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## The Symbolism along with the Irony in the Conrad's "Heart of Darkness"

"Heart of Darkness" by Joseph Conrad is a very contemplative, symbolic piece of literature. Superficially, the story is about the journey of a man named Marlow, working for an ivory company and in search of adventure, deep into Sub-Saharan Africa. On a deeper level, however, the story is about the titular "darkness". It is an exploration of that word, revealing that it is all things evil that rest in the hearts of men. All of the characters in "Heart of Darkness" have been meticulously fine-tuned to provide further development on the theme of darkness. The whole of the theme can be summed up in the individual relationships of Africa and Europe to the darkness, but nonetheless, the reader must realize that not all is as initially seems in "Heart of Darkness".

Little is held back in "Heart of Darkness" in the description of Africa as a backwards, uncivilized place. This is immediately apparent as soon Marlow's description of his travels is recounted. For example, take into account Marlow's observation of Africans at the Outer Station: "They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now -- nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation." This is obviously not a ringing endorsement of Africa's populace. To illustrate that these feelings are not simply those of one man, Marlow, note Kurtz's scribbling, "Exterminate all the brutes," in reference to the Africans. Indeed, even the landscape of Africa is described in a way that makes it sound brutish, dark, and evil: "The living trees, lashed together by the creepers and every living bush of the undergrowth, might have been changed into stone, even to the slenderest twig, to the lightest leaf... it seemed unnatural." Africa is truly meant to be seen as a dark place by the reader of "Heart of Darkness". However, despite this, it is not the titular "darkness".

Europe and its people, on the other hand, seem to be described as entities of light in "Heart of Darkness". For instance, after Marlow looks upon the poor, dirty Africans outside of the Outer Station, he goes inside and meets The Accountant, for whom this description is offered: "I shook hands with this miracle... I respected his collars, his vast cuffs, his brushed hair... In the great demoralization of the land he kept up his appearance. That's backbone." This description certainly seems to be that of a beacon of light in a sea of darkness. Europe's status continues to be built up to the reader. Furthermore, in reference to Kurtz, Marlow notes, "All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz". This statement, seeming to be continuing to make a case for the "light" of Europe despite Kurtz's wrongdoings, intentionally leads the reader to believe that these actions of Kurtz's are being validated and even admired. From this springs the opinion that "Heart of Darkness" possesses racist aspects. However, it goes much deeper than

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this. Europe's status as a beacon of light, too, is not as it seems; in the end, it simply adds to the subtle irony of the "darkness" theme overall.

As has been established, in a surface-reading of "Heart of Darkness" Africa and its people seem to be the darkness whereas Europe and its people seem to be the antipodal light; a deep analysis of many elements of the story, however, will reveal just the opposite. Europe is the true darkness. As mentioned in the last paragraph, "All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz" is seen as a breaking point for the reader, that passage supporting Kurtz even in his horrid actions simply because that which he acts poorly against is supposed "darkness". Consider, however, that the above phrase does not have a set-in-stone complementary connotation, such as "thank you" or "good job". Indeed, the same phrase could be used to mean, "All Europe should be proud of their contribution to the making of Kurtz," and, "All Europe bears the blame for the making of Kurtz." The latter would indeed make more sense. As this is realized, the overarching critique of Europe can be noticed, as the barrier to understanding it has been broken. For example, through this same logic, the following phrase uttered by Kurtz upon the shackling and beating of an African makes sense anew: "After all, I also was a part of the great cause of these high and just proceedings." Marlow does not truly believe that it is a just proceeding in the name of the "beacon of light" Europe. It is instead obviously another critique of Europe.

Again, as the initial barrier to understanding the theme of light and darkness in this way has been broken, a large number of story elements can be understood as critiques of Europe. Take Kurtz's death as an example. Upon death, he exclaims, "The horror! The horror!" It is now quite plain that he had finally seen the horror of his cruel, dark ways. Indeed, all of Kurtz's and, by extension, the Europeans' actions are now meant to be seen for what they truly are: Kurtz's turning the tribes against each other for personal gain (ivory), the Accountant's anger toward the sick Africans for naught more than their sickness, and even the personal insults (the n-word) applied to the Africans are all now revealed to be further critiques of the cruelty of the Europeans, not simple racism toward the Africans that the author thought was justifiable, as it is so often mistaken. As such, the true reason for painting Africa as a dark, savage place can finally be fully realized: to make Europe seem all the darker. After all, would not it truly be lamentable that Europe's actions have made it even crueler and more uncivilized than the depths of Africa?

The theme of darkness in "Heart of Darkness" is undeniably one of great complexity; the opposition of Africa and Europe is built around it, as are all of the characters, albeit in ways not originally envisioned by the reader. Africa is, on first observation, darkest of dark: a land of savagery and brutality. Europe, on the other hand, seemingly counters this, it being a great beacon of light. Soon, however, the story spirals into deep complexity, transforming everything into the opposite of what it initially seemed, and leaving the reader with a surprisingly

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comprehensive critique of colonialism in which the first and most obvious subject, the darkness in the hearts of men, is only the first of many dimensions. It is for these reasons and this complexity that "Heart of Darkness" is an incredibly wonderful story that should endure in the mind of any reader who fully understands it for a long time to come.

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