

The Use of Obscure Imagery
in Joseph Conrad's
"Heart of Darkness"

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For nearly one hundred years now, critics have been attempting to discern the reasons for Joseph Conrad's style of imagery in *Heart of Darkness*. Was it meant simply as a travelogue, or was a deeper message envisioned? Was Marlow on a voyage of geographic or of spiritual discovery? Most critical reviews of *Heart of Darkness* ascribe a wide array of symbolic importance to the images of gloom and darkness which permeate the story. Other critics such as R.Kerf reject this type of "symbol hunting": "(critics) seem to assume that provided symbols can be discovered, the work, or scene, or passage in which these appear gives evidence of consummate artistry" (quoted in Kimbrough 1971:232). My interpretation of both of these images in combination with Conrad's use of vague descriptions, is that they indicate instead those situations in which Conrad realized that his literary skills were unable to overcome either his lack of understanding of, or his inability to articulate his feelings about, those situations. ✓

Conrad's opening scene in *Heart of Darkness* gives the first indication of his lack of awareness of his true feelings. The scene is wonderfully calm and reassuring on the *Nellie* itself, as it naturally would be for a man with Conrad's seafaring experience. However, as soon as attention is directed towards London, "(the air) seemed condensed into a mournful gloom, brooding motionless over the biggest, and the greatest, town on earth". There seems to be a large measure of distrust of the city mixed in with his respect for it. In Conrad's attempt to become ✓✓

the consummate Englishman, was he afraid to admit that distrust of "the greatest town on earth"?

Once Marlow has arrived in Africa, the gloom, and the vagueness of the imagery increases to correspond with Conrad's lack of understanding of the continent. Conrad wrote that he had determined at about nine years of age that he would go to Africa when he grew up (quoted in Kimbrough 1971:104); when he arrived in the Congo in 1890, he unfortunately seems to have had little more understanding of the true nature of the continent than he had 22 years previously. His fascination with Africa had clearly developed a morbid quality as he aged; in that "God-forsaken wilderness", with its "formless coast bordered by dangerous surf" and rivers which were "streams of death in life", Marlow could see no beauty, only despair and misery. These are hardly the words of an informed person who is on an adventure of his own choosing. Rather he constructed an impenetrable wall between the comfort of those concepts of the nature of civilized man, and of the European landscape which he held so dear, and Africa and its people. ✓

Conrad has often been praised for his intimate observations of the details of life. Marlow, however, travels deeper and deeper into "the heart of darkness", but remains detached: "the steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy. (We were) wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse." Countless words of eloquent prose have described the

wonders of the jungles of Africa; these wonders are lost on Marlow, who sums the jungle up as "trees, trees, millions of trees, massive, immense, running up high".

Conrad's treatment of the people living in that frenzied place is no less obtuse, with two exceptions, the book-keeper and the Russian. For just a few seconds, the fog and gloom dissipates, and distinct outlines of real characters appear. Here Conrad is able to describe the kind of people he understands, civilized white males. The nearest that an African comes to being described clearly is when Marlow describes the fireman on his steamer. The wonders that rudimentary "training" had accomplished made the sight of the man "as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind legs". Is it any wonder that writers such as Chinua Achebe take exception to the racism in *Heart of Darkness*, racism which is accepted as the natural way to think?

Conrad's treatment of women follows the same pattern of showing his unwillingness to make any serious attempt to define a real character. Marlow's aunt exists only in her ability to help Marlow get to Africa. Kurtz' apparent mistress is given a hint of humanity when she "shouted something", and then, when the Europeans on the ship opened fire on the natives, "the barbarous and superb woman did not so much as flinch". Kurtz' Intended is allowed a personality (though not a Name) only by the standards of the day; off in her own world, "protected" from the harshness of reality by lies. Critic Donald R. Benson says that Marlow, with

his lie to her, "effectively seals her in darkness forever"
(quoted in Kimbrough 1971:210).

If one is able to truly focus in a fog, Kurtz is the focal enigma. He is developed as a wraith, starting with incredibly high, though unspecified, ideals; undertaking "magnificent", though virtually unquoted writing that "soared and took [Marlow] with him"; partaking in unspeakable rites; and finally dying with an incomprehensible message on his lips. The only clear indication of at least the general direction Kurtz in which had headed since arriving in Africa is the line of human skulls surrounding his garden.

Focusing on the racism issue, Chinua Achebe asks "whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art". More generally, if Joseph Conrad meant *Heart of Darkness*, and Kurtz in particular, to carry a message for him, the lack of agreement on what that message is must surely indicate his lack of success.

Sources

Achebe, Chinua. An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's "Heart of Darkness".

Kimbrough, Robert, ed. Heart of Darkness. A Norton Critical Edition. (Second Edition). New York:Norton. 1971.

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A bold attack. However, you've cited the author and other authorities, and written competently, not claiming too much for your side. Well done.