

# A Journey towards Self-discovery in Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*

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## Abstract:

*The research paper sheds light on the self-discovery of Charles Marlow and considers it as a journey of initiation which extends itself to the new unending existence. There is no time and space in it, which remains vacant for advent of a new life. It examines the pursuit of Kurtz, the head of the inner station. This study objectifies both inner and outer stations for a new experiment. This is seen as a self-discovery of one's inner spirit. These pictures, in the novella, adopt a method depicting both figurative and literal meanings. It is obviously a pursuit of self-discovery focused on the discovery of Africa and the impact of imperialism. It develops two stations are one the people and another their colonial rule. Basically, Marlow's journey appears to be as if Joseph Conrad presents himself as a cloak of true journey. The paper portrays the physical journey in the Heart of Darkness in which the inner and outer realities are complementary to each another. The inner journey has a profound effect on unconscious thoughts and actions. It shows Marlow's capability to differentiate between good and evil since he observes how progress implies the moral sense of judgment.*

**Keywords:** literal-figurative meanings, self-discovery, moral judgment.

## Introduction and Objectives to the Study :

*The Heart of Darkness*, written by Joseph Conrad, a British novelist and short story writer, is a novel based on a critique of the Western European colonial rule in Africa. This novel dramatizes the theme of a conflict between good and evil. The narrative begins with Charlie Marlow's assignment as a steamer captain in the African interior. Marlow starts his journey in search of Kurtz, an ivory-acquiring agent. Marlow is surprised to find out how colonizing traders work with the African people. Conrad's survey of darkness analyzes how good and evil spirits are inherent to all human hearts. They are well discerned on the way of the self-discovery. Marlow sets his journey from Europe to the outer space and then to the central space and had moments of encountering with good and evil spirits. The novel has multiple layers of thoughts and feelings in the darkness of inner and outer stations. Instead of centering on its plot, the readers are more attracted towards re-creation of thoughts

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and feelings of the narrator, Marlow, as Bruce Hericksen highlights, “recent criticism has insisted on the story’s being about Marlow, rather than Kurtz, regarding it as a journey into Marlow’s consciousness” (47). In fact, Marlow does not like to keep into coil to his readers with what goes to him personally, as it mentions that “yet to understand the effect of it on me you ought to know how I got out there, what I saw, how I went up that river to the place where I first met the poor chap” (5). The aim and objective of this paper is to seek the clues elaborating those changes created by the event which occurs while investigating Marlow’s journey to the heart of darkness leading to self-journey. Henricksen also shows that Marlow’s account begins to “a kind of frame-narrator’s grave, quiet, brooding voice which starts with the interior resonance of story, using the first person, to move free where he wishes in time, and therefore free to foreshadow his conclusion” (27). Through the protagonist Marlow’s journey into the heart of Africa, Conrad delves into the depths of the human psyche, revealing the darkness that resides within each individual. Marlow’s quest to find Kurtz, an ivory trader, who embodies the extremes human’s behaviour because a metaphysical journey of self-discovery for both Marlow and the reader.

Marlow’s journey into the inner recesses of the American interior is fraught with unexpected encounters and revelations that challenge his preconceived notions and beliefs. As he delves deeper into the heart of darkness, both literally and metaphorically, Marlow confronts realities that he was not fully prepared to face. He encounters the flourishing darkness, and he is gradually losing the theme of the novel. Very importantly, he measures the narrative to a dream, which may be responsible for the kind of discursive distortion that affects the story itself. In this regard R. A. Geroski mentions, “We are made aware of Kurtz’s symbolic role through the recurrent dream-imagery, which locates him as a phantom in Marlow’s dream” (15). Marlow’s encounter with Kurtz reveals the stark contrast between the façade of European civilization and the harsh realities hidden beneath Kurtz initially portrayed as an idealistic agent of European imperialism. Marlow’s journey turns a journey into the psyche of Kurtz and finds self-expression of Marlow’s own uncurious state. In this regard, Cox C. B. also points out, “the novel can be interpreted, in a Freudian manner, as a journey into the wilderness of sex, a fantasy shaped by Conrad’s own divided impulses” (41), since Kurtz reflects Marlow’s self-shadow, the secret sharer, and the voyage of discovery is a night journey in the unconscious state, his inner self.

### **Methods and Materials:**

The study is based on the horrors of the Western colonialism. It analyzes European imperialism that tarnishes not only the lands and peoples of the colonized but also the hearts and minds of those who went on the civilizing mission. The research, as a paradigm of qualitative research, investigates the self-discovery that crosses not only the changeable water that lasts in the physical world, but also the contradictory sea that lives in the hearts of human beings. In the prejudiced and biased eyes of Marlow, we judge the problem that is humanity and the vague lines between good and evil, or light and dark. Of course, it is

a journey into the dark recesses of mankind's heart and mind. Mohammad Ataullah Nuri, in *Heart of Darkness*, sees a journey of "self-realization or, like Albert Guerard it can also be viewed as a "night journey", leading to epiphany, enlightenment, and finally spiraling downwards into the crevices of a hell existing within each and every one of us, which is represented by the character of Kurtz"(75). Through Marlow Conrad represents a journey into the Congo, the use of symbols and wordplays disclose something appreciably more profound. Contrarily, William J. Scheick displays the long lasting admiration of this novel rests on hundreds of year where "its plot of adventure, its humor, and its plain narrative manner -each incidentally averting the audience's attention from racist and misogynist undertones." (45). Conrad shows his subjective notion that "we live, as we dream alone" (24). For instance, Marlow avenges his exile and attempts to solve the problem of this world through the journey between good and evil.

*Heart of Darkness* is a commentary on the splitting up of human personality under the pressure of the twin ideals. The first is the theoretical principles and the second is its practical form. They establish a wide network to fulfill their mission of life. Gradually, the good/real glares and evil/false disappears. The man who lives in the world of evil lives in frustration and demoralizes into poor creatures, finding life meaningless and absurd. King James portrays the evil/false that "I have found thee: because thou hast sold thyself to work evil in the sight of the Lord" (28). Kurtz and Marlow, in *The Heart of Darkness*, are such characters who symbolize the two categories of human beings. The ideal is the white man's burden of the British imperialists to culture and civilize the backward people of the world. Kurtz goes to Congo with this mission of their country and race, but the lust and greed of building and expanding the British Empire generates in him a similar lust for collecting ivory for himself. This lust results in the loss of the integrity of his personality in his own eyes and ultimately he dies, Marlow goes to Congo with the same intention or the ideal mission of this country but what he finds there is the brutal exploitation of the natives by the whites operating the business of ivory there. Kurtz is physically dead but his agonized soul has possessed Marlow, who comes back home with a fractured conscience. It gives him a lesson that lust is the greatest enemy in life.

### **Results and Discussion:**

Marlow starts with sixty men from the central station and he can see that the condition is worse than at the first station. The land was destroyed and uninhabited. Marlow feels that he is losing his sense of pride in the culture and civilization of his country and is being overpowered by the dullness, greed, and lust around him. He feels that everything around him is unreal, yet he thinks that something is real, which could be like a dream. Marlow was curious to see Kurtz when the person working warned him about his deeds. He develops a sense of adoration for his ideals. After the attack from the natives; he thought he would never see Kurtz. It was difficult to understand their real-life situation—their lives are in contrast to the lives of natives. He gives an elaborate statement on man's two levels of existence-illusion and real:

Of course you may be too much of a fool to go wrong-too dull even to know you are being assaulted by the power of darkness. I take it, no fool ever made a bargain for his soul with the devil: the fool is too much of a fool or a devil-I don't know which. Or you may be such a thundering exalted creature as to be altogether of blind to nothing but heavenly sights and sounds. Then the earth for you is the only a standing place and whether to be like this your loss or your gain won't pretend to say. But most of us neither-one nor the other. (76)

*Heart of Darkness* is the subconscious of Kurtz and Marlow. Kurtz realizes the futility of this short life just before his death. Kurtz was the symbol of a cultured and civilized race, but he moved to the stage of savage greed and lustful life. He realized that all that he has been living appears meaningless and horrible: "No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any epoch of one's existence, that which makes its truth, its meaning is subtle and penetrating essence is impossible. We live as we dream-alone" (44). The culmination of this fear crosses the layers of unconsciousness and then whispers his last words, "The horror! The horror" (106)! *Heart of Darkness* narrates the maddening horrors and sensations that Marlow experiences and which Conrad, too, must have experienced during his visit to the Dark Continent. His voyage into the heart of darkness when he was often very close to death, resulted in inner illumination, a better and fuller understanding of life and its mystery, and the result was a great *Heart of Darkness*. Richard Ambrosini achieves a kind of tension produces "imagery, rhythm and rhetoric through the intellectual drama without a solution" (25). The female characters in the novel move into a world of fantasy. The aunt of Marlow, who asks him to carry the light of civilization to the savages of Africa, lives in a world of illusion a dream world. They have no idea of what is really happening in Africa. The greed, cruelty, and savagery of the colonizers are fully exposed and condemned. In their lust for wealth, they throw out human values and exploit them for their gain.

For Marlow, the journey up the Congo River is a voyage of self-exploration and self-realization, which gives deep insight into the dark recess of the human mind. A similar insight falls in William Shakespeare's *Othello*. It shows curiosity in a speech: Cassio. "Here, here! For heaven's sake, help me! Iago. I cry, you mercy" (175). In this regard, it gives readers a sense of insight into his (Marlow's) heart, which in turn results in the illumination and self-knowledge. Emotional reality is higher than factual reality and *Heart of Darkness* has this emotional reality. Maria Antonia Alvarez Calleja's article "Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness as a Journey in Quest of the Self" documents the essence of it is that "although all kinds of entitles responses are demanded, every time Marlow asks his audience: do you understand" (7)? The wilds of Africa look calm and quiet with no sign of life, but they are swarming with wild savages, the remote ancestors of man. They attack the steamer, but it is their defense in reality. They do not want white people to take away. From them, nor does Kurtz wish to go with them. Kurtz was an idol of the natives and is worshipped by them as

God, but the reality is, that he is a hollow man, all hollow within. His intention is a diluted girl living under the illusion that the person whom she loves is a great man. Marlow keeps up this illusion by telling lies.

Conrad's poetic description of the African interior creates a dense and populated inner landscape at the heart of every man's consciousness: "The great wall of vegetation . . . was like a rioting invasion of soundless life, a rioting even of plants piled up, crested, ready to topple over the creek, to sweep every little man of us out of his little existence" (43). The inner space of the presence is where the Kurtz is the subconscious and the fog which envelops the ship symbolizes the difficult process through which one alone can reach the subconscious. The paradox implied in the title is nowhere more obvious than at what is usually taken to the center of the story, "the Kurtz death-bad cry, the horror..." (47). Marlow insists that these are the moments of complete knowledge. James Guetti comments that, "he asserts that the horror has to do not only with Kurtz unspeakable history, but also with the world at large wide enough to embrace the whole universe, piercing to penetrate all the hearts that beat in the darkness" (65). William Wallace Bencroft has proclaimed that "hardship produces terrible sufferings in exile, sacrifice and struggles" (23). The excited admiration and pronounce the heroic in those who rise above them, but when there is no moral stress to call forth the fibre of the deeper man, to bring out latent powers of mind and will, the tragedy is supreme!

With the burial of Kurtz's dead body, something belonging to Marlow is also buried. He ponders man's destiny, his destiny, and life. He is shorn of man's illusion of a false ideal and is face-to-face with stark realities. His observation of life is like that of a person who is trying to gather some atom of truth from the ashes of life. The most one can expect from life is the truth, or the reality of one's life. Marlow had full knowledge of Kurtz's spiritual crisis at the time of his death. The Buddha posture of Marlow is symbolic of his desire for self-knowledge. It symbolizes the inner illumination and insight that he gains through his Congo voyage.

Kurtz's spiritual agony has now become Marlow's. When he is back in Brussels, he could draw the contrast between the two patterns of life as found in the Congo and in Brussels. In the Congo, the huge mass of the natives still has homogeneity and harmony, and against them is the working class of white men officials who are united together at least by the business interests of the company. Terry Goldie, too, has similar belief that "the white Europeans still take Indian as other and alien though they have been living there for century" (234). But the people of Brussels are always dreaming of silly things of selfishness, greed and lust. In this way Patricia Mckee in *Corresponding Freedoms: Language and the Self in Pamela*, affirms: "the self that Pamela represents is neither independence nor individual; she remains both dependent on and inseparable from others" (622). Dhruva Karki represents that in the process of recognition of self, "Pamela cannot find herself separate from others, and thus, accepts her position as an individual within

the society she lives in” (61). In the similar fashion, *The Heart of Darkness* reveals the reality of life that man has to face in his life. Marlow is aware of his wounded self and his injured sensibilities. Naturally, he has no intellectual or emotional defense. He is unable to chart out any plan for his life. But it is sheer irony that he has still to go on with his duties by fulfilling one of the ironic necessities of human existence. Marlow’s adventure of life stands for an authentic life is not easy one. It brings great effort is like dark and death. Peter J. Glassman states that streams of death in life, in the extremity of an impotent despair; the jungle drives white men mad because of its solitude: “There is nobody, not a hut, there is only death, the death of many men, the death of ethical behavior, the death of goodness and civility, the death, crucially, of our authority as selves” (75). Conrad has achieved a unique mastery of language and expression in his novel, *The Heart of Darkness*.

Conrad’s language has a natural flow, rhythm and sometimes becomes pure poetry. Man’s mind and thought is capable of anything because everything is within. Kurtz descended into the heart of the darkness of his subconscious, which swallowed him, but that darkness, the reality of human life, corrodes Marlow. Hannan Lewsley rightly comments, “This master piece has become one of those amazing modern fictions such as Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice* or Kafka’s *Trial* which throws light to whole nature of twentieth century art, its problems and achievement” (50). The reality, as Jean-Aubry Georges has mentioned that the novelist appears “to be quite incapable of believing in any kind of thought-form, and his contempt is directed acidly towards a humanity” (87), that doesn’t know what it wants.

### **Conclusion:**

The study concludes that the claim to civilization made by mankind is often a façade that conceals the darkness within. The line that delves between reality and falsehood in his life is very blurred. He allows himself to be carried away by the urge of temptation and evil force once he crosses the so-called civilized boundary. The research highlights the finding that the experience of Marlow's visit to the Congo, which frames Kurtz's African expedition, is a failure, and its death. Kurtz was an emissary of the British Empire who came out to spread the light of progress and civilization among the savage people of Congo. But he is found fallen into the position of a base human being and started exploiting ignorant people. In the eyes of the natives, he is the messiah of progress, though to his colleagues, he is an agent of exploitation. He becomes inhuman, callous, and cruel towards the natives, and he is even ready to behead them for getting ivory. *The Heart of Darkness* brings out the mysteries that lie deep under human’s inner recess and the protagonist’s journey to the land of savage turns a symbolic journey leading to his own self-discovery.

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