

Conrad's africa; a key to heart of darkness

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In his novel, *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad comments on man's capacity for evil. Through this tale of European imperialism, Conrad takes the reader from the streets of London to the jungles of Africa, contrasting the civilized, outer world and the dark, inner frontier. While being somewhat autobiographical, the story is related to the reader by a seaman, who collects the tale from one of his fellows on a ship as they sail away from London. The first-hand experience is that of Charlie Marlow, who is inspired to tell his story by the London skyline, as he describes it as "also... one of the dark places of the earth," (p. 67). The other dark place that Marlow is referring to is the African jungle. For several pages, Marlow tells his fellows about the inner jungle as he and his steamboat entered it (105-8). These pages set the mood of the jungle sequences, provide Marlow with the adventure and the answers that he has been pursuing, suggesting some major themes of the novel. The journey into the jungle describes the dark, mysterious, and isolated setting in which the reader will meet Kurtz. Through descriptions of "rioting vegetation," and "implacable, vengeful silence" (106), the reader begins to feel small and threatened, truly understanding how "uncivilized" and wild the jungle seems to the white Europeans who search through it. The images of the dark trees and the black natives perpetuate the darkness in the mood. Even the light that is described is not comforting; "There was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine," (105). Conrad also conveys an amount of danger present in the jungle as Marlow relates the careful attention he had given to snags, stones, the shore, and anything else that might sink the steamer. Conrad creates a feeling of mystery by involving magical imagery. He describes the white men, who come to greet

the passing steamer, as having “ the appearance of being held there captive by a spell,” (107), and the natives as performing strange, magical rituals (108). The feeling of isolation is continued in Conrad’s comparison of the steamer to a sluggish beetle overwhelmed as it trundles through the dense foliage, Trees, trees, millions of trees, massive, immense running up high; and at their foot, hugging the bank against the stream, crept the little begrimed steamboat, like a sluggish beetle crawling on the floor of a lofty portico.(107) Later, the jungle is described as closing in behind the steamboat as it travels further inside, which also adds to the mood of isolation. As the steamer trundles along, Marlow’s quest for adventure and truth further emerges in the jungle. Marlow is taken with the realities of the jungle. However, he confesses he does not understand them, and ironically, he shies away from it. The jungle only hints at the realities it presents, while the “ inner truth is hidden,” (106). This perception of the concealed truth is developed further by Conrad’s descriptions of the “ impenetrable forest,” (105) as if the jungle’s secrets were kept behind the wall of trees. Marlow describes the outside world in contrast to the jungle,...it came in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream, remembered with wonder amongst the overwhelming realities of this strange world... it was the stillness of an implacable force... it looked at you with vengeful aspect...(106) Marlow escapes the uncomfortable silence only by doing his practical, commonplace tasks to ensure the safety of the steamer and the passengers. He calls them “ monkey tricks,” as if the silent jungle that holds the truth is mocking these supposedly important tasks from the outer world. Marlow admits that, because he is part of a civilized, advanced society, he cannot comprehend

the reality that the jungle is offering, " We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings... we could not understand because we were too far and could not remember because we were traveling in the night of the first ages," (108). This bewilderment is also exhibited when the drums of the natives break the silence of the jungle. Marlow cannot understand what is meant by the drums, and thereby is missing the essence of the jungle; the heart beat of the heart of darkness. His confusion adds fuel to his drive to meet Kurtz, " Where the pilgrims imagined it crawled to I don't know. To some place where they expected to get something... for me it crawled for Kurtz," (107). This statement also shows Marlow's honest motives, as opposed to those of the other passengers, for joining the expedition; Marlow is in search for the truth. Since Kurtz has experienced both the outer world and the jungle world, Marlow hopes that Kurtz will interpret the mysteries with which he is presented. In this way, Marlow's journey is further defined and motivated by the mysteries and hints that the jungle provides him. The jungle's primordial and isolated description suggests the theme of the natural essential nature of man. Conrad's text states that man has a natural lust for domination, which is expressed covertly within the laws of society. Those who are out of society's reach (" a policeman, a neighbor"), are free to utilize this lust outright, as Kurtz does. This is the truth that the jungle implies and that Kurtz exemplifies. However, Kurtz's genius is not in this utilization of his natural desire but in his acknowledgement of that desire in its bare, unmasked state, and of that desire in others. He shows this knowledge through his painting of the blindfolded woman, making her way into the darkness, trying to illuminate

something that she does not understand or see. The woman represents England attempting to dominate the dark, savage world under the pretense of enlightenment without ever really knowing what that world is like. This theme runs throughout the novel, but is only implied as the steamer enters the jungle. Conrad indicating a raw, essential aspect of the setting, refers to the jungle and its inhabitants as pre-historic, " We were wanderers on a pre-historic earth..." (108). This introduces the theme of man's natural state, and, as mentioned before, the way society creates an impediment to this natural state. Conrad's description of the primal setting turns the jungle into a wild, elemental environment that allows a " civilized" man to utilize his primal desire for domination. The constant references to isolation perpetuate the idea of the jungle as a boundless place: " You lost your way on that river as you would in a desert, and butted all day long against shoals... till you thought yourself... cut off for ever from everything you had known once" (105). Through his depiction of the jungle, Conrad introduces the theme of man's " natural" state. As Marlow recounts his experience while traveling into the African jungle, he shares the mood, journey, and theme of the novel with his fellow seamen. With all these elements incorporated into it, the jungle setting is one of the most significant of all the settings in the novel, Heart of Darkness. It is this description that allows Conrad to set the mood for the rest of the novel, continue Marlow's journey, and emphasize his commentary on man at the turn of the century.