes” adore ivory “praying to it” are hollow men with “perhaps a little dirt” inside. They stop dinner when hearing of Kurtz’s death (hollow pretence of civilized behaviour) while they are secretly happy at his death.

**The Brick-maker** who makes no bricks is an example of the uselessness of the whites and the absurdity of colonialism. He is “backbiting and intriguing”, represents evil with his forked beard “a *papier maché* Mephistopheles”, a hollow puppet.

**The Harlequin** (Russian seaman) like Marlow he is a sailor, efficient and young survived in the wilderness without being affected by its evil but he is full of contradictions, “smiles and frowns”. He idolises Kurtz who “has enlarged [his] mind” but repeats “I don’t understand”.

**The natives** at the beginning are full of vitality “intense energy of movement” admired by Marlow “a comfort to look at” before being reduced to slaves, and then left to die in the grove of death. The cannibal woodcutters are also admired by Marlow for their restraint and self-control (lacking in whites). Conrad is the first European author to describe the Africans more favourably than the Europeans.

**The helmsman** is a detribalized African, “an improved specimen” who has been “civilized” and taught to steer the boat by Fresleven. however his reaction during the attack leads to his death symbolizing the loss of identity which means a loss of life.

**Kurtz’s native mistress** represents Africa; “fecund and mysterious”, “savage and superb” “like the wilderness itself”. Kurtz feels a mixture of attraction and repulsion for her. Like the cannibals she has dignity and is not impressed by the boat’s whistle. She represents “truth” while the Intended is self-deceptive.

**The Intended** as her name indicates symbolizes an intention, unreal. She loved Kurtz’s ideas rather than the man but is persuaded only she knew him well. She is an illusion of civilization, living in a graveyard supported by “a saving illusion and a lie”. The light she represents is a source of death. She is also a voice (she talked and talked asking questions and supplying answers). Kurtz’s last words are her name symbolically, she is a horror since she represents western civilization.

### Minor characters

**The knitters of black wool** symbolic of darkness and death, they are ominous at the beginning of the novel and point to the evil of colonialism. They represent the **Fates** of classical mythology, the goddesses that spin the threads of men’s lives and determine their course: **black wool**.

**The company’s clerk** not “foolish” enough to go to Africa himself, represents Europeans who are ignorant of the nature of colonialism.

**The Doctor** refers to mental “changes” that “take place inside” and alludes to the inner life that is to be explored in the novel (the subconscious). He “never sees them when they return”, meaning that Europe is blind to what is happening in Africa.

**Marlow’s aunt** represents European wide-spread view of colonialism as an ideal enterprise for the benefit of Africa.

Feminist criticism attacked Conrad’s protective attitude towards women when Marlow lied to the intended, saying “women should stay in that beautiful world of their own”.

### Symbolism

**The Title** *Heart of Darkness* can have several meanings

Africa is the Dark Continent with the Congo at its heart; Africa is shaped like a heart. Darkness refers to the savagery and evil that lies inside every human heart, it is the evil Kurtz discovers within himself. Europeans are white outside but dark at heart...

**Characters** are also symbolic as seen before.

**Light and darkness** are conventional symbols associating light and white with good, knowledge, religion, positive symbols and darkness with evil, ignorance, savagery, death, negative symbols. But Conrad reverses the conventional meanings in the novel.

At the beginning, London which is normally a symbol of light and civilization is symbolized by “gloom brooding over a crowd of men” and even kills the sun while the novel ends with the “heart of an impenetrable darkness” to which the river Thames leads. “A brooding gloom in sunshine” sums the symbols of the novel referring to the existence of darkness and evil at the heart of a shining civilization. When Marlow arrives to the inner station, the river is in sunshine but Kurtz’s station is in darkness. The white man and light in the novel are a source of darkness and death.

The painting by Kurtz of a blind-folded white woman in darkness carrying a torch symbolizes civilization that is blind to its true nature and burns and kills with the torch that she does not benefit from.

The Intended dressed in black gathers all the light on her forehead but the room grows darker as the phantom of Kurtz enters it.

**Death** is associated with the white Europeans from the beginning. Brussels is “a city of the dead”, a “whited sepulchre”, its streets are like “alleys in a cemetery”; symbolizing the deadly enterprise of colonialism. In the house of the Intended the piano (a symbol of art and civilization) is described as “polished sarcophagus”, symbol of death.

Ghosts and phantoms are not just the natives killed by the colonizers, even Kurtz is “an animated image of death” “an initiated wraith from the back of nowhere”; at once the agent and the victim of the deadly enterprise of colonialism.

Whites and blacks are symbolically dead, the blacks literally through exploitation and killing and the whites through dehumanization: hollow, dummies, not alive.

Ivory is closely associated with death, Kurtz was ready to kill the harlequin who saved his life twice for a little ivory and in the macabre juxtaposition of his own head as “an ivory ball” with the dead heads on the poles surrounding his house.

**Hole:** there are several holes in the novel, symbols of darkness and emptiness.

- the hole that resulted from the “purposeless blasting” at the outer station
- the hole in the pail held by a faithless pilgrim to put out the fire, failing to play its role
- the hole at the bottom of the boat which is a symbol of technology but which fails to fulfil its aim

Conrad’s novel is universal, it is not just about nineteenth-century imperialism but can apply to any time. It is about human evil and the glittering façade of civilization used as a pretext for evil actions as what happened in the world wars, and more recently in the gulf wars, the situation in Syria, Libya, etc.

*Heart of Darkness* has been transposed into the film *Apocalypse Now* about the Vietnam War directed by Francis Ford Coppola with Marlon Brando as Colonel Kurtz.