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Justification of the Title – Heart of Darkness

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Abstract:

This research paper is an effort to justify the title of the novel 'The Heart of Darkness' written by Joseph Conrad. The novel is remarkable in a sense that Conrad has based this novel on his personal experiences of sea voyage. The story of the novel is a complex exploration of the attitudes people hold on what constitutes a barbarian versus a civilized society and the attitudes on colonialism and racism that were part and parcel of European imperialism. The phrase 'Heart of Darkness' refers to the inmost region of Africa (which was in those times still in the process of being explored) and the black people who still led primitive lives. The title is appropriate for the novel because Marlow has described his experiences of the Congo and people of Congo. The events at the beginning of the novel and at the end of the novel occur outside Africa, but the major and most significant events of the story take place in Congo and on the river of Congo. The savages in the Congo are evil because of the primitive instincts which dominate them and the civilized men of the white cities have become corrupt because of the vices of civilization. The greediness of the white intruders who aimed only at their material comforts had made the natives in a miserable condition. The backwardness and ignorance of the natives intensifies the atmosphere of fear and mystery. They are white at the heart but the black hearted white people. Heart of Darkness explores the issues surrounding imperialism in complicated ways. The incidental scenery in the book offers a harsh picture of colonial enterprise. The impetus behind Marlow's adventures has to do with the hypocrisy inherent in the rhetoric used to justify imperialism. This novel is an exploration of hypocrisy, ambiguity, and moral confusion. It explores the idea of the proverbial choice between the lesser of two evils as the idealistic Marlow is forced to align himself with either the hypocritical and malicious colonial bureaucracy or the openly malevolent, rule-defying Kurtz.

Key words: Dark Continent, Exploration, Imperialism, Spiritual Change, Charisma, Communion

1. Introduction

'Heart of Darkness' is one of the most remarkable novels of Joseph Conrad in a sense that Conrad has based this novel on his personal experiences of sea voyage. The term 'darkness' generally refers to ignorance, evil, mystery. In the same way 'darkness' also tends to suggest the same meanings here. The title 'Heart of Darkness' has two meanings. One is the literal meaning and the other is the symbolic meaning.

2. The dark continent

Literally, the title refers to the dark continent of Africa, Especially the territory known as Congo, because the novel deals with the experiences of Marlow of his journey to Congo. The famous explorer and writer, Henry Morton Stanley has given the name of "the dark continent" after having travelled through Africa. Thereafter the phrase begins current and began to be widely used in Africa. So, the phrase 'Heart of Darkness' refers to the inmost region of Africa (which was in those times still in the process of being explored) and the black people who still led primitive lives. The title is appropriate for the novel because Marlow has described his experiences of the Congo and people of the Congo. The events at the beginning of the novel and at the end of the novel occur outside Africa, but the major and most significant events of the story take place in the Congo and on the river of Congo. Much of the portion deals with a white man Mr. Kurtz, who falls under the influence of savages by his long stay with them. The natives really belong to the heart of Darkness.

3. The Scenery

There are other features of the novel which also justify the title. One such feature is the descriptions of the wild scenery of the thick, almost impenetrable jungle. Passages in the novel contains descriptions of the wild scenery contribute to the atmosphere of the book. Marlow on seeing the scenes says that sailing up the river Congo was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings the impenetrable forest provides a feeling of stillness which was the stillness of a relentless force brooding over some mysterious purpose the brilliance of sunshine is exactly in sharp contrast with dark lives of miserable natives.

As Marlow journeys up the river toward the Inner Station, he catches occasional glimpses of native villages along the riverbanks. More often, though, he simply hears things: drums, chants, howls. These engage his imagination, and the fact that they do so troubles him, because it suggests, as he says, a “kinship” with these men, whom he has so far been able to classify as “inhuman.” This moment is one of several in the text in which Marlow seems to admit the limits of his own perception. These moments allow for a reading of *Heart of Darkness* that is much more critical of colonialism and much more ironic about the stereotypes it engenders. Nevertheless, it is important to notice that Marlow still casts Africans as a primitive version of himself rather than as potential equals.

The suggestive pictures of the natives in the novel add to justify the title. They peer at the white intruders in a furtive, stealthy and suspicious manner behind the trees and even attack them if the occasion demands. The savages in the Congo are evil because of the primitive instincts which dominate them and the civilized men of the white cities have become corrupt because of the vices of civilization. The greediness of the white intruders who aimed only at their material comforts had made the natives in a miserable condition. The backwardness and ignorance of the natives intensifies the atmosphere of fear and mystery. They are white at the heart but the black hearted white people led them to be more primitive. Mr. Kurtz a successful ivory merchant, became wholly evil in the company of these savages. This conversion from a civilized and enlightened man into a superstitious and brutal individual lends emphasis to the literal darkness of Congo instating of civilizing the natives, he himself became barbarian. In this sense, darkness means superstition and evil which is symbolized by Mr. Kurtz.

4. The Hypocrisy of Imperialism

Heart of Darkness explores the issues surrounding imperialism in complicated ways. As Marlow travels from the outer Station to the Central Station and finally ends up the river to the Inner Station, he encounters scenes of torture, cruelty, and near-slavery. The savages in the Congo are evil because of the primitive instincts which dominate them and the civilized men of the white cities have become corrupt because of the vices of civilization. The greediness of the white intruders who aimed only at their material comforts had made the natives in a miserable condition. The backwardness and ignorance of the natives intensifies the atmosphere of fear and mystery. They are white at the heart but the black hearted white people led them to be more primitive. At the very least, the incidental scenery of the book offers a harsh picture of colonial enterprise. The impetus

behind Marlow’s adventures, too, has to do with the hypocrisy inherent in the rhetoric used to justify imperialism. The men who work for the Company describe what they do as “trade,” and their treatment of native Africans is part of a benevolent project of “civilization.” Kurtz, on the other hand, is open about the fact that he does not trade but rather takes ivory by force, and he describes his own treatment of the natives with the words “suppression” and “extermination”: he does not hide the fact that he rules through violence and intimidation. His perverse honesty leads to his downfall, as his success threatens to expose the evil practices behind European activity in Africa.

“It was unearthly, and the men were. They were not inhuman. The worst of it is the suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but it was just the thought of their humanity the thought of remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. It was ugly enough that there was the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which could be comprehend.

However, for Marlow as much as for Kurtz or for the Company, Africans in this book are mostly objects: Marlow refers to his helmsman as a piece of machinery, and Kurtz’s African mistress is at best a piece of statuary. It can be argued that *Heart of Darkness* participates in an oppression of nonwhites that is much more sinister and much harder to remedy than the open abuses of Kurtz or the Company’s men. Africans become for Marlow a mere backdrop, a human screen against which he can play out his philosophical and existential struggles. Their existence and their exoticism enable his self-contemplation. This kind of dehumanization is harder to identify than colonial violence or open racism. While *Heart of Darkness* offers a powerful condemnation of the hypocritical operations of imperialism, it also presents a set of issues surrounding race that is ultimately troubling.

5. Madness as a Result of Imperialism

Madness is closely linked to imperialism in this book. Africa is responsible for mental disintegration as well as physical illness. Madness has two primary functions. First, it serves as an ironic device to engage the reader’s sympathies. Kurtz, Marlow is told from the beginning, is mad. However, as Marlow, and the reader, begin to form a more complete picture of Kurtz, it becomes apparent that his madness is only relative, that in the context of the Company insanity is difficult to define. Thus, both Marlow and the reader begin to sympathize with Kurtz and view the Company with suspicion. Madness also functions to establish the necessity of social fictions. Although social mores and explanatory justifications are shown throughout *Heart of Darkness* to be utterly false and even leading to evil, they are nevertheless necessary for both group harmony and individual security. Madness, in *Heart of Darkness*, is the result of being removed from one’s social context and allowed to be the sole arbiter of one’s own actions. Madness is thus linked not only to absolute power and a kind of moral genius but to man’s fundamental fallibility: Kurtz has no authority to whom he answers but himself, and this is more than any one man can bear.

6. The Absurdity of Evil

This novel is an exploration of hypocrisy, ambiguity, and moral confusion. It explores the idea of the proverbial choice between the lesser of two evils. As the idealistic Marlow is forced to align himself with either the hypocritical and malicious colonial bureaucracy or the openly malevolent, rule-defying Kurtz, it becomes increasingly clear that to try to judge either alternative is an act of folly: how can moral standards or social values be relevant in judging evil? Is there such thing as insanity in a world that has already gone insane? The number of ridiculous situations Marlow witnesses act as reflections of the larger issue: at one station, for

instance, he sees a man trying to carry water in a bucket with a large hole in it. At the Outer Station, he watches native laborers blast away at a hillside with no particular goal in mind. The absurd involves both insignificant silliness and life-or-death issues, often simultaneously. That the serious and the mundane are treated similarly suggests a profound moral confusion and a tremendous hypocrisy: it is terrifying that Kurtz's homicidal megalomania and a leaky bucket provoke essentially the same reaction from Marlow.

7. Motifs

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, or literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.

8. Observation and Eavesdropping

Marlow gains a great deal of information by watching the world around him and by overhearing others' conversations, as when he listens from the deck of the wrecked steamer to the manager of the Central Station and his uncle discussing Kurtz and the Russian trader. This phenomenon speaks to the impossibility of direct communication between individuals: information must come as the result of chance observation and astute interpretation. Words themselves fail to capture meaning adequately, and thus they must be taken in the context of their utterance. Another good example of this is Marlow's conversation with the brick maker, during which Marlow is able to figure out a good deal more than simply what the man has to say.

9. Interiors and Exteriors

Comparisons between interiors and exteriors pervade *Heart of Darkness*. As the narrator states at the beginning of the text, Marlow is more interested in surfaces, in the surrounding aura of a thing rather than in any hidden nugget of meaning deep within the thing itself. This inverts the usual hierarchy of meaning: normally one seeks the deep message or hidden truth. The priority placed on observation demonstrates that penetrating to the interior of an idea or a person is impossible in this world. Thus, Marlow is confronted with a series of exteriors and surfaces—the river's banks, the forest walls around the station, Kurtz's broad forehead—that he must interpret. These exteriors are all the material he is given, and they provide him with perhaps a more profound source of knowledge than any falsely constructed interior "kernel."

10. Darkness

Darkness is important enough conceptually to be part of the book's title. However, it is difficult to discern exactly what it might mean, given that absolutely everything in the book is cloaked in darkness. Africa, England, and Brussels are all described as gloomy and somehow dark, even if the sun is shining brightly. Darkness thus seems to operate metaphorically and existentially rather than specifically. Darkness is the inability to see: this may sound simple, but as a description of the human condition it has profound implications. Failing to see another human being means failing to understand that individual and failing to establish any sort of sympathetic communion with him or her.

"I was within a hair's-breadth of the last opportunity for pronouncement, and I found with humiliation that probably I would have nothing to say. This is the reason why I affirm that Kurtz was a remarkable man. He had something to say. He said it. . . . He had summed up—he had judged. 'The horror!' He was a remarkable man."

Marlow has just recovered from his near-fatal illness. His "nothing to say" is not reflective of a lack of substance but rather of his realization that anything he might have to say would be so ambiguous and so profound as to be impossible to put into words. Kurtz, on the other hand, is "remarkable" for his ability to cut through ambiguity, to create a definite "something." Paradoxically, though, the final formulation of that "something" is so vague as to approach "nothing": "'The horror!'" could be almost anything. However, perhaps Kurtz is most fascinating to Marlow because he has had the courage to judge, to deny ambiguity. Marlow is aware of Kurtz's intelligence and the man's appreciation of paradox, so he also knows that Kurtz's rabid systematization of the world around him has been an act and a lie. Yet Kurtz, on the strength of his hubris and his charisma, has created out of himself a way of organizing the world that contradicts generally accepted social models. Most important, he has created an impressive legacy: Marlow will ponder Kurtz's words ("The horror!") and Kurtz's memory for the rest of his life. By turning himself into an enigma, Kurtz has done the ultimate: he has ensured his own immortality.

The phrase 'Heart of Darkness' has yet another meaning. Marlow's exploration to the dark country known as Congo is accompanied also by an exploration of the depths of his own mind or soul. The human mind may also be regarded as a kind of Dark Continent. The exploration of this dark Continent is perhaps even more difficult than the exploration of a dark country Congo. It symbolizes the solitary journey which involves a profound spiritual change in the voyages. So, Marlow's journey is metaphorically a psychological and anthropological night journey. Marlow prepares us for such a journey in the very beginning when he says that he had been able to arrive at the furthest point of navigation and the culminating point of his experience. So, morality and adventure are mixed here.

There are passages in Marlow's Narration which gives us glimpses of his own mind. At one point he tells that he has always hated and detested lies because he has always found a taint of death and a have our of morality in lies. He says, "We live as we dream – alone." Marlow not only tells about his conscious thoughts but tries to probe his sub conscious mind which is the heart of darkness which he tries to explore. A critic, commenting on the title says that the "darkness" here is many things: it is unknown it is the sub conscious; it is also a moral darkness; it is the evil which swallows up Mr. Kurtz and it is the spiritual emptiness which he sees at the center of existence but above all it is mystery itself the mysteriousness of man's spiritual life.

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