

## An Analysis of Symbolism and Humanity Exploration in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

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**Abstract:** Conrad's *Heart of darkness* demonstrates that a variety of breath-taking performance of human nature in the African jungle by describing the protagonist's journey to Africa. Joseph Conrad uses a large number of symbolism in this novel, which enriches the connotation of the works. This paper is designed to interpret the author's writing technique and ideological implication by analyzing symbolism of several important images, namely, the narrator Marlow's journey to Africa was a spiritual journey to exploring inner world.

### 1. Introduction

Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) occupies a very important position in British literary world. His novels, which are characterized by broad backgrounds, complex characters, inventive techniques and distinctive styles, have played crucial role in linking the traditional novels of the 19th century and the modernist novels of the 20th century. It is generally acknowledged that his novel *Heart of Darkness* is one of the most representative works of showing Conrad's thought and artistic characteristics. Since *Heart of Darkness* was published, it has been widely concerned by readers and critics. They concerned this work from different perspectives and analyze figures and events by using different theories. Some critics focused on its writing style of impressionism and framing narrative structure, some think that this novel is a work of discrimination against women from the angle of feminist theory, some regard it as a racist novel from the perspective of racism, others regard *Heart of Darkness* as positive novel of anti-colonialism. This paper mainly focuses on the symbolism of several important images in the novel, interpret the author's writing technique and ideological implication by analyzing symbolism of several important images, namely, Marlow's journey to Africa was a spiritual journey to exploring inner world, on which the protagonist finds the dark side of human nature and complete his moral salvation.

*Heart of Darkness*, based on Conrad's adventures in Congo in 1890, describes that the captain Marlow narrated the story about the Congo River in a sea craft. Marlow's story involves his African experience when he was young. Furthermore, he mainly tells the story of a white colonizer named Kurtz that he knew in Africa, who is an idealist of devoting himself to bring "advanced civilization" to Africa, and ultimately degenerate into a greedy colonizer. A nightmare in the novel truly reflects the catastrophic experience. Many scenes of the novel are just like a series of impressionist paintings. It always displays personal characters by starting with a given time when figures make a strong impression, and then alternately describe the personal character from different levels and gradually unfold. In the novel, sound, light, shadow and color are fully used not only to convey sense experience, but to vividly express a variety of symbolic images. "Conrad attaches great importance to the use of symbols. He thought that all great literary creation is symbolic, only by symbols can the work achieve the complexity, infectivity, depth and beauty." (Xue Shiqi, Zhi Liang, 2008.) For example, all things, ranging from sea, wind, jungle, old ships to a cap, is of symbolic significance. Conrad's symbolism is characterized by not writing happiness and sorrow in daily life, but describe the hidden mental consciousness, so as to reveal the truth behind things. This paper will make an analysis of symbolic significance conveyed by several important images in *Heart of Darkness*.

## **2. Concept of Symbol and Symbolism**

“A symbol is a mark, sign or word that indicates, signifies, or is understood as representing an idea, object, or relationship. Symbols allow people to go beyond what is known or seen by creating linkages between otherwise very different concepts and experiences.(Wikipedia,) therefore, the meaning of symbol can be generalized as “denotation of a thing is larger than itself”. As the pioneer of symbolism, Allan Poe thought that the fundamental purpose of literature is to create “divine beauty”, and nothing else. Baudelaire agreed that the secret correspondence between subjective world and objective world can only be achieved by means of symbolism. That is to say, the specific things or images in objective world, such as animals, plants, color, natural phenomena, voice, etc., are used to suggest and convey the artist’s thoughts and emotions. Perceptive and objective world hide a more realistic and eternal world, and only by intuition can we comprehend the secret. Exposing and conveying artistically is considered as the ultimate task of a writer. Fortunately, the technique of symbolism can effectively help writers to complete the task, and also help readers understand the true essence of works of art.

## **3. Analysis of Symbolic Significance of Marlow's Journey**

The part is to analyze specific symbols of Marlow’s journey so as to find the dark side of human nature, at the same time complete his moral salvation.

### **3.1 The Congo River in Marlow’s eyes before His Journey**

In the first part of the novel, Marlow assimilates the Congo River in African map to the giant snake: “it resembles an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country, and its tail lost in the depths of the land. And as I looked at the map of it in a shop-window, it fascinated me as a snake would a bird-- a silly little bird. ” (Joseph Conrad,1950)

The author endows this river with specific connotation and image of giant snake, so that readers can deeply understand its symbolic significance in the work—a backward, savage, uncivilized and mysterious place, as well as a wild place without moral and legal constraints. Therefore, this journey of the Congo River is like sailing into the dark heart.

### **3.2 Symbol of the Pilgrim**

Why does Marlow insist to work for the company now that he foresees it would be a difficult Journey? First of all, this trip is Marlow's dream of childhood. He dreamed of all kinds of glories brought by adventure when he was a child dream. There is the biggest and most blank place where I desire for. Therefore, he makes his mind to visit this mysterious land that he dreams. He began his adventure with boarding the ship heading over to Africa. For him, this trip to Africa was Marlow's pilgrimage. Secondly, the voyage is definitely a pilgrimage no matter for Marlow or other Europeans gold diggers. Marlow, who regards himself as one of pilgrims, is full of anticipation for the upcoming journey—an adventurous journey to spread civilization.

### **3.3 Symbol of the Knitting Women**

Marlow came to his company before he started, and he met two women who knitted black wool. The two women do not play leading roles in the novel, but the author makes much effort to describe them in detail, and gives them deep implication. In the first place, let us look at the description: one is a younger woman, the other is an old woman. Both are knitting black wool on the grass pad. The younger one wearing flat plain stood up and came at me as you came across a somnambulist. From the description of the younger woman, readers seem to see a face without expression. The indifferent woman seems to live in her own world, which tells readers and Marlow that she has been accustomed to meeting those adventurers, and she is also used to facing forever gone, that is to say, she is indeed too familiar with death. Then let us focus on the old woman: “the old woman sat on her chair. Her flat cloth slippers were propped up on a foot-warmer, and a cat reposed on her lap. She glanced at me above the glasses. The swift and indifferent placidity of that look troubled me.”(Joseph Conrad, 1950) A knitting old woman, an obedient cat and a foot warmer, etc. should

have constituted a warm and harmonious picture. Unfortunately, the woman's indifferent and omniscient eyes make the old woman look like a witch, who seems to have everything under her control. She is able to foreknow what will happen in these young people, and what they are waiting for is almost nothing but death. The woman has sense of destiny. As Marlow felt, they are guarding the gate to dark world, and the black wool they are knitting is used as a warm shroud. The two women like messengers of death implicate to Marlow and readers what tragedy will happen in future. At the same time, they also symbolize that the trade company constantly send these adventurers to Africa, to the Death. It probably at this time that Marlow begins to realize that Africa trip is not miraculous, mysterious and romantic like what he expected, but an experience suffused with danger, fear and even death. The pilgrimage perhaps turns to be a journey to dark world.

### **3.4 Symbols of Explosion and Railway**

Marlow started his journey after finishing the formalities. On his way to government office, he met an anchored warship firing into the jungle. Someone on board said to Marlow, "there are natives living in a camp, who are regarded as enemies. While Marlow thinks "they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement, that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast".(Joseph Conrad,1950) Conrad skillfully uses the technique of symbolism. Firing warship is the symbol of power that is destroying primitive civilization, while Marlow and indigenous people also became the symbol of people suffering injury. When their ship came into an anchor on the place of government office after sailing for more than 30 days, Marlow heard another explosive sound from cliff. As Marlow says, the warship firing into land suddenly occurred to me. The explosion is as unfortunate as the last time, and the flowering shells fell over their heads, which turns into the unexplainable mystery across the ocean. The author gives the shells specific connotation and image by using the rhetoric device of "intermittent repetition", makes reader deeply experience the symbolic meaning that the shells represent in the works. Explosive sound is the symbol of bad external environment as well as deep-felt pain of internal contradictions. The explosion also indicates the misery and death that "civilized" people have brought to blacks and natives(Zheng Limin,2009 ).

Marlow saw the railway that represents the advanced productive forces and European civilization when he arrives at waterfront station. The rail symbolizing western civilization, however, is a pile of rotting machine parts. The railway built by "civilized" people is just used to transport the ivory plundered by Europeans from inland to the coast. In Marlow's eyes, the European civilization like railway is stepping into darkness, into degeneration, and traditional moral and faith are corrupted as well. Marlow who just arrived at Africa deeply realizes that the so-called civilized Europeans are destroying the undeveloped wilderness. The pilgrimage is nothing more than a journey of plundering money and ivory.

As a fellow white said, adventuring to Africa is definitely for money, and what else do you want? Ivory is the entire purpose of coming into Africa. At first, Marlow is disappointed to what his fellows done, for he thinks that he is a well-educated European and is of well morality. Marlow is more convinced by his moral principles when he saw what these "civilized" Europeans have done. When he heard about the legend of Kurtz, an excellent employee in the company and a very distinctive person, he thinks Kurtz seems to be different from others.

### **3.5 Symbol of Kurtz**

Through initial rumors, Marlow seemed to see a man with the competence of leadership, an idol who he admires. Therefore, meeting Mr. Kurtz and talking to him have become the most important even exclusive purpose of his navigation. Along the way the various comments on Kurtz constantly came into Marlow's ears, Kurtz's image in his imagination increasingly becomes rich and plump, which steadfast Marlow's determination to meet the great man. In Marlow's heart, Kurtz, as an angel of light and an ideal colonist, is a heroic figure.

It is not hard to find that Conrad gives Kurtz a deep symbolic meaning. Kurtz, whose mother is a half British and father is a half French, is definitely the representative of western civilization, and he

grew up with influence of the whole Europe. He is a painter, poet, musician, speaker, and all his talents are produced by both European politics and culture, which is enough to show his symbolic meaning of western civilization. Kurtz finally showed up, his face was visibly scarred and his lower lip was eating a bone that had already been polished. (Joseph Conrad, 1950) The “civilized” people in African jungle have degenerated into a barbarian who slaughters the natives unscrupulously and robs the country relentlessly. He has been mentally collapsed, and his moral has been already deeply fallen. He didn’t want to leave the environment he has been accustomed to. Kurtz ordered attacking Marlow’s steamboat powerfully prove the point. As the symbol of European civilization, Kurtz’s degeneration shows the result caused by conflict between the civilized and the uncultivated, and European civilization is completely deformed.

Marlow lost his goal, and he has been extremely embarrassed and morally shocked. He wonders the difference between African barbarians’ worship of material things and civilized Europeans’ pursuit of ivory. Actually, civilization and barbarism are interlinked in essence. Civilization is superficial, and it is maintained only by law and morality. However, an civilized person, once he is separated from these situations, is no different from a barbarian, or even worse. Kurtz’s degeneration powerfully proves the point.

Marlow, therefore, comes to the conclusion that Kurtz is equal to European civilization, and represents darkness as well. When he recognizes this, his mind is slackened, and he is suffered a lot. At the same time, his spirit has gained purification. When he was in the face with Kurtz’s fiancée, he could not tell the truth, because he cannot bear to destroy her expectation, so Marlow tells lies.

### **3.6 Symbol of *Heart of Darkness***

*Heart of Darkness*, as the title, is the main image of the novel. First of all, “Heart” can be comprehended from different perspectives: 1. “Heart” refers to African continent shaped like a heart, especially the upstream of the Congo River is in the heart of African continent. 2. “Heart” refers to the spirit, e.g. soul and conscience, which can be both the kind heart of raising Marlow’s conscience and introspection, and the cruel heart of Kurtz’s degeneration and greed after losing moral constraints. 3. “Heart” refers to the core, that is, the essence and core of some ideas and thinking. It represents several different ideas about colonialism: one is the dominant idea, namely, Europe is the center of civilization. Therefore, it seems to be a duty for them to help backward nationality, and bring them civilization, so they are messenger of light. They have a supreme faith to support their conscience. The other is an idea possessed by the person like Marlow, which is not much concerned and accepted by most people. The idea is more like an introspection, a recognition of colonial thought, as well as a kind of conscience. It was assumed that the connotation of “help” should not be oppressing, killing and robbing, human nature should not be corrupt, even vanished in the name of “help”, and the desire of greed should not expanded because of losing moral and legal constraints. Secondly, the “Darkness”, as a color symbol, can be understood from several levels: 1. “Darkness” refers to the dark African jungle with dim light. 2. “Darkness” represents the unknown and mysterious things. African continent, the center of darkness, has too many unknown things for European settlers from the “civilized” world, and these unknown things add a layer of mysterious color to Africa. 3. “Darkness” represents chaos and backwardness. In European eyes, Africa is the place full of poverty, backwardness, ignorance and disease. 4. “Darkness” also implicates evil, sin and cruelty. It is those Europeans like Kurtz with cruel and wicked soul that committed crimes to Africans. So the title *Heart of Darkness* makes readers see a black heart, which gives people a feeling of depression and unluckiness. As a matter of fact, it is the keynote of the whole novel. Conrad gives the title a rich connotation, and creates the tragic atmosphere in the novel.

### **4. Conclusion**

*Heart of Darkness* is an outstanding literary work by Conrad based on the author’s life experience. The author fully uses the technique of symbolism to delicately arrange the plots, artistically portray the figures. The description of these symbols strongly attacks the colonialist policy, and convincingly expose the characteristics of colonizers such as selfishness, greed,

narrowness and irresponsibility, etc., and demonstrates that modern people's lost ideal and spirit. Although Marlow finished sudden enlightenment and moral salvation through journey to Africa, but as a product of European civilization, he still tries to maintain the corrupted "civilized" image, and it is the technique that Conrad depicts complex inner world of the figure that gives the eternal significance to this classic literary work.

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