

Imagery in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

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Rezumat

Acest articol tratează romanul lui Joseph Conrad "*Inima întunericului*". Prin decoruri, simboluri și stilul impresionist, J. Conrad ilustrează impactul epifaniei lui Marlow asupra descrierii umanității și a responsabilităților sale față de omenire.

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) is an early and important example of modernist experimentation in English fiction. In the voice of his frame narrator, Conrad provides a crucial image for understanding the symbolism of modern literature when he explains that the stories of Marlow, the narrator of most of the novella, differ from those of other sailors: „The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut... But to Marlow, the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze.” [1, p.7].

Heart of Darkness does not reveal its meaning in digestible morsels, like the kernel of a nut. Rather, its meanings evade the interpreter; they are larger than the story itself.

Conrad's use of polyvalent symbols like the knitters of black wool, the grove of death, or Kurtz himself, suggests his connection to symbolist tendencies, but his famously hazy literary technique owed more to impressionism. As Conrad's interpreter, Ian Watt, has observed, „the abstract geometry of the [nut] metaphor is symbolist because the meaning of the story, represented by the shell of a nut or the haze around the glow, is larger than its narrative vehicle, the kernel or the glow; but the sensory quality of the metaphor, the mist and haze, is essentially impressionist.” [2, p.45].

The reader realizes only gradually what has happened and thus shares in the experience of Marlow's perplexity. A similar structure dominates the narrative on a larger scale, as Marlow continually jumps around in the telling of his story, layering impressions from various times in his attempt to make sense of his experience. This resulted in breaking up the temporal continuity associated with the nineteenth-century novel. His use of multiple narrators undermines the nineteenth-century convention of narrative omniscience. The literary critic F. R. Leavis complained that Conrad frequently seemed „intent on making a virtue out of not knowing what he means.” Yet, this technique for forcing the reader to share the impressions of the characters became central to modernist fiction [1, p.215].

Many books are written by an author purely for informational, recreational, or monetary reasons, Joseph Conrad's book *Heart of Darkness* is one such book. If the book is examined only superficially, a tragic story of the African jungle is seen, but when the paragraphs are picked apart, a deeper meaning arises. Joseph Conrad uses the theme of light and dark to contrast the civilized with the savage in *Heart of Darkness*. The next 5 pages analyze Conrad's use of light and dark in *Heart of Darkness*. First, they explain how Conrad's past and experiences affected his writing. Then, they show how light versus dark is used to contrast the civilized and the savage. Finally, they will examine Conrad's use of light and dark in *Heart of Darkness* to contrast the civilized and the savage.

In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad again uses light and dark to symbolize good and evil, except the roles are reversed. It is whiteness that is truly sinister and evil, for it symbolizes the immoral scramble for loot by the unscrupulous and unfeeling Belgian traders in ivory and human flesh; the whiteness of ivory is also contrasted with the blackness of the natives whose lives must be

destroyed for its sake[4,p.87].

From the very start, Marlow (the main character), creates a feeling of darkness.

In **Heart of Darkness**, there is a real contrast between what is light and what is dark. These contrasts work within the reality of what is considered civilized and uncivilized. The light representing civilization or the civilized side of the world and the dark representing the uncivilized or savage side of the world. Throughout the book, there are several references to these two contrasts. In Conrad's novel, black and white have the unusual connotations of evil and good. The setting also plays a critical role in describing how Marlow feels about the entire adventure he endured. From the very start of the novel, there are signs of what is to come. The colors of items and objects help to foreshadow the tragedy that is Conrad uses Marlowe's imagery and objective observation to establish a criticism of „civilized" society. The very opening paragraphs create a dark image of London, the center of civilization during Conrad's time.

The dichotomy of dark imagery paired with the implication of "light" which civilization and London represent begin an extended the contrary of light and dark with civilization and brutality. After further explication of the gloominess and "lurid glare" of London, Marlowe speaks his first words. „And this also has been one of the dark places of the earth" [2, p.67]. Although it does not seem obvious at first, corroborative descriptions of civilization create a distasteful and critical depiction of it. The sun changes from „glowing white" to „dull red without rays and without heat, as if about to go out suddenly, stricken to death by the touch of that gloom brooding over a crowd of men" [4,p.66]. Here again the contrary of light and dark surfaces as London, which typically spreads the „light" of civilization, extinguishes the light of the sun in a fit of darkness. Although this continually contradicting imagery of light and dark seems somewhat erratic at first, it serves to perpetuate the connected idea that civilization, or light, contains an intrinsic element of the savage, or the dark.

Marlowe also exhibits a resolution of frankness and truth. Throughout the novel he emphasizes his contempt for shallow, materialistic men (and „civilized" society) and his value on honesty. When confronted with the primal beating of the drums in the jungle, Marlowe discusses the facade of inhumanity attributed to the natives by the whites as a deceptive self-defense mechanism. „No, [the natives] were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it -- suspicion of their not being inhuman . . . but what thrilled you was just the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar". Marlowe condemns the dishonesty of attributing the natives with an inhuman savagery simply as a means of self-deception. „Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise" [4,p.105]. Marlowe even criticizes the professions of his friends to whom he is narrating, implying the futility of self-deception and even civilized behavior itself. „I felt often [the inner truth's] mysterious stillness watching me at my monkey tricks, just as it watches you fellows performing on your respective tight-ropes for -- what is it? half-a-crown a tumble". In response to the protestations of one of his listeners, Marlowe replies: „I beg your pardon. I forgot the heartache which makes up the rest of the price. And indeed what does the price matter, if the trick be well done?" [3,p.103].

Marlowe chooses a strenuous philosophy by choosing to realize his own „heart of darkness" and the brutality of civilization. Ignorance could have provided him a paved road, but Marlowe rejects this option; it provides no integrity. At the same time, Marlowe could have rejected society and its facades by following in the path of Kurtz. Kurtz has rejected the facades and deceptions of society in favor of not only a recognition of his „heart of darkness," but a

surrender to those dark temptations. In Kurtz' final moments, Marlowe describes the changes that came over him. „It was as though a veil had been rent. 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?" [2, p.147]. Kurtz then proceeds to judge his life, unrestrained violence, rampant greed, unconditional surrender to his "heart of darkness," in his final phrase, "The horror! The horror!" Marlowe meets the penultimate example of the deceptive facade of society, embodied in the Intended, and the extreme rejection of civilization, Kurtz. Marlowe rejects both of these paths, the Intended's being too smooth in ignorance, and Kurtz' being too smooth in complete surrender to primal urges. Marlowe's path, one of realization, acceptance, and a constant struggle to maintain integrity, provides a real continuity within Heart of Darkness.

Bibliography

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2. Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1979.
3. This page has been adapted from Pericles Lewis's *Cambridge Introduction to Modernism*, Cambridge UP, 2007.
4. Gillon, Adam, *Joseph Conrad*, Twayne's English Author Series, 1982.