

Heart of darkness essay sample



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Heart of Darkness contains two layers of narration. The outer narrator is a passenger on the pleasure ship *The Nellie*, who hears Marlow recount one of his “inconclusive experiences” (21) as a riverboat captain in Africa. This unnamed narrator speaks for not only himself, but also the four other men who listen to Marlow’s story. He breaks into Marlow’s narrative infrequently; mainly to remark on the audience’s reaction to what Marlow is saying. He is omniscient only with respect to himself, since he cannot tell what the others on the boat are thinking.

The inner, and main narrator of *Heart of Darkness* is Marlow. He tells the other passengers of his story “into the heart of darkness” (62) in the first person singular, and the only thoughts the reader has access to are Marlow’s. This novel has two separate settings. The frame narrative is set in London, England, aboard “*The Nellie*, a cruising yawl, [that had] swung to her anchor without a flutter of the sails, and was at rest” (15). She is anchored in the Thames River, where her passengers wait for the tide to go out. The second setting is that of Marlow’s actual tale.

In it, he travels first to Company Headquarters in Brussels, then to the Belgian Congo in Africa. Much of the story takes place as Marlow fights his way down the Congo River, deep in the jungle. After accomplishing his mission, Marlow returns to Belgium to visit Kurtz’s intended. All of this happens sometime towards the latter part of the 19th century, when imperialism in Africa was at its highest, and the ivory trade was thriving. Our Service Can Write a Custom Essay on *Heart of Darkness* for You! Marlow is a complicated, round, dynamic character in *Heart of Darkness*.

He travels into the Congo to find a man, Kurtz, that he doesn't know, but begins to admire him nonetheless. Marlow comments to his listeners on The Nellie that “ The point was in [Kurtz] being a gifted creature, and that of all his gifts the one that stood out pre-eminently, that carried with it a sense of real presence, was his ability to talk, his words – the gift of expression, the bewildering, the illuminating, the most exalted and the most contemptible, the pulsating stream of light, or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness” (79). In this one comment, Marlow reveals much about his character.

Although he entered Africa with at least an inkling that imperialism was a positive thing, he quickly learned the truth: that it was driven by greed and lust alone. Marlow is torn by that “ deceitful flow”, because he recognizes what it is, but cannot distance himself from it. At the end, he becomes part of the “ deceitful flow” by lying to Kurtz's intended, despite the fact that he had a good motive. Kurtz is portrayed in Heart of Darkness as a veritable renaissance man. He is not only an excellent writer, painter, poet, and musician, but a world-class orator as well.

These skills, along with several guns, are what make the natives worship him. When Marlow asks about Kurtz as he travels to meet him, he is merely told, “ Mr Kurtz is a very remarkable person” (37). This may be an understatement, since at that very moment Kurtz was a god to the villagers he sacrificed. Kurtz is a round character, and dynamic as well. He espoused the idealism of imperialism and the pure side of the European presence in Africa, and traveled to the Congo in order to bring civilization and culture to the savages, or whatever it was they thought they were doing.

In time, however, the evil that surrounded him made its way into his heart, and he became worse than anything about imperialism he imposed. Kurtz continually talks about progress, enlightenment, and kindness in the European presence in Africa. In his actions, however, he murders the natives, steals whatever they have, and allows himself to become their deity. These sides clashing within him are probably what drive him to madness. The General Manager runs the Central Station on the Congo for the ivory company.

He embodies the ideas of imperialism with his greed and lack of compassion. It was a mixture of greed and evil that “inspired uneasiness” (42) in those around him. Marlow noticed when first meeting him that “His eyes, of the usual blue, were perhaps remarkably cold, and he certainly could make his glance fall on one as trenchant and heavy as an axe” (41). Conrad makes it clear to the reader that even though the Manager is a detestable little prick, he is required, by capitalism, to be that way to survive.

The only reason that he has the office is that he managed to outlive his competition, and he gives us a clue as to how. When the General Manager begins to fear that Kurtz may take his position from him, he simply cuts off his lifeline. He stops all food and supplies going to Kurtz, effectively forcing him into insanity. The manager is flat and static, and exemplifies the evil of imperialism. The Russian trader is a static, somewhat flat character. He is one of Kurtz's disciples and admires him to a fault. He is exuberant and youthful, but not terribly deep.

Towards the end, when Marlow provides him with some cartridges and tobacco, he “seemed to think himself excellently equipped for a renewed adventure in the jungle” (103). He is an outstanding example of what happens when strong will's and flowery speeches (Kurtz) meet weak and yielding minds (the Russian). Kurtz's intended is a flat, static character. She doesn't change at all in the time Kurtz is gone, although part of that is not her fault. She might have changed, if Marlow had given her the opportunity.

Instead, she was told, “[Kurtz's] last words were of [her]” (107). She is loyal to Kurtz however, although that is really her only quality, good or bad. She is presented as the other females in this novel are; one-dimensional and naive. The tone of Heart of Darkness is dark and oppressive. Phrases like “Not a living thing was seen on the shore” (96) allow for a feeling of not only isolation, but a bit of fear as well. A sense of darkness is brought about in this story, though exactly what the darkness is and what is causing it remain a mystery.

The tone is also somewhat bleak, because as Marlow gets closer to Kurtz, he develops a higher and higher opinion of the man, which is crushed when he realizes that he has gone mad. There is an overall sense of emptiness that encompasses this story, but oppressive and dark sum it up very well. Conrad uses his writing style to effectively create an oppressive and ominous tone in Heart of Darkness. Just as Marlow is being suffocated by the heat and density of the jungle he is fighting against, so the reader is being suffocated by the long, wordy, excessively detailed book.

Any reader must struggle with passages like “ We had a glimpse of the towering multitude of trees, of the immense matted jungle, with the blazing sun hanging over it – all perfectly still” (68). This style works amazingly well however, because it allows the reader to relate to Marlow in a more personal way than would be possible if the book were a light, easy to read story. “ Kurtz – that means “ short” in German – don’t it? Well, the name was as true as everything else in his life – and death. He looked at least seven feet long” (97).

Marlow’s statement to his audience sums up many of the ironies in Heart of Darkness. Everything Marlow thought about Kurtz turned out to be untrue, as did Kurtz’s own ideas. Another irony in the novel is the fact that “ Mr Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts” (95), in reference to his human sacrifices, and the subsequent head impaling. The irony, however, is that Marlow is making this comment about Kurtz, when earlier he remarked how the cannibals exhibited a great deal of restraint, in terms of not eating any of the pilgrims.

Through the story, Marlow never looked upon the Africans as people, and several times compared them to animals. He calls one of them “ a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind legs” (64). And yet the man who he had admired most turned out to be less of a human than what he thought the natives were. The overriding theme in Heart of Darkness is that all of man’s good intentions, thoughts, and ideas mean nil when compared to all of man’s evil intentions, thoughts, and ideas. Mixed into that is the madness that results when those two sides of human nature collide.

Evidence of such insanity is prevalent throughout the novel, such as when Marlow happens upon a French ship, “ incomprehensibl[ly] firing into a continent” (30). Again, when a fire breaks out and Marlow “ noticed there was a hold in the bottom of [a man’s] pail” (44), which he was using to try to put out the fire. The larger theme is revealed towards the end of the story, when Marlow discovers what Kurtz truly is. A man who came to the Congo with grand ideas of reform and progress, who was unable to stave off the evil that surrounded him, and finally let it into his heart.

Heart of Darkness is a novel rich in symbols. Fog and smoke are a symbol that recurs throughout the story, obscuring Marlow’s view of the river. More symbolically, they do not allow him to see the truth (about several things) until it is too late to turn back, or to change it. The fog prevents him from anticipating the attack on the steamer from the riverbank, just as it, in a larger sense, prevents him from getting to Kurtz until it is too late to save him. The smoke obstructs his view of Kurtz’s mistress at the end of the story.

Only the barbarous and superb woman did not so much as flinch, and stretched tragically her bare arms after is over the sombre and fluttering river” (109). “ And then that imbecile crowd down on the deck started their little fun, and I could see nothing more for smoke” (109). The smoke prevents Marlow from knowing exactly what happened to Kurtz’s mistress, although he can surely guess. The smoke also shields him, and the pilgrims, from many of the truths about Africa, imperialism, and themselves.

The Congo River is also a prominent symbol in this novel. The river almost has a life force of its own. It impeded Marlow’s progress upriver, but “ The

brown current ran swiftly out of the heart of darkness, bearing us down towards the sea with twice the speed of our upward progress" (109). It would seem then, that the river wants them out of Africa. On another level, the river is symbolic of the struggle of Africa as a whole against European imperialism. A less obvious symbol presents itself towards the close of Marlow's story.

When Marlow visits the Company Headquarters in Brussels, he notices a color coded map of Africa, on which Britain is represented in red, and France in blue. Much later in the story, just before Marlow leaves with Kurtz, he gives the Russian trader some cartridges, and some tobacco. " One of his pockets (bright red) was bulging with cartridges, from the other (dark blue) peeped " Towson's Inquiry" (103). This is probably symbolic of the policies Britain and France had towards their African, and other, colonies during the height of imperialism.

Britain was known for using somewhat violent tactics to accomplish their goals, and refused to view any of the natives as equal to them in any way, hence the bullets. France, on the other hand, believed that anyone who learned and practiced both French customs and the French language was an equal, which would explain the tobacco. In addition " The French were pansies" (Huffine). The title, Heart of Darkness, effectively summarizes the theme of the story. In every man's heart, evil (or darkness, as in the title) will inevitably overwhelm the good.

As was demonstrated by Kurtz, simply being surrounded by evil is enough for it to invade one's being. Heart of Darkness also has a more literal sense, in

that Marlow travels deeper and deeper into the middle of Africa. At this time, Africa was known as the “ Dark Continent”, because it was shrouded in mystery and horror, so someone totally oblivious to the theme wouldn’t necessarily have to read anything into the title, since it is a literal truth. I only enjoyed this book after I was finished reading it. The incredibly long detail segments were just not doing it for me on a summer day.

However, because I did not have to read it again to write this paper, I am now thoroughly enjoying this novel. I love how rich in symbolism and theme and history and everything that it is. I especially enjoyed researching French and British imperialism to understand more where Marlow was coming from. I also like how men were described as “ flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil[s] of rapacious and pitiless folly” (34). I’m going to use that next time I want to insult someone. In all, this was not a fun book to read, but it is proving to be highly enjoyable to analyze and write about.