

## Gothic Elements in Heart of Darkness

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**Abstract:** As a recognized classic of 20th-century literature, *Heart of Darkness* has received numerous reviews and studies by scholars at home and abroad. In order to fill the gap in the analysis of the Gothic novel style embodied in *Heart of Darkness*, this thesis explores the various characteristics of the Gothic novel embodied in the novel from four aspects: the description of the environment, the character analysis of Kurtz, the storyline, and the main theme. The thesis concludes that *Heart of Darkness* uses Gothic novel techniques to reveal the crimes of society and the darkness of human nature by highlighting degradation and darkness, criticizing colonialism for its oppressive and exploitative nature, and also to provoke readers to think about human nature and morality.

### 1. Introduction

*Heart of Darkness* is one of the major works of the Polish-English writer Joseph Conrad. It examines the horrors of Western colonialism, which tarnishes not only the lands and peoples it exploits but also those in the West who advance it. Conrad's semiautobiographical tale has gone on to become one of the most widely analyzed works of English literature but rare articles could be found reviewing this renowned masterpiece from the perspective of the Gothic novel. Gothic novel is a form of fiction in Western popular literature, which is full of thrills, grotesqueries, and darkness. It is characterized by creating an atmosphere of mystery and terror, aiming to reveal the evil in society, morality, and human nature. The novel, *Heart of Darkness*, has the characteristics of Gothic novels in terms of atmosphere, character image, storyline, and the main idea. Analyzing Gothic elements in the novel enables readers to have a more comprehensive and profound grasp of Conrad's final presentation of the work and the main theme of the novel.

### 2. Horrific Environments and Atmospheres

Gothic novel places heavy emphasis on atmosphere like dark forests, unnerving mountain regions, ominous climatic conditions, and threatening storms, using setting and diction to build suspense and a sense of unease in readers. A large number of environmental and social descriptions in *Heart of Darkness* have a strong Gothic style, creating a gloomy, dread, barbaric, and mysterious atmosphere.

The description of the Thames River and its surroundings in the first part of the novel creates a dark and depressing atmosphere, which reflects the beginning of man's plundering of nature. There are descriptive terms such as "interminable", "welded together", and "luminous" (Conrad 2). These terms, descriptive of an image, seem to depict a beautiful and powerful city; yet the paragraph shifts to a foreshadowing tone in the last few lines. Words such as "mournful" and "brooding" illustrate a darker story ahead (2). In the first few lines of the narrative portion, Conrad uses calm, almost serene, imagery and diction: "The water shone pacifically; the sky, without a speck" (3). This is highly in contrast to the latter stages of the same paragraph where the story takes on a darker quality: "the gloom to the west, brooding over the upper reaches, became more somber" (3). This image of the darkening sky casts a menacing veil over the story and projects an image that reflects the tone of a mystery novel. There are many strong images in this part such as the "dull red without rays and without heat" (3). All the images have one thing in common that is the transition to a darker scene.

In part two of the novel, Marlow tells his listeners about his journey up the river, the Congo River. Conrad describes the environment of the river Congo as:

“Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. The air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish. There was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine. The long stretches of the waterway ran on, deserted, into the gloom of overshadowed distances” (Conrad 39).

The wild scene, thick and impenetrable jungle, the pictures of the natives hiding in the dense jungle, the silence and the dangerous stillness of the river Congo, and the thick fog, all these features are suggestive of the title *Heart of Darkness*. The outer physical setting intensifies the horror and fear among readers. The reading about the description of the natives and their way of appearing in the novel brings a terrific effect in readers. The barbarism of the natives reinforces the effect of these descriptive passages and intensifies the atmosphere of mystery and fear. Reading about the natives, one can get an even stronger impression that he is in the midst of darkness. On one occasion, the natives, seeing Marlow’s steamer sailing up the river, draw near the river-bank in order to launch an attack upon the intruders. Marlow on this occasion hears a muffled rattle, then a very loud cry, as of infinite desolation. This cry gives rise to a feeling of terror in the hearts of all the white men. The environment around the setting in *Heart of Darkness* reflects a bleak and foreboding atmosphere typically in Gothic novel.

### **3. Kurtz: a Villain-Hero and Isolated Character**

Kurtz is a key character in *Heart of Darkness* and Conrad depicts him as a very Gothic novelistic character. Gothic fiction is obsessed with creating tyrannical characters, mostly villains or Byronic heroes. According to Allison Breen, the typical type of villain-hero is one who has superhuman abilities and potential, who clashes with morality or the law to achieve his desires, but who is not a completely evil person by any means. In fact, he is usually a great man, with many heroic qualities such as courage, wisdom, and strength. The weakness in his character makes him prone to error, which is the source of his suffering. When he violates standards of behavior, he becomes a villain and is punished for his crimes (Breen 4). Kurtz is such a villain-hero. Kurtz comes to Africa as an ambassador of civilization and progress, and there is no denying his eloquence, pioneering spirit, and superhuman intelligence. Driven by his own adventure and curiosity, Marlow, the narrator of the novel, decides to go to the hinterlands of Africa to make a career out of his talents. From the moment he leaves Europe and sails to Africa, his European colleagues in various African trading posts tell him that Kurtz “is a very remarkable person” and “sends in as much ivory as all the others put together” (Conrad 21), and even describe Kurtz as “a prodigy” and “an emissary of pity, and science, and progress” (28). Thus Marlow, with great anticipation and curiosity, views Kurtz as a legendary hero who amasses wealth for the British Empire and spreads human civilization. However, as the novel progresses, Marlow’s excitement, anticipation, and pilgrimage become a horror and a nightmare, and his ideals are completely disillusioned when he finds out the truth. The Kurtz that Marlow sees is drastically different from the Kurtz described by others, and the Kurtz he sees has “thin arms” and his “eyes of that apparition shining darkly far in its bony head that nodded with grotesque jerks”, as if “an animated image of death carved out of old ivory had has been shaking its hand with menaces” (70). It turns out that the revered hero of other people and the hero Marlow wants to pursue is nothing more than a minion sent to Africa by the European imperialist conglomerate to plunder ivory. When plundering, Kurtz slaughters, enslaves, and fools the natives in Africa. Driven by his own inner greed, Kurtz becomes shockingly depraved and displays a primitive and murderous nature. Kurtz’s heart is twisted by his own inflated material desires and spiritual desolation which make him a walking corpse. Villain-hero pursues ideals that have nothing to do with narrow personal pleasure or moral turpitude but are highly committed to the goal itself until the end of his life, which means that villain-hero is often willing to defend his power or pursue his ideals at the cost of his own life (Breen 10). To the end of his life, although Kurtz is placed on a ship and set sail back to Europe, he remains obsessed and claims that he “had immense plans” and

“was on the threshold of great things” (Conrad 77). With his typical Gothic villain-hero image, Kurtz embodies the loss of sanity, moral degradation, and human depravity in the face of lust and wealth.

The protagonists of Gothic novel are often isolated or alone. According to Alex Stainlee, that isolation could be physical, trapped in somewhere far from civilization, or emotional, cut off from the people around, and may either be self-imposed or a result of circumstances beyond their control (Stainlee). Kurtz is such an isolated and lonely figure. Kurtz’s sense of isolation comes from his geographical location. Kurtz comes from the advanced industrial civilization of Europe to the closed and barbaric Africa, far from Europe and isolated in the wildest and most savage part of inland Africa. However, as a man who grew up in an advanced civilization, he comes to Africa and stays in the heart of primitive and barbaric Africa making him geographically far from civilization, but not really belonging to Africa. Besides, Kurtz separates from the European elites and roots in the indigenous Africans he conquers, but there is no direct communication and psychological commonality or empathy between him and the Africans. The world that an individual inhabits is based on the dialogue between the individual and others, a dialogue that is a spiritual refuge that gives meaning and value to human existence (Yang 83). Kurtz’s dying words, “The horror! The horror!” (Conrad 82) are the most succinct summation of his own life. As an alienated soul, Kurtz’s fear reflects, in an extreme form, the universal cause of man’s own fear of death: loneliness and the fear of death itself. Loneliness can make one feel the emptiness of existence and the inevitability of death. Existentialism argues that the lack of true communion and communication with others makes existence barren and meaningless (Yang 84). The native Africans’ consciousness is deprived of the possibility of existence by Kurtz’s Eurocentrism, in which he is seen as the supreme ruler who constantly produces death and rules his ivory kingdom with the fear of death of the indigenous population, with whom he does not communicate as an equal. As in the case of the African woman who appears in the novel, she never speaks directly to Kurtz, which reinforces the fact that Kurtz is a lonely and isolated man. Moreover, Kurtz never speaks to the Russian but only thinks aloud, and he collects more ivory to gain approval from others. Such an alienated and lonely man has no choice but to devote himself to his ambitious plan and finally to the abyss of doom.

#### **4. Plot and Content Development of Heart of Darkness**

Common Gothic plots include revenge, mystery, and madness. *Heart of Darkness*’ contents include violence, murder, pillage, slavery, rivalry, and even insanity which are of the Gothic novel style. Marlow says of Africa that enchants him like this, “It had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery--a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over. It had become a place of darkness” (Conrad 8). In the journey, as he gets deep into the jungle, Marlow discovers both external and internal darkness. He sees the reality of European presence, the evil side of human nature, and how people even himself get dehumanized by colonization. The deeper into the Congo, the less humanity they have. As Marlow travels from the Outer Station to the Inner Station, he sees firsthand the reality of colonization. In the novel, Marlow sees six black slaves all chained to each other carrying earth, or dirt, and all stripped to the bone. The chains show cruelty and how the slaves are treated by European colonists to enforce the aimless works on them. Chained natives are forced to dig holes into the ground for an unreal charity. Besides, the black people Marlow witnesses along the way “as in some picture of a massacre or a pestilence” (19), and the creepiest is the blackheads hung on the wooden stake in front of Kurtz’s gate, which gives Marlow an unimaginable shock. Kurtz hangs the heads of the natives on the stake in order to frighten and subdue the natives so that they would treat him as a leader. Of course, there is only one ultimate goal-ivory. Kurtz is driven by his own greed to kill, conquer, and enslave African people, but he is also exploited by Europe as so-called civilized emissaries or explorers. Kurtz has remarkable achievements and is good at civil and military, and the man who contributes so much to the European group tells the truth at the end of his life, that the ivory he had paid for with his life would end up in the possession of the company. Kurtz is nothing more than a white slave of Europe. However, when Kurtz alone brings back as much ivory as everyone else, except for the young

Russian admiration, a group of people headed by the manager begins to exclude Kurtz and intrigue against him. The manager's primary concern is preserving his position in the company, which he incorrectly assumes Kurtz wishes to steal from him. A scheming liar, the manager sabotages Marlow's steamboat to prevent supplies from reaching Kurtz at the Inner Station. According to Marlow, the manager inspires uneasiness and tries to gain information about Kurtz and his activities from Marlow. In addition, after Kurtz's death and Marlow's return to Europe, an employee of the company, a man who claims to be Kurtz's cousin, and a journalist all come to Marlow in the hope of getting something from him. It can be seen how false the ethical order was in Europe during the colonial period in all walks of life where companies without business ethics, relatives without principles, journalists representing public opinion without professional ethics. All of these show the hypocrisy of the European ethical order.

## 5. The Main Idea of Heart of Darkness

Gothic novels conduct in-depth moral explorations mainly by revealing social, political, religious, and moral evils and discovering the gloom of human nature. *Heart of Darkness* revolves around the theme of death including the killing and plundering of the colonialists in Africa, the colonialist's own loneliness and fear in the face of death, and Marlow's search for himself as well as his exploration of humanity as a witness in the death of others. The novel aims to attack the dangers that colonialism has brought to humanity and society, revealing the sinister and dark nature of humans in the face of desire and profit. Kurtz, as a terror, has more access to the truth about death than anyone else. No matter how brutally he could kill the natives, he would one day lose his life and his flesh would corrupt and turn to bones. Furthermore, as Wu and Li state, "the journey to the central Africa does not just force Marlow to see primitive Africa, the natives, to meet Kurtz, his madness and evil, it is also a journey to self-discovery or drive-discovery" (Wu and Li 129). As a participant in this journey of discovery of the dark world within man, Marlow also discovers the dark part of himself. Marlow at the outset of the narrative is seemingly prepared to accept the consequences of the conquest-the robbery with violence, the aggravated murder on a grand scale. However, as the novel makes clear, it becomes more and more difficult for Marlow to maintain his belief in the redemption of the idea as he witnesses the carnage and genocide visited upon Africans by European "civilization". And Kurtz's presence allows Marlow to reflect and warn. Such reflection reflects the ability to observe and examine one's current state of being from a high point in life after experiencing a marginal situation (Sung 69). Marlow points to the absurdity and irrationality of characterizing Africans as criminals when he encounters the chain-gang: "They were called criminals, and the outraged law, like the bursting shells, had come to them, an insoluble mystery from over the sea" (Conrad 17). The real criminals are of course the Europeans who participate in the imperial project, their viciousness taking the form of organized violence. The African corpses that Marlow stumbles upon bear the mark of this organized criminality. Marlow simply observes the fact of death and does not permit himself to dwell on its implications. Through this self-discovery and self-knowledge, Marlow gains a deeper understanding of human nature, and he feels that the so-called civilized societies are actually darker. Marlow's journey along the Congo River into the heart of Africa's darkness is also a journey into the darkness of the human heart, and his search for Kurtz is also a search into the subconscious and spiritual world of man. In the process, Marlow encounters his own dark nature but ultimately achieves his moral salvation. By the end of the voyage, Marlow has gained a deeper understanding of himself and humanity.

Challenging and subversive, Gothic novel powerfully reveals the evils of society and the darkness of human nature by highlighting violence and depravity, and it uses shocking strokes to point directly at the prevailing social order and moral system. Conrad uses this dark and horrific Gothic style to tell such a dark and tragic story in order to reveal the dark side of human nature and to show the call for human morality. Analyzing Gothic elements in *Heart of Darkness* can help readers understand the deep meaning of the novel, grasp its connotations, and arouse people's thoughts.

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