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## HEART OF DARKNESS: A SYMBOLIC STUDY

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In this paper, I intend to conduct a study of the symbolic meaning of Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness by isolating and interpreting a net of symbols, which is very deftly manipulated by its author for the creation of a short, but superb, artistic expression of his appraisal of man's option for a tragic existence.

In the process of this essay I shall examine the following symbolic elements: setting and characters. I shall endeavor to establish meanings for the river, forest, town, etc. As to characters, I shall concentrate on Kurtz's, but I shall also point out important differences and similarities between his character and those of the savages, of Marlow and of the Intended. I shall use other texts written by Conrad in order to supply further evidence for interpretations offered to elements of Heart of Darkness.

I have decided to conduct a thorough analysis of the symbolic structure that pervades Heart of Darkness because my readings of this novel, and those of other works by Conrad, have led me to believe that it is critically very productive to consider him an author who utilizes, consciously or unconsciously, a set of formal elements that impart shape and meaning to his imaginative reorganization of experience, the symbolic structure being one of them, and being large enough to yield meanings of great relevance.

I confess that I agree with Wayne Booth's statement in his book The Rhetoric of Fiction: "...most ...works... have so many possible mythological or metaphorical or symbolic analogues, that to find any one of them, and to announce it as what the work is for, is to do at best, a very small part of the critical task..." (p. 272). I am aware that my approach is partial, but I am also confident that it may prove revealing as to the way in which Conrad shapes his fictional world, in that, as David Daiches points out in his book Critical Approaches to Literature: "...Modern interest in the... way of using language... leads to inquiry into the function of metaphor and symbol... and to a new interest in the nature of myth..." (167)

I shall begin the study itself by pointing out that Conrad has a fundamentally non-realistic view of the river that leads into the Central Station, the heart of *Darkness*, where Kurtz lives:

"... it was a mighty big river...resembling an immense snake (15)...going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world...when big trees were kings...till you thought yourself... bewitched and cut off... from everything... in another existence...amongst realities of plants, water, and silence (49)...travelling in the night of the first ages (51). And why not? the mind of man is capable of anything - because everything is in it, all the past and the future... truth stripped of its cloak of time (52) ... inner truth (49)..."

On examining the lines quoted above, we notice that the river is an entity capable of leading man to the discovery of "another" existence, of the "inner" truth by removing him from the "outer" world, by

"bewitching" him to take a regressive trip into the timeless world of his internal cosmos. We cannot help asking ourselves whether the "inner" truth is different from the "outer" one, since Conrad himself touches the subject explicitly:

"...when you have to attend...to the mere incidents of the surface, the reality - the reality ...fades, the inner truth is hidden..." (49)

There is no doubt that he wants to examine two different aspects of existence: real and illusory forms of life. As we read Conrad's work intently, we discover that in his survey of these levels of experience he establishes a group of symbols and images which are dependent on the symbolic use of the river, namely: the primeval forest, the snake, the primeval man, travelling, etc.

It can be affirmed that in the context of Heart of Darkness, travelling on the river is symbolic of man's being tempted by the snake of evil into accepting the "fascination of the abomination", into accepting "that mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs in the forest, in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men..." (9). Therefore, I would state that Conrad presents to us the symbolic forest that exists in the hearts of men, that, like Kurtz, have fallen apart from a genuine association with other men, isolating themselves at the "bottom of a precipice" (98) of "impenetrable darkness", found in the depths of their hearts.

As a matter of fact, we learn from Marlow that Kurtz's "trip" is an International affair, rather than an individual enterprise. The lines quoted below give

evidence that Kurtz stands for an example, as a symbol of the "wild" men that can be found in all nations of the world. It should be noted that "wild" now is taken to mean any men living in isolation from his kindred in any part of the world.

"..All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz, and... The International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs has entrusted him with the making of a report, for its future guidance...(71) men looked up to him... his example..."(109)

Therefore, Kurtz represents all the men that: "fall" apart from what Conrad calls "the toil of life" from which men derive their vital energy, he stands for all those that commit the "sin" of being fascinated by the abomination of an egotistical, damning trip that carries them into the "barren darkness" of their individualities. Indeed, after the end of Kurtz's voyage there appears the sham, selfish, "fallen" man who possesses only a factitious, rhetorical power to hide his hollowness:

"...A voice! a voice! deep to the very last. My Intended...my station...my career... my ideas... utterances of elevated sentiments... The shade of the original Kurtz frequented the bedside of the hollow sham..." (98)

In the above quotations, we notice that Conrad sees Kurtz as two separate entities: a real and a false one. To Kurtz's real existence he ascribes the adjective "original", which in the context of the book may be taken to mean the man saved from his "fall" through the grace imparted by unselfish participation in the "glorious and obscure toil" that he mentions in The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'.

I believe that it would be useful to mention other examples from other novels of Conrad to illustrate

the "temptation" the "fall" the "original sin" of man. Let us begin by examining the manner in which he presents the image of the forest:

1. There is the forest of man's own making, that of his heart, that which is impenetrable, and barren.
2. There is also the forest that can be seen on the river banks, which differs from the former by being a place where there can be found "a great turmoil of life", and which is penetrable. The following quotations from Heart of Darkness will back up my assertions:

"... I had judged the jungle of both banks quite impenetrable - and yet eyes were in it...the riverside bushes were certainly very thick; but the undergrowth behind was evidently penetrable..." (61)

"...: Close the shutter' said Kurtz 'I can't bear to look at this [forest] 'Oh but I will wring your heart yet!' he cried at the invisible wilderness (99) His was an impenetrable darkness... 'I am lying...in the dark waiting for death: "the light was within a foot of his eyes..." (100)

There is a direct parallel between the "invisible wilderness" and the forest that exists on the river banks alongside which the steamer sails. The invisible forest allows in no light whatsoever, whereas the one on the banks permits people to "see" their ways around in spite of the very thick bushes, which undoubtedly render movement in it a trying experience, one that could be said to be the toil of life. The invisible, untouched wilderness occurs in Lord Jim, too.

"... Jim accompanied me... back to the world he had renounced, and the way at times seemed

to lead through the very heart of untouched wilderness... The shadow of separation had already put an immense space between us...the smell of fecund earth seemed to sting our faces..." (249)

Here again, we see that the wilderness that Marlow mentions is that of Jim's heart, which remains untouched by the "energy of the implacable world"(249) and therefore lies sterile. We should notice that in the lines above the surroundings are fraught with the smell of life, which is strong enough to be able to touch one's face. It is evident that Jim, like Kurtz, who is also unable to see the light of life standing within a foot of his eyes, has lost the bond with life. This loss is due to his having isolated himself inside the desert of his self, in the darkness of the forest of his own making. If we examine some quotations from An Outcast of the Islands, we shall find out more about the two forests:

"...He saw death looking at him from everywhere yet the world was full of life... mad turmoil of tropical life...he looked without seeing anything ... He sat in the darkness of his own making..." (261)

In Lord Jim, Marlow establishes a dichotomy: Jim's inner world and the outer world, implying that Jim, like Kurtz and Willems, has lost his capacity to be touched by life, which for Conrad, can only be found outside the individual world. Thus, we can say that Marlow's trip back to the world Jim has renounced is merely symbolic, in that Jim might take the same trip without leaving Patusan. In fact he might do exactly the same thing as Marlow by eliminating his aloofness in relation to the outer world, evidenced by his tragic statement: "nothing can touch me." His words have the

power of excluding all the people that surround him, even Jewel, and of isolating him from the very "scheme of creation", in the same way as Willems, in An Outcast of the Islands:

"... the very savages around him strove, struggled, fought, worked - if only to prolong a miserable existence. But they lived, they lived. And it was only himself that seemed to be left outside the scheme of creation in a hopeless immobility..." (281)

At this point, we can see the meaning of the word "fall", of the expression "original sin" with great clarity. In Lord Jim, Marlow uses the word "sinner" to refer explicitly to Jim, implying that he has become one by renouncing the "outer" world, and like a Judas, betraying his own life. In opposition to Jim, we see Marlow as a man with a natural bond with the "implacable world", as an individual that is in touch with the "forest of men". In the following series of quotations from Lord Jim, Jim's final separation from the rest of the world is equated with a "sin" for which there is condemnation in the very sky of the offing, at which he refuses to look lest (according to Marlow) he may see "writ large... the reproof of his romantic conscience" (25). In Heart of Darkness, the same image of horizon is repeated with emphasis on the saving grace offered by the open world:

"In the offing the sea and the sky were welded together without a joint..." (5)

"... Jim accompanied me...back to the world he had renounced...the shadow of impending separation had put an immense space between us... we sweltered side by side...till a great hand lifted...an immense portal...the forests sank down...this sky and this sea were open to me... the atmosphere...seemed to



vibrate with the toil of life, with the energy of an implacable world.. there was a call in them..something to which I responded with every fibre of my being... And I looked at the sinner by my side..." (249)

I believe that it is clear that, for Conrad, the isolation, introspection, romanticism, sense of superiority, etc. are means of "damnation" that lead to the destruction of one's capacity to absorb the spiritual energy offered by the "glorious and obscure" toil of life, that he speaks of in The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'. In his works, specifically in Heart of Darkness, men are rendered hollow, incapable of living up to the rhetorical pledges of civilization, progress, and blessings which they announce, while dressed in their white suits, in their "deep voice". Indeed they only contradict their promises by proving with their deeds that they are materialistic, egoistic, and savage, instead.

"... Kurtz wandered alone... in the depths of the forest (80)... the appetite for more ivory had got the better of the less material aspirations...(82) heads drying on... stakes ...horrors(83)... savagery... (84)

In An Outcast of the Islands, the image of death as punishment for the "sin" of wandering away from the outside world, for the crime of detaching oneself from the living forest formed by interrelated, interdependent "trees" appears again:

"...He stared on the river... through and past the illusion of the material world... higher up a solitary log came out... and went on drifting slowly... a dead and wandering tree going to its grave in the sea, between two ranks of trees motionless and living... the black log passing by (on the muddy river) on its first and last voyage... He hated..."

the joyous sea of living... the forests..."  
(237)

Later, Willems's brain is compared to a breeding ground of snakes that have the power to lure men into the experience of penetrating the dark, sterile maze of his heart:

"...All was night within him... he walked about blindly in zigzagging paths that led to no issue... in his tired brain, seethed his thoughts; horrible and venomous, like a nestful of snakes..." (265)

In Victory, we notice that Axel Heyst meets a tragic fate for his "sin" of isolating himself in the symbolic round island of his brain, where he manages to eliminate all possible ties with the external world, with any other individual:

"... Davidson could not guess that Heyst... alone on that island... felt neither more nor less lonely than in any other place, desert or populous... This was a spirit that had renounced all outside nourishment and was sustaining itself proudly on its contempt of the usual coarse ailments which life offers ... (152) he had lost touch with his surroundings... (71) divorced from the love of life..." (311)

However, Heyst, enveloped in his tragic illusion of what could give him true safety of life, declares boldly his independence from the falsity of the promises of real existence made by the outside world, and asserts his flawed conception of true existence:

"...I have managed to refine everything away. I've said to the Earth that bore me: I am I and you are a shadow... I have lost all belief in realities..." (281)

It is this same tragic outcry that we hear Razumov utter with the damning pride that removes

individuals from participation in the "logic of history" and renders them a "withered member that must be cut off" (36). These are the words that Razumov expresses at the crowning of his "fallen" existence, close to the end of Under Western Eyes:

"...I made myself free from falsehood... independent of every human being on this earth..." (303)

It is interesting to notice that in all instances of "travelling" and "wandering" there is a paradox, since movement implies the stiffness, the immobility brought about by death, by the issueless voyage into the sterile self. In opposition we notice that in the fixedness of the trees one can find the energy, the movement of life. We notice that death is expressed through the metaphors of cutting, of uprooting, burning, etc., while travelling becomes a metaphor for destruction, too, since it is only when a tree is "dead", cut down, that it can wander away to its grave in the sea. Conrad often uses tree as a metaphor for man and forest as a metaphor for a group of interrelated men. The quotations below will illustrate my statements and supply one more example of metaphor, that of the ship, meaning a "fecund tropical forest of men".

"...Cut down a few trees. No! one would do... one would do. One tree to cut down...big logs of uprooted trees drifted in midstream. A long procession of black and ragged specks... He had a terrible vision of shadowless horizons where the blue sky and the blue sea met; or a circular and blazing emptiness where a dead tree and dead man drifted together... no ships there. Only death.

And the river led to it..."(267) (And Outcast of

the Islands).

"...most seamen lead... a sedentary life... their minds are of the stay-at-home order and their home is always with them - the ship; and so is their country - the sea. One ship is very much like another, and the sea is always the same..." (8) (Heart of Darkness)

In the quotations above, we see that in "the circular and blazing emptiness" of Willems's brain there is the overwhelming presence of death in the form of a log drifting down the stream of his thoughts. Willems points out specifically that there were no ships there, but only death. Therefore, the ship appears as the antithesis of destructive mobility, symbolizing the stable home of man in the immutable sea of life. Aboard a ship man will be offered the opportunity of life-giving association with the crew members, participating in the exacting duty of promoting the progress of the ship through the storms of the sea. However, the end of the voyage of the 'Narcissus' is not marked by sorrow, and death that stamps the end of the journey taken by Kurtz on the river of his thoughts, since aboard a ship man is taught the rule for the acquisition of perfect wisdom for a blessed life. In The Nigger of the 'Narcissus', Singleton epitomizes the prototype of man raised above destruction:

"..he had never given a thought to his mortal self. He lived unscathed, as though he had been indestructible..." (87)

In the same novel, we learn that the grace that saves man from the damnation of self love, egoism, etc. is given by the sea in the form of the necessity of toiling hard, a need that prevents individuals from

"feeling" themselves and "getting done up and stiff", like James Wait, and his followers, Charley, Belfast and Donkin.

".. through the perfect of its (the sea's) grace they are not permitted to meditate at ease upon ... existence. They must without pause justify their life to the eternal pity that commands toil to be hard and unceasing..." (80)

At the end of the voyage (differently from Charley, Belfast, and Donkin, who like Kurtz, James Wait, Willems, etc. "wandered off alone") (141), the crew is seen "clinging to one another" (141), and on account of this fact the crew is depicted as human beings worthy of the grace of the eternal pity of the world. In fact, we see them bathed in light, surrounded by the sympathy of the very trees and stones, which express their approval of their exemplary, redeeming stoicism aboard the ship.

"... The dark knot of seamen drifted in sunshine... the trees sighed... the stones... seemed to stir... in the play of light... remembering the fighting prototypes of these men. The sunshine of heaven fell like a gift of grace on the mud of the earth..." (142/3)

Concluding, we might say that, formally, the image of wandering pervades the tragedy of man's return to cannibalism, savagery, and, consequently, to his own destructive state. We see that it is by man's walking away from the company of other individuals, often referred to as "Brutes", that man brutalizes himself to the point of no return, in the dead center of death found in the interior of his own deceptive brain.

"... death... is the most unexciting contest you can imagine. It takes place in an impalpable greyness, with nothing underfoot,

with nothing around, without spectators...  
in a sickly atmosphere of skepticism. In a  
sickly atmosphere of skepticism... he had  
made that last stride... into that  
inappreciable moment of time in which we step  
over the threshold of the invisible..."(100/1)