

Reading Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

Leema Farha

A Norton Critical Edition: Heart of Darkness

Ed. Robert Kimbrough (Third Edition).

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Civilization as a contrast to primitivism is not something inborn, rather, it is something to be achieved and constructed. On the other hand, primitivism is originality and inborn but not derived. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* can be considered as an exploration of both the civilized and uncivilized human minds in the form of an expedition into Africa by European powers. Europe symbolizes law, order and humanity, which are aspects of civilization and which are completely opposite to the lawless, savage Africa. Conrad in this novella tries to exhibit the consequences of having a civilized man (Kurtz) extracted from his native contexts or more precisely to test the strength of the hold of civilization on its members when dropped in an alien world. After reading the novella, the reader feels being exposed to the naked truth about himself and is left to rethink over his 'civilized being.' *Heart of Darkness* is almost a romance with its adventurous tales, symbolic significance, colonial history, heroism, supernatural forces and primitive beliefs.

Robert Kimbrough, the editor of *A Norton Critical Edition: Heart of Darkness* (Third Edition) 1988, edits Joseph Conrad's masterpiece with various reviews, criticisms, background and source information with an intention to present the novella in a new light to the readers. Robert Kimbrough is a Professor Emeritus of English, University of Wisconsin. He had published the First Edition of the text in 1963 and the Second Edition in 1971. This Norton Edition is compiled with the most comprehensive and critical surveys of the novella. There are a rich collection of essays on the background and source materials divided in three sections: "The Congo," "Conrad in the Congo" and "Conrad on Life and Art." Under these three headings there are reports, essays, open

letters, brief history, biographical sketches, Conrad's diary, etc. which bear on Conrad's life and literature. There is an essay titled "The Sacred Mission of Civilization" by King Leopold II where the writer not only comments on the various aspects of the novella but also adds photos of the black natives in Congo (p 127-130). Even George Washington William in "A Report upon the Congo State and Country to the President of the Republic of the United States of America" shows a photo of an ivory caravan carrying ivory from Stanley Pool (the Central Station) to Matadi (the Lower Station) (p 97). There is also a picture of the 'Pilgrim' with his stave. These pictures will obviously help the readers to visualize clearly Marlow's experience in and description of Congo. Robert Kimbrough has also printed a few maps of Africa. There is "A Map of Congo Free State, 1890" (p 87); "A Map of Zaire, 1987" (p 131). Studying these two maps and reading Lynne Rice's essay, "Zaire, from Colony to Nation: A Brief History, 1908 to 1987," the readers will easily be helped to comprehend the ecological condition that was responsible for giving Conrad the idea of *Heart of Darkness*. So the editor has shown his brilliance in collating different materials that are arranged chronologically. Then there are various types of letters collected by John Hope Franklin and George Washington Williams, where we find an account of the actual events of the Belgian colonial enterprises at Congo.

There is also a letter from Conrad's uncle collected by G. Jean-Aubry, which establishes that Conrad is Marlow in the novella and many of the incidents of the book are taken directly from his Congo life. Conrad's various writings on his journey to Congo are also printed. His "The Congo Dairy" is an interesting piece of writing from which we come to know about some enchanting experiences of his journey to Congo. Some brief notes on Conrad's view of life are also included. Reading his views on life and art, our understanding of the novella becomes clear. Conrad through Marlow's eyes shows the readers the world's dark places resting under European control represented by Kurtz whose idealistic and noble system to "exterminate all the brutes" (p 51) turn out to be corrupt, threatening, inhuman, riotous, commercially unethical and, lastly, inexorably cruel over helpless human beings. This novella also takes the European individuals to Africa, outside the European social system of checks and balances. Here in Africa they cast off the civilized values and surrender themselves to the hands of the dark wilderness of Africa as Kurtz does. On the contrary the African savages show extraordinary kind of self-restraint. Conrad might not exactly admire savages clapping their hands,

stamping their feet making awful sounds (p 39), but he does admire their merit of being in their place and in their own unpretentious self. However, Chinua Achebe in his "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" is not ready to take Conrad's sympathy on the face. He says, 'at first these . . . might be mistaken for unexpected acts of generosity from Conrad. In reality they constitute some of his best assaults.' (p 255) At one place he even directly accuses Conrad as a 'thoroughgoing racist.' However, this is his way of looking at Conrad. But there are many other critics like Michael Levenson, in "The Value of Facts in the *Heart of Darkness*" and Juliet McLauchlan in "The Value and Significance of *Heart of Darkness*" who shower compliments on Conrad for the gift for such a story. So through publishing these criticisms, the editor paves the way for his readers to thoroughly examining the novella in different perspectives.

Another critic named Frances B. Singh in his "The Colonialistic Bias of *Heart of Darkness*" makes a critical comment on the saint like Marlow saying that even Marlow is not all free from sin. He (Marlow) looks at the band of cannibals with fear and contempt, yet instantly admires them when they do not eat human flesh on board the steamer commenting 'fine fellows' 'in their places' but at the same time surprised: "these chaps . . . had no earthly reason for any kind of scruple. Restraint! I would just soon have expected restraint from a hyena prowling amongst the corpses of a battlefield." (p 43) He can't figure out how these hyenas can possess such superior quality. The reason probably is because he had never granted them human status, rather at best they could be a species of superior hyena. Restraint is one of our strengths and superior qualities which if by any chance removed as Albert . Guerard says in his essay, "The journey Within," then even the civilized man becomes hollow, possessed by the evil of vacancy, and succumbs. So while the Buddha like Marlow makes a journey from ignorance to knowledge, Kurtz transforms himself into the species of inferior hyenas. Kurtz has become pre-Christain, primal energy, capable of utterly destroying the ethical man, and, therefore, Kurtz's crime is unpardonable, but again just before death Kurtz's crying out aloud "The horror! The horror!" (p 68) reveals his realization of the position he had dragged himself into during his African years. But it's too late to fix his life back.

Heart of Darkness has impressive style and is wonderfully intricate.

The symbols used in this novella are derived from the main geographical features of Congo. Darkness, fog, Congo River, grove of death, several heads on the fence posts, knitting women in Company offices, man trying to fill bucket with hole in it are among many other symbols of this novella suggesting cruelty and hollowness of the European colonialists. Ian Watt in his "Impressionism and Symbolism in *Heart of Darkness*" says that the novella shares many of the characteristic preoccupations and themes of the French symbolists, especially Baudlaire, in his poem "Le Voyage," the spiritual voyage of discovery through an exotic jungle landscape, and the pervasive atmosphere of dream, nightmare and hallucination crisscrossing one another in a continual psychedelic atmosphere.

Lastly, in spite of the many allegations brought against the obscurities in the novella, no one can doubt that it is an exciting but impassive literary piece dealing with imperial atrocities, the rupturing of the human sentiment, malicious desire, and sin and fall. Thousands of voyages and romances have been written on and no doubt thousands more will be written, but *Heart of Darkness* stands out in a thousand ways among them and, therefore, presenting provocative reading to all. The Norton Edition is a scholarly edition helpful both for teachers and students and worth buying.