

Symbolism in "heart of darkness"

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



Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* tells the tale of a sailor, a petty trader and commander, as well as a tyrannical company, through symbolic hidden meanings and irony. Ultimately bringing forth, the true meaning of the novella. Throughout *Heart of Darkness*, how these figurative elements are executed, lures the reader and envelopes them in a novella that reveals the truth of colonialism and the influence it has on the whites and minorities, making this work worthy of study in a literature course.

Conrad uses symbolism in an attempt to reveal the truth of colonialism and the influence it has on the whites and minorities. For instance, Kurtz and the river, both are more than what they appear to be; a man and a natural unit. The symbol is something used to insinuate that one has to look below the surface, dig deeper, in order to find the hidden meaning. As you read the novel, you come to find that the ringmaster of the heart of darkness found within the Congo, is Kurtz. Kurtz, the central figure of the novel, symbolizes many things. For one, he represents the great influence the individuals found in the Congo, referred to as savages, have on the man believed to be civilized and insane. Kurtz also represents the power hungry and greedy whites as he leads the savages to do what he ultimately desires, which is to be treated and referred to as a god like figure. While attempting to train the savages he turned into one himself. Kurtz hurt others with no remorse as he climbed the ladder of success he had built himself during his time in the Congo.

Another major figure is Marlow, he too has a symbolic role in the novel. Marlow symbolizes the spirit one would find in a student. He seeks new knowledge constantly and like a child, curiosity. Once he absorbs something

new during his journey, he takes a moment to observe it, analyze the human behavior, and categorize it regarding morals/values. After some time, Marlow, similarly to Kurtz, begins to show the influence savagery can have on a civilized man and how everyone contains that darkness within them. One of the minor characters in the book, the manager of the central station, symbolizes futility. Day by day he works like a machine and holds the same characteristics as one as well; unable to fear, love, or respect. The manager, similar to a set of machinery, is empty. Perhaps one of the most important symbols in this book, one that is not a character but an object, is ivory. The novel revolves around ivory, symbolizing the white man's greed. The individuals in the novel scour the Congo in search of this for a chance of success and superiority. All things found in the Heart of Darkness have a deeper meaning than one may initially believe so. Through the use of symbolism Conrad reveals the truth of colonialism and the influence it has on the whites and minorities, making this work worthy of study in a literature course.

Conrad uses irony to uncover the hidden meaning in the Heart of Darkness. Irony can be described as something that is said versus what actually occurs or is true. There are many ironic situations in the novel, one of the two most important ones, regard to the two greater figures in the novel. One being the influence the Congo had on Kurtz who before traveling there, was a successful agent for a company that wrote an informative brochure on the so called ' amazing impact whites have on the Congo as a whole; including its savages. The form states how the whites can tame the savages and transform them into civilized human beings. However, their way of causing

this transformation is extremely savage-like, making the entire situation an irony. They have become accustomed to inflicting pain on the savages and killing them in order to cause fear. Fear would then cause order and this is what they advertise to accomplish. Also, Kurtz is believed to be one of the best to civilize the savages due to his great moral restraint. This is an irony within an irony. Not only is their way of civilizing the savages immoral but Kurtz also allows his position in the Congo get to his head, leading him to become a savage himself. In the civilized man's attempt to transform a savage he was unable to control his moral self and became a savage himself. During his time there, Kurtz becomes so power-hungry that he begins to order the savages to worship him as if he were a god and to scour the Congo for ivory so that he too can be successful and above all, far more superior than the rest. Him being a part of a company that speaks of being able to civilize savages and then being easily transformed into a savage himself, is one of the greatest ironies the novella holds. The execution of these ironic moments and how they blend into one another seamlessly not to mention how well they compliment each other, make it worthy of study in a literature course.

From the beginning, Conrad brings the reader aboard the *Nellie* in a tale saturated with ironies and symbolism. His execution of these two figurative elements lures the reader into the Congo alongside Marlow for a tale of horror. Conrad reveals the truth of colonialism and the influence it has on the whites and minorities, making this work worthy of study in a literature course.