

# The concept of truth in heart of darkness

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



“ The inner truth is hidden-luckily luckily” -Marlow, Heart of Darkness

Joseph Conrad’s renowned novella, Heart of Darkness, is a work which has sparked great controversy and heated debate with regards to its meaning. Since its publication over one hundred years ago, countless interpretations of the novella have arisen. Indeed, “ its imagery has been described in detail, resonances from Dante, Milton, the Bible, the Upanishads, invoked; its philosophical position is argued variously to be Schopenhauerian, Nietzschean, nihilist, existentialist, or Christian, its psychology, Freudian, Jungian, Adlerian...”(Bloom, 57). It is possible that Conrad intentionally left his novella ambiguous and open to so many interpretations in order to convey its true message; namely, that there is no truth in life, no real meaning, only ambiguity. While this statement itself may sound ambiguous, as illustrated in the following paragraphs, through the set-up of the story itself, Marlow’s journey, Kurtz’s journey, and its inconclusive ending, Conrad expresses this concept of meaninglessness and unattainable truth. The novella is set up in an ambiguous fashion from the beginning. While Marlow is the character who experienced this physical and metaphorical journey into the “ center of the earth”, it is an unnamed narrator who relates Marlow’s story. This unnamed narrator did not actually go into the Congo with Marlow, so every line of his story is an attempt to recollect the story that Marlow told him. Thus, the reader is not placed directly into the story or the true experience, nor even told of it by Marlow, the character who actually experienced it. The reader is told of it by a character who merely heard about it from Marlow. Already, Conrad has placed the reader far from the story itself, distancing the reader from the truth. Marlow’s physical journey

into the Congo is the fulfillment of a childhood dream. He recounts his desire as a youth to travel and explore the globe, including the Congo River. He describes this area of the map, saying, “ It had become a place of darkness. But there was in it one river especially, a mighty big river that you could see on the map, resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country and its tail lost in the depths of the land” (12). This concept of “ darkness”, which arises continually throughout the novella, serves as a symbol of the unknown. It is to physically discover this “ place of darkness” that Marlow decides to journey down the Congo River. Thus, through his journey Marlow is searching for truth and meaning. In his journey down the Congo River, Marlow relates the brutality of the white men against the African population, and the horrible conditions which many natives suffered. One such description occurs when he witnesses various native workers dying. He comments, “ There were dying slowly-it was very clear. There were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now, nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation lying confusedly in the greenish gloom” (20). Marlow does recognize and describe the terrible conditions of the native peoples, but he does not directly voice his disapproval at any point. His descriptions, like the one above, evoke compassion from the reader for the African people, but this compassion is a reaction to the horrors which he is describing, and not to the psychological difficulties Marlow has experienced in regards to dealing with the atrocities of the whites. What Marlow actually concludes about the brutality is not revealed. Thus, while his journey is filled with descriptions of the sufferings of the natives, the reader is left with no ultimate sense of truth

in regards to how Marlow feels about what he has witnessed. Marlow's journey also becomes a quest to find Kurtz. He describes his view of Kurtz prior to meeting him, saying, " All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz" (50). Thus, for Marlow, Kurtz symbolizes Europe and civilization. Marlow expresses his realization that the journey has become a search for Kurtz when he describes the steamboat (or " grimy beetle", as he refers to it) traveling down the Congo River. He says, " Where the pilgrims imagined it crawled to I don't know. To some place where they expected to get something, I bet! For me it crawled towards Kurtz-exclusively" (37). Marlow's journey through the Congo is ultimately a journey to find Kurtz, who has become a symbol for Marlow. However, despite his strange attraction and loyalty to Kurtz, Marlow's feelings towards this man are never fully expressed. While he reveals that Kurtz is a very gifted, influential man, he never directly voices approval or disapproval about Kurtz's actions in the Congo. Thus Marlow's journey is not only inconclusive in that he never really states how he feels about the atrocities he witnesses, but it is also ambiguous and devoid of truth in that he makes no real conclusions about this talented and brutal man, whose successes have come about through the sufferings of others. The unnamed narrator actually reveals that this is what shall happen before Marlow begins his story, saying, " we were fated, before the ebb began to run, to hear about one of Marlow's inconclusive experiences"(11). Kurtz is also on a journey in Heart of Darkness, although his journey is coming quickly to a close, as he dies soon after he is introduced in the novella. Just as he does with Marlow, Conrad leaves Kurtz's beliefs and conclusions somewhat ambiguous. He does, however, become

the only character who seems to find any truth in his journey. When he is dying, Kurtz experiences a meaningful moment of insight. It is the only place in the novella where Conrad hints at the possibility of discovering truth. Marlow describes the moment, saying, “ I saw on that ivory face the expression of somber 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?” (68). While experiencing this moment of “ complete knowledge” and “ glimpsed truth”, Kurtz exclaims “ The horror! The horror!” (69) – an entirely ambiguous statement. It can be interpreted as a recognition of the violent, barbaric human being he has become, but Conrad leaves this unclear. Although Kurtz is the only character to experience a moment of truth and clarity, Marlow does not arrive at any conclusion about what truth Kurtz sees as he is dying. It is left unclear, just like Marlow’s own insights. As discussed earlier, the setup of the story distances the reader from the actual events taking place, and thus distances the reader from the truth. Similarly, this idea of ambiguity and absence of truth is furthered by the ending of the story. Heart of Darkness ends inconclusively: Marlow finishes his story with the recollection of a lie he once told. The fact that the last thing he recounts is the exact opposite of truth was a decision made intentionally on the part of Conrad to convey his overall message in regards to the meaninglessness of things, and a lack of absolute truth. Marlow recounts that he told Kurtz’s “ intended” that Kurtz’s last words were her name because he felt too guilty not telling such a lie. He says “ it would have been too dark-too dark altogether” (76). Not only does Marlow express

ambivalent attitudes towards the significant issues in the novella, such as imperialism and brutality, but he also ends his story with a lie: the anti-thesis of truth. Conrad also ends the story ambiguously by having the unnamed narrator conclude with a description in which he remarks, “ The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed somber under an overcast sky-seemed to lead in the heart of an immense darkness” (76). The fact that Conrad concludes his novella with a description of the “ immense darkness” is extremely relevant because “ darkness” is used throughout the novella as a metaphor for the unknown. Heart of Darkness thus ends with a reference to the unknown, without any conclusions or truth. Just as the reader is unaware of how Marlow felt about his experience in the Congo, similarly the reader is left in the dark in regards to the unnamed narrator’s reaction to Marlow’s story. Throughout his novella – in the setup itself, in the journeys of the both Marlow and Kurtz, and in the ending – Joseph Conrad never presents any definite conclusions on the part of the characters or the narrator. He intentionally distances the reader from the novella, and then leaves the story ambiguous to present the only real meaning in Heart of Darkness: that there is no ultimate truth. His principal character, Marlow, witnesses brutalities and atrocities throughout his journey, but never comes to any conclusions about the experiences. Although Kurtz does find a moment of recognition and truth, this too is left unexplained and ambiguous. Finally, the novella itself ends with both a lie, and a reference to “ darkness”: the symbol of the unknown in the novella. Thus, from the opening to the ending, Heart of Darkness leaves the reader wondering what Marlow, Kurtz, and ultimately

Conrad feel about the issues presented in the novella. Through having his characters experience journeys but never actually come to any real conclusions, Conrad expresses the notion that there is no ultimate truth, and that the desire for the unknown and for truth is a vain pursuit that can only end inconclusively. The idea that Conrad's novella attempted to convey the idea that there is no ultimate meaning to life is only furthered by the fact that so many varying interpretations of the novella have arisen.

Bibliography Bloom, Harold. Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness. New York: Chelsea House, 1987.