

Cœur des ténèbres

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Au cœur des ténèbres, nouvelle de Joseph Conrad qui a été publiée pour la première fois en 1899 dans *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* puis dans *Conrad's Youth: and Two Other Stories* (1902). *Heart of Darkness* examine les horreurs du colonialisme occidental, le décrivant comme un phénomène qui ternit non seulement les terres et les peuples qu'il exploite, mais aussi ceux en Occident qui le font avancer. Bien qu'ayant reçu un accueil terne au départ, le récit semi-autobiographique de Conrad est devenu l'une des œuvres les plus analysées de la littérature anglaise. Les critiques n'ont pas toujours traité favorablement *Heart of Darkness*, reprochant sa représentation déshumanisante des peuples colonisés et son traitement méprisant des femmes. Néanmoins, *Heart of Darkness* a perduré, et aujourd'hui il se présente comme un Chef-d'œuvre moderniste directement engagé dans les réalités postcoloniales.

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Résumé

Heart of Darkness raconte une histoire dans une histoire. La nouvelle commence avec un groupe de passagers à bord d'un bateau flottant sur la Tamise. L'un d'eux, Charlie Marlow, raconte à ses camarades marins une expérience qui s'est déroulée sur un tout autre fleuve : le fleuve Congo en Afrique. L'histoire de Marlow commence dans ce qu'il appelle la « ville sépulcrale », quelque part en Europe. Là, « la Compagnie », une organisation anonyme qui dirige une entreprise coloniale au Congo belge, le nomme capitaine d'un bateau à vapeur. Il part pour l'Afrique optimiste quant à ce qu'il trouvera.

Mais ses attentes se sont vite aigries. Dès son arrivée, il est exposé au mal de l'impérialisme, témoin de la violence qu'il inflige aux peuples africains qu'il exploite. Au fur et à mesure qu'il avance, il commence à entendre parler d'un homme nommé Kurtz - un agent colonial qui est censé être sans égal dans sa

capacité à se procurer de l'ivoire de l'intérieur du continent. Selon la rumeur, Kurtz est tombé malade (et peut-être fou aussi), mettant ainsi en péril toute l'entreprise de la Compagnie au Congo.

Marlow se voit confier le commandement de son bateau à vapeur et un équipage d'Européens et d'Africains pour le piloter, ces derniers que Conrad présente sans vergogne comme des « cannibales ». Alors qu'il pénètre plus profondément dans la jungle, il devient clair que son environnement l'affecte psychologiquement : son voyage n'est pas seulement dans un « cœur des ténèbres » géographique, mais dans son propre intérieur psychique - et peut-être dans l'intérieur psychique assombri de la civilisation occidentale comme bien.

Après avoir rencontré de nombreux obstacles en cours de route, le vapeur de Marlow arrive enfin à Kurtz. Kurtz a pris le commandement d'une tribu d'indigènes qu'il emploie maintenant pour mener des raids dans les régions environnantes. L'homme est clairement malade, physiquement et psychologiquement. Marlow doit le menacer de les suivre, donc Kurtz est déterminé à exécuter ses "immenses plans". Alors que le bateau à vapeur fait demi-tour, l'équipage de Marlow tire sur le groupe d'indigènes auparavant sous l'emprise de Kurtz, qui comprend une figure de la reine décrite par Conrad avec beaucoup d'érotisme et d'exotisme.

Kurtz dies on the journey back up the river but not before revealing to Marlow the terrifying glimpse of human evil he'd been exposed to. "The horror! The horror!" he tells Marlow before dying. Marlow almost dies as well, but he makes it back to the sepulchral city to recuperate. He is disdainful of the petty tribulations of Western civilization that seem to occupy everyone around him. As he heals, he is visited by various characters from Kurtz's former life—the life he led before finding the dark interior of himself in Africa.

A year after his return to Europe, Marlow pays Kurtz's partner a visit. She is represented—as several of *Heart of Darkness's* female characters are—as naively sheltered from the awfulness of the world, a state that Marlow hopes to preserve. When she asks about Kurtz's final words, Marlow lies: "your name," he tells her.

Marlow's story ends there. *Heart of Darkness* itself ends as the narrator, one of Marlow's audience, sees a mass of brooding clouds gathering on the horizon—what seems to him to be “heart of an immense darkness.”

Reception

Heart of Darkness was published in 1902 as a novella in *Youth: And Two Other Stories*, a collection which included two other stories by Conrad. But the text first appeared in 1899 in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, a literary monthly on its thousandth issue, to which its editor invited Conrad to contribute. Conrad was hesitant to do so, perhaps for good reason—although *Heart of Darkness* received acclaim among his own literary circle, the story failed to secure any kind of popular success. That remained the case even when it was published in 1902; *Heart of Darkness* received the least attention out of the three stories included, and the collection was eponymously named after another one of the stories altogether. Conrad didn't live long enough to see it become a popular success.

Heart of Darkness first began garnering academic attention in the 1940 and '50s, at a time when literary studies were dominated by a psychologically oriented approach to the interpretation of literature. *Heart of Darkness* was, accordingly, understood as a universalist exploration of human interiority—of its corruptibility, its inaccessibility, and the darkness inherent to it. There was something lacking in these critiques, of course: any kind of examination of the novella's message about colonialism or its use of Africa and its people as an indistinct backdrop against which to explore the complexities of the white psyche.

That changed in the 1970s when Chinua Achebe, the Nigerian author of *Things Fall Apart*, levelled an excoriating critique against *Heart of Darkness* for the way it dehumanized African people. Achebe's critique opened the doors for further postcolonial analyses of the work, was followed by those from other academic perspectives: feminist readings, for example, revealed a similar kind of effacement done unto its female subjects. Although *Heart of Darkness* has remained on many syllabi since the 1970s, it now occupies a much more controversial position in the Western canon: as a story that, while levelling critiques against colonialism that

were novel for its time, and which was formative for the emergence of modernism in literature, is still deeply and inexcusably entrenched in the white male perspective.

Analysis

On the most superficial level, *Heart of Darkness* can be understood through its semiautobiographical relationship to Conrad's real life. Much like his protagonist Marlow, Conrad's career as a merchant marine also took him up the Congo River. And much like Marlow, Conrad was profoundly affected by the human depravity he witnessed on his boat tour of European colonialism in Africa.

But it's overly reductive to boil *Heart of Darkness* down to the commonalities it shares with Conrad's own experiences. It would be useful to examine its elements crucial to the emergence of modernism: for example, Conrad's use of multiple narrators; his couching of one narrative within another; the story's achronological unfolding; and as would become increasingly clear as the 20th century progressed, his almost post-structuralist distrust in the stability of language. At the same time, his story pays homage to the Victorian tales he grew up on, evident in the popular heroism so central to his story's narrative. In that sense, *Heart of Darkness* straddles the boundary between a waning Victorian sensibility and a waxing Modernist one.

One of the most resoundingly Modernist elements of Conrad's work lies in this kind of early post-structuralist treatment of language—his insistence on the inherent inability of words to express the real, in all of its horrific truth. Marlow's journey is full of encounters with things that are “unspeakable,” with words that are uninterpretable, and with a world that is eminently “inscrutable.” In this way, language fails time and time again to do what it is meant to do—to communicate. It's a phenomenon best summed up when Marlow tells his audience that “it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence—that which makes its truth, its meaning—its subtle and penetrating essence... We live, as we dream—alone.” Kurtz—as “eloquent” as he may be—can't even adequately communicate the terrifying darkness he observed around him. “The horror! The

horror!” is all he can say. Some critics have surmised that part of *Heart of Darkness*’s mass appeal comes from this ambiguity of language—from the free rein it gives its readers to interpret. Others posit this as a great weakness of the text, viewing Conrad’s inability to name things as an unseemly quality in a writer who’s supposed to be one of the greats. Perhaps this is itself a testament to the *Heart of Darkness*’s breadth of interpretability.

Examining *Heart of Darkness* from a postcolonial perspective has given way to more derisive critiques. As Achebe put it, Conrad was a “thoroughgoing racist,” one who dehumanized Africans in order to use them as a backdrop against which to explore the white man’s interiority. Achebe is right: although Conrad rebukes the evils of colonialism, he does little to dismantle the racism that undergirds such a system, instead positing the indigenous people of Africa as little more than part of the natural environment. This work has been held up as one of the West’s most insightful books on the evils of European imperialism in Africa, and yet it fails to assign any particularity to African people themselves.

Feminist discourse has offered similar critiques, that Conrad has flattened his female characters similar to the way he’s done so with his African ones. Women are deployed not as multidimensional beings, but as signifiers undistinguished from the field of other signifiers that make up the text. They are shells emptied of all particularity and meaning, such that Conrad can fill them with the significance he sees fit: the African queen becomes the embodiment of darkened nature and an eroticized symbol of its atavistic allure; Kurtz’s Intended, meanwhile, is just a signifier for the illusory reality of society that Marlow is trying to protect against the invading darkness of human nature. Neither woman is interiorized, and neither is named—a rhetorical strategy that seems less about Conrad illustrating the failures of language than it does about him privileging his masculine voice above any possible feminine ones.

Much contemporary analysis—the aforementioned postcolonial and feminist critiques included—is centred not on text itself, but on other commentaries of the text, thereby elucidating the way that discussions in academia might unwittingly perpetuate some of the work’s more problematic elements. Thus, *Heart of*

Darkness is occupying an ever-changing position in the literary canon: no longer as an elucidatory text that reveals the depths of human depravity, but as an artifact that is the product of such depravity and which reproduces it in its own right. The question then becomes: Does the *Heart of Darkness* still belong in the West's literary cannon? And if so, will it always?

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