

Symbolism in "heart of darkness" by joseph conrad essay sample

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Symbolism is an effective tool used by authors to construct meaning beyond the boundaries of literal understanding. It is the process by which ideas are expressed through the use of imagery that conveys meaning beyond its own physicality. In the novella –Heart of Darkness, Joseph Conrad uses symbolism to interrogate ideas and judgments of the imperialist ideology. Imperialism argues that colonization benefits both the colonized and the empire yet it looks to excuse its violent methods that ironically, defy its principles. In Heart of Darkness visual imagery and symbolic character construction such as, the Whited Sepulcher, the character of the accountant, the Thames and Congo rivers, Kurt’s painting and the map of Africa are used to challenge the pretences of the imperialist ideology and expose the gap between its ideals and its practice. Symbols therefore become tools to interrogate entire concepts.

Marlow’s recounting of arriving, “ In a city that always makes me think of a whited sepulcher,” within the context of a colonialist reading challenges the assumptions that surround the civilized cities of the world. The image of a sepulcher is one of death and confinement defying the expectation of a peaceful and harmonious city. The attributes of death symbolize the inhumanity of the empire and, “ The merry dance of death and trade,” whilst the image of confinement highlights the rigid social expectations that enable and encourage both cruelty and dehumanization under Belgian rule. Under a biblical reading the book of Mathew describes “ whited sepulchers” as

something beautiful on the outside but containing horrors within, dead bodies. Through this religious symbolism Conrad interrogates that the, “redeeming idea,” the “philanthropic pretence,” that Imperialism draws its very foundations from is merely a cover for, the “horror,” that continues behind the backs of the naive people.

The character of the accountant is a symbolic representation of the attitudes and values of the imperialist conquest. He is a heartless character, the epitome of painstaking bureaucracy whose only concern is profit. His dedication to wealth and indifference to suffering is expressed in his ironic remark, “When one has got to make correct entries, one comes to hate those savages – hate them to death.” The ironic characterization of the accountant describing his immaculate appearance as, “achievements of character,” portrays imperialism’s devotion to efficiency based on its complete lack of humanity. In fact the utter disregards for the twisted bodies in the grove of death as he steps out to, “get a breath of fresh air,” call into question the entire humanitarian motivation. By juxtaposing the symbolic representation of the flawless accountant with the horror and disorder of the Congo Conrad depicts the disturbing secrets of the colonialist venture that defy its charitable front.

Heart of Darkness powerfully juxtaposes the symbolic depiction of two different rivers, the Thames and the Congo, leading the reader to question the ideological theory behind Imperialism. The Thames River is portrayed in a heroic light by the unnamed narrator. “What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that great river into the mystery of an unknown earth!” The

Narrative voice of this point of view constructs the idea that Europe is the center of the civilized world reaching out to the unknown earth. However, Marlow's recalling that this land also "has been one of the dark places of the earth," challenges this idea. This point of view brings the satirical argument that the "sand-banks, marshes, forests, savages" of the Thames were once feared by the all powerful Romans. In comparing the Roman conquest of England with the Imperialist, "Conquest of the earth," Marlow's symbolic juxtaposition of the two rivers and their respective histories undermines the colonial discourse and interrupts the narrow viewed nationalism that defines the colonialist idea.

The symbolic image of the map of Africa disrupts the conventional inspiration behind the colonialist venture and challenges its right to, "robbery with violence." In the beginning of the novella the reader sees Marlow's naive passion for the uncivilized reaches of the earth yet his description of the map of Africa contradicts colonial belief. "It was not a blank space anymore...it had become a place of darkness." Conrad's ironic reversal of the binary opposition of black and white imagery interrogates that white men have turned Africa into a place of darkness.

Kurtz's enigmatic painting is another symbolic tool interrogating the naivety of the colonialist venture. The image of a blindfolded woman carrying a lighted torch that obscures her face carries three symbolic ideas all drenched in irony. The narrative voice of the novel casts women as naïve and in a "beautiful world of their own," yet the woman in the painting symbolically represents Europe. This interrogates that like the woman they

have suppressed; the colonialist venture is itself, naive and stupid. The torch she carries is “The spark from the sacred fire,” a symbol of European customs being forced upon the Africans. Yet the fact that she is blindfolded whilst carrying an instrument of light symbolizes the idea that Imperialism is blind to the destruction it causes. The image of the sacred fire brings an allusion to the Greek myth of Prometheus, who stole fire from the gods. Thus the text suggest the empire is a metaphorical god charged with the task of bringing good to the world when ironically they stole from the lands they swore to civilize.

In conclusion, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* uses symbols to interrogate abstract ideas and concepts. The symbolic imagery and characterization in the novella conveys meaning that undercuts the motives of the imperialist ideology and exposes the dark holes in its morals. The symbolic image of the whited sepulcher challenges the assumptions of a civilized society casting the city of Marlow's departure as a place of beautiful exteriors concealing undeniable horrors.

The characterization of the accountant as a symbolic representation of the greedy and self obsessed Imperialist movement challenges its philanthropic pretences whilst the juxtaposition of the brutal Belgian conquest of The Congo with the Roman conquest of England destabilizes the bubble of naïve nationalism that surrounds the colonialist venture. Finally the symbolic imagery of the map of Africa, Kurt's painting and the mythological allusion to the sacred fire position the reader to see the inherent flaws of a mission blind to the consequences of its actions. Joseph Conrad uses symbolism to

create complex meaning beyond the literal boundaries of the symbols themselves. Thus the text challenges the bureaucracy and hypocrisy that Imperialism is defined upon.

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