

# Restrictions and moderations in the composition "the heart of darkness"

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



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Joseph Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness' is not merely "the story of a journey up a river," but rather an insightful psychological study into the human condition and the hidden nature of mankind conveyed in the form of a narrative. Conrad explores his perception of the human psyche through the concept of 'restraint' and the ironic symbolism of light and dark imagery, delivered within the context of 19th century colonisation and imperialism. The value of the text to 21st century readers lies in the perennial nature of its psychological theme as the novella scrutinises the "heart of darkness" that exists within us all.

The motif of 'restraint' is present throughout 'Heart of Darkness,' with its significance becoming gradually substantiated as the novella delves deeper into its exploration of the human condition. Conrad observes, under the guise of Marlow, that restraint (most notably in the forms of societal expectations and work) both influences and suppresses human behaviours and decisions. This notion is illustrated through the portrayal of the Manager, a man who embodies the greed, hollowness and moral ambiguity of colonisation, and yet who managed not to lose himself in the "darkness" that he helped create. It is revealed that he saved himself from his dark desires through his "wish to preserve appearances. That was his restraint." As long as the Manager at least appeared civilised and fulfilled his expected social obligations (such as his reaction to Kurtz's death, in which "he considered it necessary to sigh, but neglected to be consistently sorrowful"), then he was able to measure a certain level of control over his mind and his subsequent actions. Marlow also considered work to be a suitable constraint, commenting on the starving cannibals' ability to concentrate on operating

the steamboat instead of satisfying their savage appetites. He was particularly impressed by their behaviour in that he “ would have just as soon expected restraint from a hyena prowling amongst the corpses of a battlefield.” The repeated emphasis on the theme of restraint in ‘ Heart of Darkness’ demonstrates the importance of self-control in remaining psychologically stable in an emotionally, ethically and spiritually unstable environment, in this case the 19th century colonised Congo.

In addition to the significance of possessing restraint, the gravity of lacking restraint and the associated consequences of that absence are considerable. Kurtz personifies the “ darkness” of the human condition and the devastating results of leading a compulsive, greedy, unrestrained life. Initially described as an “ emissary of pity, science and progress,” Kurtz’s fall from grace compounded itself in his self-appointed status as a local deity and complete loss of “ restraint”. His lust for ivory (the currency of the white man) had “ consumed his flesh and sealed his soul,” giving him a grotesquely “ voracious aspect” that offered the impression of his entire being, not just his soul, as being corrupted. “ Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts,” and so consequently fell under the illusion that he had power over those lusts - “ My Intended, my ivory, my station, my river...everything belonged to him.” It quickly becomes apparent, however, that those things which Kurtz felt belonged to him were not what mattered, but rather “ what he belonged to, how many powers of darkness claimed him for their own.” Even when ‘ rescued’ by Marlow, Kurtz makes a desperate effort to escape back to the wilderness, preferring to stay in the “ darkness,” knowing he’ll

lose his soul, then return to the restraining light of civilisation. Only moments before his death does the “ darkness” of Kurtz’s heart lift, allowing one last conclusive commentary on his life and humanity in general - “ The horror, the horror!” His words offer an insight into the true nature of mankind and a warning as to the consequences of lacking restraint and losing ourselves to the “ darkness.”

As illustrated, “ darkness” is symbolic of the human condition, and the evil, corrupt desires that accompany it. In contrast, “ light” is supposed to represent knowledge and enlightenment, a way of “ weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways.” However, in ‘ Heart of Darkness’ light/dark is not synonymous with good/bad, right/wrong - rather, Conrad has intertwined them in such a way as to render them indistinct from one another. He uses this duality as a way of explaining the dichotomy that exists between colonisation as something that brings civility and enlightenment and as something that brings violence, ignorance and “ darkness.” Kurtz understood this relationship, conveying the irony of the situation in a painting; a woman, blindfolded, carrying a torch. The torch symbolises the “ light” of knowledge that the Europeans are shining over the “ dark” wilderness of the Congo, the blindfold symbolising the ignorance of the emissaries. There are also references to the indiscriminate homicidal antics of the white pilgrims in comparison to the relative restrained composure of the black indigenous people, demonstrating a reversal of the perceived archetypes. Furthermore, the source of the metaphorical “ darkness” of the jungle and its inhabitants is white ivory, portraying another

ironic contradiction. In Conrad's view, "light" and "dark" is not a choice of right or wrong, but as to which is the better of two evils. The vague nature of the imagery is indicative of the contradictory nature of the human psyche and the hypocrisy of the human condition.

The enduring psychological theme of 'Heart of Darkness' ensures that it is never simply "the story of a journey up a river." It reveals the complex layers of ambiguity that form the mind and the true essence of what lies within our hearts. Without awareness of the potential singularity of "light" and "dark," or the understanding that by our very nature humans need limitations and restraints, we could follow Kurtz "into the heart of an immense darkness."