

Imagery, symbolism and motif in 'heart of darkness' assignment

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In this extract taken from the Novella, Heart of Darkness, Joseph Conrad explores many elements. Conrad uses a framing narrative; Marlow's narrative is framed by another narrative, in which the reader listens to Marlow's story told through one of those listening. The narrator remains unnamed as do the other listeners. The narration is told in the first-person plural, letting the reader know what each of the four listeners are thinking and feeling. It could be interpreted that the anonymity of the narrator represents the conventional perspective of an outsider, someone not involved.

One of the key aspects in the Novella is the way in which Conrad explores the depths of imagery, motif and symbolism. Arguably the biggest motif explored in Heart of Darkness is that of 'Light' and 'Darkness'. Conrad's use of 'light' and 'darkness' imagery is reflected through devices such as setting and atmosphere. The extract begins rich with imagery as Marlow talks of the "Light" that "came out of this river", emphasising the idea that through invasion, the Romans diminished the "darkness that was here yesterday" in their brief "flicker" of light.

This almost suggests what is to come, not only of the invasion of the natives but the impact that it will have on their own minds. Conrad mentions "a military camp lost in the wilderness" alongside "Knights" and "Romans". All of these could be interpreted as a symbol of the invasion that is to come. The foreshadowing is mostly shown through Conrad's use of imagery, which is consistently dark and threatening. It could be interpreted that the motifs of 'light' and 'darkness' signify what is to come later on in the novella.

The foreshadowing associations to invasion link with one of the main themes at the centre of Heart of Darkness, Imperialism. It seems almost a dark subject amongst the story which is reflected in Conrad's use of vivid descriptions and imagery. Africa was known as "The Dark Continent" in the Victorian era, Marlow refers to it throughout the novella as "one of the dark places on earth". The Thames conjures up images as the narrator retells the stories of 'Knights' and 'Romans' in a celebratory tone, calling them "knight errants" of the sea.

Conrad uses lots of 'light' imagery, "it is like a running blaze on a plain, like a flash of lightning in the clouds", and this implies that such voyages served a glorious, higher purpose. He explores the idea that Europe 'enlightened' the rest of civilization from their apparent 'darkness'. Conrad fills the whole novella with symbolic aspects of light and darkness, which plays the central role in Heart of Darkness. Both Africa and England share connotations of darkness, "a sea the color of lead, a sky the color of smoke, a kind of ship about as rigid as a concertina ???".

Through the use of such words like "lead" and "smoke", Conrad emphasises a true darkness to the setting. Darkness stands for the purity and innocence of the natives, whereas light symbolises the corruption, greed and exploitation of the white men. The contrast between light and dark parallels the idea of civilized and uncivilized. The light represents the civilization of the white men and the dark representing the uncivilized, almost savage lives of the natives. It makes the reader question which civilization really possesses the darkness.

Marlow wants to give "light" to all the Africans living in ignorance, educate them and gain control over them. Marlow suggests that the uncivilized savages degrade Europeans by placing them in the Congo and removing them from their "civilized" society. Thus, tempting them into 'uncivilized' behaviour, because of their surroundings and the 'darkness' of such a place. The symbolism of light and darkness could also emphasise the mental disintegration that we witness, as a result of one being removed from their normal social surroundings. They were men enough to face the darkness", Conrad insinuates the possibility of this "darkness" taking over one's mind. Conrad emphasises the darkness within mankind that is beneath the surface. He explores this through the characters of Marlow himself and Kurtz. He repeatedly forewarns of those "who tackle a darkness" and arguably Conrad uses darkness as a metaphor, perhaps signifying the inability to see. It could be interpreted as Marlow's inability to see and understand others.

Towards the end of the extract, the narrator repeats the disturbing line that Marlow says, "The fascination of the abomination ??? you know. Imagine the growing regrets, the longing to escape, the powerless disgust, the surrender, the hate." Marlow looks at things from the perspective of a Roman sea-captain, emphasising the idea that he's drawn to the darkness in the savage life and ultimately fills with hate when he surrenders to it. This again ultimately foreshadows what is to come of Kurtz and even Marlow himself.

Conrad uses comparisons between interiors and exteriors emphasising Marlow's interest in surfaces and surface meaning. Marlow speaks of his surroundings, "Sandbanks, marshes, forests, savages"; he doesn't delve

deeper through the surface. The Novella expands between 'good' and 'evil' and the struggle between the two. The interpretations of lightness and darkness we are familiar with is that of 'good' and 'evil', lightness being enlightenment and good and darkness associating with corruption and evil.

However, everything is almost reversed in the novella with darkness having connotations of enlightenment and truth and whiteness being false. This could be representing the races within Heart of Darkness and the darkness of the natives in comparison to the light of the Europeans. Conrad emphasises the dark capacity within every civilization. There is almost a reversal as the reader witnesses the darkness within the Europeans and the ivory, in which the trade is dark and dirty.

Conrad explores the idea of 'darkness' and 'light' through his use of motif, imagery and symbolism, making the reader delve beneath the surface. Throughout the whole novella, Marlow introduces three levels of darkness. Imagery is used to introduce the theme of darkness within the Congo, the cruel treatment of the natives and the capacity of darkness within every human being. This extract relates to the entire novella in the way it foreshadows what is to occur later on and in which the gradual build up of 'darkness' ultimately climaxes at the very end.