"the dark horror: dark imagery in heart of darkness”

Literature, Novel

In Joseph Conrad’s The Heart of Darkness, Mr. Kurtz’s chilling final words reveal his epiphany about the true nature of man. He has come to realize that the flickering light of his own morals could not overcome the darkness of his human nature. By weaving images of dark and light throughout the book, Conrad gives the reader a true sense of the darkness and “ the horror!” present inside every man (239). Through Marlow’s journey into the darkness of the Congo, Conrad’s use of light and dark imagery as well as symbolism indicate that he is also on a journey into the deepest recesses of the darkness of his soul. Marlow’s first words to break the silence in the novel set the dark tone of his tale. He states that “ this also has been one of the dark places of the earth” (138). With Britain’s role in colonization, it truly has become a place marred with darkness. He describes the river Thames as a “ running blaze on a plain, like a flash of lightning in the clouds,” a flash of bright surrounded by the dark sins of the British civilization (139). All that Marlow sees and experiences leads him to this conclusion, and his narrative is his attempt to convey this knowledge to his shipmates as well as grapple with the harsh reality himself. As the “ only man of [the group] who still ‘ follow[s] the sea,'” Marlow has the capacity to reach this far into the heart of man and discriminate the blurred line between light and darkness (138). He is like the ancient Romans who were “ men enough to face the darkness” (139). Marlow, however, would not have this capacity if it were not for his journey and encounter with Kurtz. The journey, however, is ultimately “ one of Marlow’s inconclusive experiences” because the internal battle between light and dark can never be concluded, only merely acknowledged (141). Marlow’s second mention of dark imagery comes through the symbol of the

map2E Showing his taste for adventure and exploration, as a boy Marlow is fascinated by the “ blank space[s] of delightful mystery” dotting the map (142). As time progresses, explorers ‘ fill-in’ those light spaces, filling the emptiness with the “ darkness” of “ rivers and lakes and names” (142). Conrad uses this light and dark image on this level to illustrate the spread of the dark side of human nature through the British exploration. The pale white innocent spaces seem ideal for colonization and the spread of righteousness. Unfortunately, in the actuality of the situation, the darkness of man comes through bleeds like ink across the continent when man is exposed to the jungle. This infestation of evil is illustrated through the destruction of Kurtz’s “ white” moral fortitude and the cowardly evil of the Manager2E Marlow sees Kurtz as a man with the true mission of doing something right with the world. When Marlow finally reaches Kurtz, he sees that “ the horror” inside Kurtz’s soul has flourished in the jungle and snuffed out his moral flame. The manager, on the other hand, is simply an empty cowardly evil, without any moral flicker. Marlow’s next use of light and dark imagery comes in the “ whited sepulchre” of Brussels (145). Conrad uses this allusion to the Bible to illustrate the hypocrisy of the city, like a sepulchre that “ indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men’s bones, of all uncleanness” (Matthew 23: 27-28). Like the later image of the “ paper-mch Mephistopheles,” the “ whited sepulchre” has an ideal outward appearance with only darkness inside (171). This duality allows Conrad to point out Brussles’ hypocritical treatment of colonization, using moralist propaganda under the false pretense of “ civilizing the natives” to guise their greedy, evil actions. The Company inherently is also a “ whited sepulchre,”

as it carries out the evil purpose. As Marlow approaches the Company's building, he is escorted inside by one of two women who are " knitting black wool" (145). The knitting women are an allusion to the Fates of Greek mythology. The symbol of their black wool and their silence sets a foreboding tone upon the scene. As the women weave their twisting black threads, they present the idea of Marlow's pre-woven destiny. He even must move out of one of their way as if she was a " somnambulist," walking without conscious control of her destination (145). The dark threads they weave for Marlow will lead him twisting down the Congo and into understanding of his own dark immoral fibers. Conrad's use of the black wool foreshadows the evil that Marlow's fate will lead him to experience, and further extends the image of darkness. As Marlow continues his tale, his illustration of light and dark becomes more passionate and pointed. " I've seen the devil of violence, and the devil of greed, and the devil of hot desire; but, by all the stars! These were strong, lusty, red-eyed devils, that swayed and drove men- men, I tell you. But as I stood on the hillside, I foresaw that in the blinding sunshine of that land I would become acquainted with a flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly. How insidious he could be, too, I was only to find out several months later" (155). The blinding sunshine reveals to Marlow the true " savages" of the Congo. In the Jungle, Marlow's description of the appearance of the savages places them as " black shapes crouched, lay, sat between trees, leaning against trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced with dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair" (156). These dark savages have been " half effaced" with the " light" of British civilization. They are still a weak starving

people, and have “ all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair.” Through this description, Conrad is illustrating Marlow’s realization of the innocence of what once were thought to be merely uncivilized savages. In actuality, it is the colonists, pale skinned and clad in white, that represent the true evil. Their “ white cuffs,.. 2Elight alpaca jacket[s]. snowy trousers, a clear silk necktie, and varnished boots”(157) only hide the fact that they are hollow to the core, a true representation of the “ paper-mch Mephistopheles.” Conrad illustrates the white man’s attempt to cover their evil with the faade of civilization through the white clothing over their dark, empty conscience. Like the painting on the wall of the Central Station, the light of their misdirected ‘ morals’ casts them in a “ sinister” light (169). The light they bring into this dark world brings out their true evil, just like the woman walking in a “ stately” manner through the darkness. The ultimate illustration of light verses dark in the novel occurs within Kurtz himself. Going into the Congo as a shining light of moral fortitude, Kurtz gains the respect of those around him and the envy of those who cannot produce ivory to his standards. By gaining the respect of the natives, Kurtz’s original moral reserve helps him to gain a leg up in the ivory trade. However, the true “ horror” of the world around him and the “ horror” of the deepest regions of his soul overcome him, driving him to rule with an iron fist. Seemingly a failure, Kurtz’s moral flicker dims and his moral purpose becomes obscured. However, he manages to do what none of the other “ hollow men” are able to. Kurtz is able to recognize his folly and “ the horror!” of his human nature. Marlow originally attributes Kurtz’s behavior with his disconnection with civilization. “ Never before, did this land, this river, this jungle, the very arch

of this blazing sky, appear to me so hopeless and so dark, so impenetrable to human thought, so pitiless to human weakness" (217). Marlow discovers, as Kurtz does in his dying words, that the true reason is not the darkness around but the darkness within. " Being in the wilderness, [he] had looked within [himself]" (235). Once again, the images of light and dark bring his revelation, when he reaches Kurtz he is " transported into some lightless region of subtle horrors, where pure uncomplicated savagery was a positive relief, being something that had a right to exist- obviously- in the sunshine" (222). Kurtz's allows his savage interior to expose itself, but his intentions are still good. "[The tribe] adored him," (218) he used his savagery to attain his ends, but by not masking his evil, he is more of a man than any of the other members of the Company. He is not a " flabby…weak-eyed devil," he is simply a man with morals that does not need the bland white veil of " civilization." With this knowledge, it is clear why Kurtz is Marlow's choice of evils. Conrad brings the images of light and dark into The Heart of Darkness on many levels, good and evil, civilization and savagery, knowledge and ignorance. In the end, Kurtz's final words bring the ultimate meaning of the darkness, " the horror," to the forefront. Marlow's journey has reached deep within his soul as he sees how Kurtz, like himself, has moral reserve. By recognizing the darkness also present within the heart of every man, and accepting it, Kurtz has become one of the whole men, whereas most of the British colonists have constructed themselves in denial of their true human nature, constructing a hollow shell of fake " civilization" with nothing left within. Their " blind pitiless folly" is the only true evil of the novel, as it is darkness without substance.