

Heart of disease and
starvation, lying
confusedly



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Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad In Joseph Conrad's novel, 'Heart of Darkness', the term "darkness" can be related to a few different meanings. Conrad uses this term in various ways to characterize social, political and psychological affairs in order to help the reader get a feel of his attitudes towards things, such as colonialism, Africa, and civilization. The first impression of the word "darkness" in relations to this novel that I understood was its reference to racism. This, I got from the way Conrad writes about the White people and how they treated the natives (Black), in Africa. During the colonization of Africa, forced ideals of a race that thought of themselves as more superior than those who occupied that land before them existed.

This is demonstrated as Conrad writes about how the Whites completely dominate the Blacks in Africa. A significant passage from the novel illustrating this point is when Marlow describes, "Black shapes crouched, lay... The work was going on..

. this was the place where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die...

they were nothing earthly now, nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom" (34-35). The natives were not "helpers", but slaves who were forced to work till physical exhaustion under the orders of the White colonist. To further support the idea of racism as seen in this novel, consider the description that Marlow gives about an incident he encounters, "And while I had to look after the savage who was a fireman..

. to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind-legs... he was useful because he had been

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instructed" (63-64). From this, Conrad acknowledges that although the natives take on some White characteristics, they are still seen as inferior. In that passage, the fireman is seen as a joke.

Not as a man, but a "dog in breeches". Therefore, no matter how educated or similar in appearance the Blacks become, they are still seen as being beneath the Whites. The natives are not given any personal traits or uniqueness unless they possess a similarity to the Whites. Even then we see no glimpse of humanity in their characters through Conrad's writing. From racism, the idea of civilization is brought about in terms of "darkness". Conrad uses the contrast of light and dark with relation to the civilized and the uncivilized.

The light of course, represents civilization or the civilized side of the world and the dark, more importantly represents the uncivilized or savage side of the world. From the passages quoted earlier, when Marlow calls the workers "black shadows of disease and starvation" (35), Conrad is reinforcing the idea that Blacks and the dark images they project are uncivilized and they are nothing to be wishing for. However, through Conrad's reiteration of Marlow's experience, there was an interesting aspect of the slaves seen. The reality is that these Blacks are what created the civilized life for the Whites. The Blacks are being used by the civilized, in turn making them uncivilized.

But, the fact remains that the Whites may be considered the savages for working these Blacks to death. However, as ironic as it may seem, their view was that the natives were there to be conquered. All in all, Conrad writes about civilization versus savagery.

Through the novel, he implies that the setting of laws and codes that would encourage men to achieve higher standards is what creates civilization. It prevents men from reverting back to their darker tendencies. Civilization, however, must be learned. London itself, in the book is a symbol of enlightenment, "was once" one of the darker places of the earth" before the Romans forced civilization upon them (18).

While society seems to restrain these savage lifestyles, it does not get rid of them. These primitive tendencies will always be like a black cloth lurking in the background. The possibility of reverting back to savagery is seen in Kurtz. When Marlow meets Kurtz, he finds a man that has totally thrown off the restraints of civilization and has de-evolved into a primitive state. Marlow and Kurtz are two opposite examples of the human condition.

Kurtz represents what every man will become if left to his own natural desires without a protective civilized environment. Marlow represents the civilized soul that has not been drawn back into savagery by a dark, alienated jungle. This darkness that Conrad writes about can also mean the wilderness in which the