



## “Heart of Darkness”

Paper III – Novel

**Question:** Discuss the major themes in the novel “Heart of Darkness”.

**Answer:-**

*“I was thinking of very old times, when the Romans first came here, nineteen hundred years ago – the other day .... Light came out of their river since – you say knights? Yes, but it is like a running blaze on a plain, like a flash of lightening in the clouds. We live in flicker – may it last as long as the old earth keeps rolling! But darkness was here yesterday.”*

(Marlow, Heart of Darkness)

Themes are fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary piece of work. “Heart of Darkness” is rich in meaning and significance because it deals with several themes which have been skillfully coordinated and integrated with one another. These well-knit and major themes include imperialism, the theme of silence and solitude, deception of hypocrisy, self-restraint, racism and moral corruption etc. some of these themes are obvious, while others can be delved by reading between the lines.

“Heart of Darkness”, at its most abstract level, is a narrative about the difficulty of understanding the world beyond the self, about the ability of one man to judge another. The novel centres around Marlow, an introspective sailor, and his journey up to the Congo River to meet Kurtz, reputed to be an idealistic man of great abilities.

In “Heart of Darkness”, the most obvious theme is **imperialism**. “Heart of Darkness” explores the issues surrounding imperialism in complicated ways. As Marlow travels from one station to another, he witness the scenes of torture, cruelty and near-slavery. At the very least, the incidental scenery of the book offers a harsh picture of colonial enterprise. The impetus behind Marlow’s adventures, too, has to do with the hypocrisy inherent in the rhetoric used to justify imperialism. Kurtz, on the other hand, is open about the fact that he does not trade but rather takes ivory by force. Further, he describes his own treatment of the motives with the word “suppression” and “extermination”: he does not hide the fact that he rules through violence and intimidation. His perverse honesty leads to his downfall, as his success threatens to expose the evil practices behind European activity in Africa.

Throughout “Heart of Darkness”, which narrates a journey into the heart of Belgian Congo and out again, the themes of **alienation, loneliness, silence and solitude** predominate. The books begins and ends in silence, with men first waiting for a tale to begin and then left to their own thoughts after it has concluded. The question of what the alienation and loneliness of extended periods of time in a remote and hostile environment can do to men’s mind is a central theme of the book. Prolonged silence and solitude are seen to have damaging effects on many characters in the book.

*“Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world.”*

(Marlow)

“**Self-restraint**” also seems prevailing throughout the situation in the novella, “Heart of Darkness”. This pervades the whole situation in such a way that everyone in this novel seems unable to control one’s passions, greed and hypocrisy. As in the case of Kurtz, he went to Africa to civilize the Africans but he himself loses his identity there. He could not resist his greed and passion for ivory. Even that for this purpose, he ordered to stay African brutes. He involves in his material interests rather than his bright idea of civilizing. At this point, the irony is that the most civilized people becomes uncivilized and the uncivilized people seem to be civilized.

It whispers to Kurtz things about himself he does not know. He cannot resist the whisperings because he is “*hollow at the core*”. It is very late when he comes to realize what has happened to him so mysteriously that he scribbles at the end of the report:

*“Exterminate all the brutes.”*

In fact, Kurtz can do what he does intend to do. He is not able to resist the temptation and involves himself in lust for money, lust for power and lust for physical pleasure. Hence,

*“Going into the darkness of the jungle was travelling in the past and into the sub-conscience.”*

**Deception or hypocrisy**, is also a major theme of the novel and is explored at many levels. In the disguise of a “noble cause”, the Belgians have exploited the Congo. Actions taken in the name of philanthropy are merely covers for greed. Marlow has even obtained his captaincy through deception, for his aunt misrepresented him as “an exceptional and gifted creature”. At the end of the book, Marlow engages in his own deception when he tells Kurtz’s fiancé the lie that Kurtz died with her name on his lips.

As reason loses hold, **doubt and ambiguity** take over. As Marlow travels deeper inland, the reality of everything, he encounters, becomes suspect. The perceptions, motivations and reliability of those he meets, as well as his own, are all open to doubt. The central ambiguity of “Heart of Darkness” is Kurtz himself. Who is he? What does he do? Those who know him speak of rhetoric, but the reader hears little of it. Marlow has heard that Kurtz is a great man, yet he suspects he is “hollow to the core”. After Kurtz’s death, there was no man who really knew him. Was he a painter, a writer, a great musician, a politician, as he is variously described? Marlow settles for the ambiguous term, “universal genius”, which would imply Kurtz was whatever one wanted to make of him.

*“The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed somber under an overcast sky-seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness.”*

(Heart of Darkness)

**The subject of racism** is not really treated by Conrad as a theme in “Heart of Darkness” as much as it is simply shown to be the prevailing attitude of the day. The African natives are referred to as “Cannibals”, “criminals”, and “savages”. European colonizers see them as a subordinate species and chain, starve, rob, mutilate and murder them without fear of punishment. Kurtz is writing a treatise for something called “The international society for the suppression of savage customs.” This implies the existence of a worldwide movement to subjugate all non-white races. Africans believe that white people appear to them as supernatural beings. So the natives seem to have worshipped Kurtz as a god. This innocence proceeds, in Kurtz’s view, from an inferior intelligence and does not prevent him from concluding that the way to deal with the natives is to exterminate them all.

*“A savage who was no more account than a grain of sand in a black Sahara.”*

(Marlow-Heart of Darkness)

Marlow further elaborates:

*“They were dying slowly – it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now, nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation lying confusedly in the greenish gloom.”*

Then the two of the most important themes in this novel are **violence and cruelty**. The violence and cruelty depicted in “Heart of Darkness” escalate from acts of inhumanity committed against the natives of the Belgian Congo to “unspeakable” and “undescribed horrors”. The natives are seen chained by iron collars, starved, beaten and finally ruthlessly murdered. Conrad suggests that violence and cruelty result when law is absent. Under such circumstances, anything is possible, and what Conrad sees emerging from the situation is the profound cruelty and limitless violence that lies at the heart of the human soul.

*“While I stood horror struck, one of these creatures rose to his hands and knees and went off on all fours towards the river to drink.”* (Marlow)

The book’s theme of **moral corruption** is the one to which, like streams to a river, all others lead. Racism, madness, loveliness, deception, imperialism, doubt and ambiguity, self-restraint, violence and cruelty – culminate in the moral corruption revealed by Kurtz’s acts in the Congo. Kurtz has cast off reason and allowed his most base and brutal instincts to rule unrestrained. Kurtz perhaps realizes the depth of his own moral corruption when, as he lies dying, he utters “The horror! The horror!” The savage nature of man thus reaches at the end of the journey, not upriver, but into his own soul.

To be curt, keeping in view the extending variety of themes in “Heart of Darkness”, we may safely say that “Heart of Darkness” is a great novel which contains layers within layers of meaning. It can be read at various levels. It creates an ambiance which is replete with the social, moral and historical references. Joseph Conrad stands prominent among his contemporaries due to his mastery in presenting and handling a large number of conspicuous and well-contrived themes.

*“Those who read me, know my conviction that the world, the temporal world, rests on a few very simple ideas. So simple that they must be as old as the hills. It rests, notably, among others, on the idea of Fidelity.”*

(Joseph Conrad – The preface to a personal record)

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## SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TITLE

**Question:** What did Conrad mean by the phrase “Heart of Darkness”?

OR

Discuss the significance of the title “Heart of Darkness”.

**Answer:-**

*“The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed somber under an overcast sky-seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness.”*

(Marlow - Heart of Darkness)

The title of the novel, “Heart of Darkness”, refers to the uncivilized savagery and the dark continent of Africa and also the dark ends of Europeans. Each and every object, action and character in the novel is quite in accordance with the title.

First of all, the climate of Africa is dark as Marlow tells that the night came suddenly and seemed to strike him blind. When the sun rose, there was a white fog, very warm and damp, and more blindly than the night. So we can say that darkness prevailed in Africa thoroughly even where there was a light or brightness of fog. Marlow said:

*“I was thinking of very old times, when the Romans first came here, nineteen hundred years ago – the other day .... Light came out of their river since – you say knights? Yes, but it is like a running blaze on a plain, like a flash of lightning in the clouds. We live in flicker – may it last as long as the old earth keeps rolling! ”*

Then there has been portrayed the deplorable picture of the black people in the novel. As Marlow and his crew progress deeper into the heart of the forest, we can take note that black people are dehumanized and they are referred to in animalistic terms and are treated as such. Then Marlow comes across two black women knitting with black wool in the dark continent of Africa.

The title “Heart of Darkness” has symbolic meaning as well. The word ‘darkness’ symbolizes the sense of evil existed in every human being and thus the symbolic meaning of the phrase ‘Heart of Darkness’ is the climax or culmination of evil. The title refers to both physical darkness as well as the internal darkness or the darkness of heart. But the noteworthy fact is that the man’s internal darkness has not been revealed openly in the novel in fact it is ever – present beneath the layers of refinement and civility.

The character of Kurtz is a perfect example of such evil disguised by the refinement and civilization. He was actually a refined and civilized man but before he came to Africa. He comes here to reform the uncivilized natives but he himself is transformed into an uncivilized brute. In the lust of more and more ivory he has lost himself. In fact he has degraded himself to an extent that he does not prevent people to give sacrifice for him. The heads of the natives fixed on the sticks outside his residence is an evident proof of his moral degradation. Moreover, he allows the tribe’s men to deify him and takes a savage mistress. In short, when he no longer feels satisfied with just being a mere mortal he transforms himself into an omnipotent being and becomes a man-god. It was very late when he came to realize what had happened to him and it

was his reaction to what had happened to him so mysteriously that he scribbled at the end of the report:

*“Exterminate all the brutes.”*

His descent into madness is finally established with his disturbing final words:

*“The horror! The horror!”*

These final words uttered by Kurtz, The horror! The horror!, refer to what he sees inside himself which is of course the darkness of evil in his heart to which he remained hiding from the world but he himself could not escape from it. Mr. Kurtz belongs to ‘the powers of the darkness’.

*“Mr. Kurtz’ methods had ruined the district .... Mr. Kurtz has done more harm than good to the company. He did not see the time was not ripe for vigorous action.”*

(The Manager)

Kurtz can safely be called the representative of all the Europeans as they all keep the same mentality and commit authorities to the black people in the name of civilization. They are actually desirous to occupy the whole territory of Africa because of its rich resources. Their slogan of the reformation of the people is just a pretense. So they also hide their dark aims under the lame excuse of development.

There is another character, the manager, who shows all the immorality of European colonization. He runs the most disorganized station in the region of Congo. He leads his station not through intelligence and insight but through his ability to create disturbance and uneasiness among the people. He is not interested in actually colonizing the region. His only concern is to attain as much ivory as possible. It is he who attacks Kurtz’ station in order to remove his competition for the business of ivory. He also has the dark end on his part which is material success and thus he clearly comes into the range of the title.

Along with the characters there are a number of events, scattered throughout the novel, which show the evil nature of the colonizers that how they commit atrocities on the poor natives relentlessly.

The first event in the Congo which Marlow witnesses is the spectacle of a French man of war. He is shelling an unseen village in the bush as if the people living in that village are the enemies of the French in war. It is no doubt the vilest display of the darkness of imperialism. From there Marlow descends into a grave where the starving and sick Negroes are lying to die. **Marlow** says:

*“They were dying slowly – it was clear. They were not enemies; they were not criminals; they were nothing earthly now – nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation. Brought from all the recesses of the cost fed on unfamiliar food; they sickened to die unattended.”*

**Marlow** further elaborates:

*“While I stood horror struck, one of these creatures rose to his hands and knees and went off on all fours towards the river to drink.”*

Then Marlow witnesses six Negroes tied up with a chain and moving in a straight line carrying buckets full of earth on their heads in front of a white man who is carrying a rifle in his hands. Here they are being treated not as slaves but as criminals. The worst that happens to the

Negro labourers is that they are deprived of the rotten meet they have brought with them for food.

The heads of young natives fixed on stakes around Kurtz’ lodging is the horrible sight. The natives worship him and sacrifice periodically one young Negro to keep him healthy and strong and to maintain his ascendancy over them.

The climax of Marlow’s journey leads into the heart of darkness or in a more wordly sense, Hell. ‘Heart of Darkness’ indicates that hell is within us that it is the evil existing deep inside our souls. As Milton writes in ‘Paradise Lost’:

*“The mind in itself and in its own place,  
can make a hell of heaven, a heaven of hell.”*

As regards the darkness, it has been prevailed throughout the novel and can be seen in almost every event, object and situation but if we talk about the ‘Heart’ it is no doubt Kurtz’ station which can aptly be called the heart of darkness as it is the centre of evil in the region of Congo.

To be curt, we can say that the title ‘Heart of Darkness’ is apt to the story of the novel. It attracts the attention of the reader and fascinates as a snake would fascinate a bird. Conrad’s African experience made him one of the fiercest critics of the dark aspects of the “white man’s mission”. He was keenly conscious of the darkness prevailed in the world. So, the title of the novel is quite appropriate to the themes and story of the novel.

*“Those who read me, know my conviction that the world, the temporal world, rests on a few very simple ideas. So simple that they must be as old as the hills, it reacts notably, among others, on the idea of Fidelity.”*

(J. Conrad)

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