

# The art of the novel: heart of darkness essay sample



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Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* is considered a masterpiece of 20th century writing, with abundant admiration as well as severe criticisms made by critics such as Douglas Hewitt and Chinua Achebe. The reason this novel attracts so much attention would have to be the ambiguities and the struggle of the character Marlow. Many associate Marlow being Conrad himself, whereas others argue that the "story-teller" is different from the writer. I would have to agree with the former statement, that Marlow and Conrad are in fact the same character.

Conrad actually made the trip up the Congo River himself - according to *The Congo Diary*, written by Conrad himself - and Marlow is merely recalling the journey Conrad took. This enables readers to comprehend the author's true sentiment upon writing the book. Through Conrad's unique use of two narrators in the novella, Marlow's ambiguous character was established and Conrad could channel his voice and opinions through Marlow's character, the ambiguity upon Conrad's standpoint of the natives. My first impression of Marlow is that he has a very ambiguous persona.

The main ambiguity that arises in the novella is how Marlow feels about the natives. Marlow has racist notions as he refers to them as "savages" and looks down upon them. The passage he pointed out well explains this reference: "And between whiles I had to look after the savage who was fireman. He was an improved specimen; he could fire up a vertical boiler. He was there below me and, upon my word, to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat walking on his hind legs" (63).

This shows that Marlow considers the natives as savages, in a similar tone to what other Europeans supposedly call “civilizing” them. But at the same time, he commiserates the natives, having to give a Swedish biscuit to the Africans that symbolize brotherliness between white and black men. The equality amongst black and white, even women is seen through Marlow’s respect upon Kurtz’s intended in Africa. Marlow illustrates this native woman rather differently from the African slaves; she walks with measured steps, “draped in striped and fringed cloths, treading the earth proudly” and carries her head “high” (99).

She is said to be a “savage” like all the other Africans are described, yet “superb, wild-eyed, and magnificent.” Furthermore there is something “ominous and stately” in her deliberate progress. Unlike the other Africans who die under the cruelty of European civilization, this woman stands strongly with invisible, yet ineffable power. Through racist and non-racist notions of the natives, it is evident that Marlow is a very ambiguous character. Although the main “story-teller” is Marlow, Conrad’s voice is channeled through the narrator.

This is evident as Conrad’s portrayal of the natives is similar to Marlow’s. Conrad’s view upon the natives is also split, where racist notions are evident. “A black figure stood up, strode on long black legs, waving long black arms...” (106). Conrad employs the word “black” to describe the natives so often that it seems abnormal and awkward to meet the Africans without having the image of blackness throughout the novel. Not only does Conrad use the image of blackness but he also uses the image of whiteness as a contradiction.

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He describes one of the Africans wearing a European necklace using the words “ black” and “ white” at the same time: “ It looked startling round his black neck, this bit of white thread from beyond the seas” (35). Such contradictory words seem to emphasize the Africans being black even more. The way that Marlow sees this African seems more prejudiced for it looks “ startling” to have a “ black” native to wear a “ white” European necklace. But Conrad also stands on the side of Africans with sympathy and compassion at times, as he does not emphasize the “ greatness” of civilized Europe.

Instead he takes the side of the Africans with the sense of guilt and even abases European civilization, its cruel domination, and himself as a European. Through Marlow’s voice Conrad states “ They were dying slowly – it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now, – nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation ... ” (35). After seeing the exploitation of the natives, Conrad shows his sympathy through Marlow’s view upon the unbelievable scene. From Conrad and Marlow’s split opinion about the natives, it can be seen that the “ story-teller” is in fact same as the writer.

The novella consists of two narrators, the main narrator being Marlow and a minor character who is accompanying Marlow on the Nellie. Although he is a minor character, he plays an important role of balancing between the reality and Marlow’s reminiscence. In the beginning of the novella he differentiates the characters on board the Nellie, and filling in the gaps throughout Marlow’s Journey. “ The Director of Companies was our captain and our host

... He resembled a pilot" (15) he narrates, an unbiased opinion that is consistent.

But the crucial fact is that at the end of Marlow's story, the only one that is touched and moved is this narrator, while the others were indifferent about it. The Director simply mentions " we have lost the first of the ebb" (123), mainly concerned with the tide, whereas the narrator finishes the novella by exclaiming that " I raised my head. 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 into the heart of an immense darkness" (124).

The fact that the narrator learned a lesson through it enables the characters to relate to the narrator and form a relationship with him. This enables an enhanced reading and understanding of the novella. Through the use of two, first anonymous narrator, the novella adds on the ambiguity of the characters as well as a flow in the story. As the above excerpts of Conrad's novel suggest, the narrators play a significant role in delivering the story in the novella. Conrad successfully uses Marlow to channel his true opinion in the novella. I think Conrad's intentions reflect on the period of time the novel was written to justify his purpose.

During the time Conrad published this book, he had to consider the viewpoints of the public or his readers, and therefore he may not have been able to state his true view of the African natives straightforwardly. Literature, though the context stays the same, changes in interpretation of the readers as the time changes. In conclusion, Conrad being portrayed as Marlow in the

anecdote enables readers to explore the ambiguities of his view regarding the natives and to make their own interpretations, whether it may be an admiration or criticism of Conrad's work.