

Why 'Heart of Darkness' by Joseph Conrad is Over-rated by R.C Speck

'So I'm gonna tell you a story. Really, it's one of the most amazing stories ever. You want darkness? It's full of darkness. Moreover it's full of important darkness, like, the darkness of far-off uncharted territories that's really the darkness in our own hearts, you know? So here it is then. Don't say I didn't warn you:

So there I was on a boat with these other guys. And one of them, this guy Marlow, told the most amazing story ever. You want darkness? It's full of darkness. Moreover it's full of important darkness, like, the darkness of far-off uncharted territories that's really the darkness in our own hearts, you know? So here's what he said. Don't say I didn't warn you:

Marlow here. I'm gonna tell you three guys a story. Really, it's one of the most amazing stories ever. You want darkness? It's full of darkness. Moreover it's full of important darkness, like, the darkness of far-off uncharted territories that really the darkness in our own hearts, you know? So here it is then. Don't say I didn't warn you:

So there I was, there I was, there I was...in the Congo. Boy, was it dark. I was a steamship captain going up river to work at a trading station that deals in ivory. Not a whole lot happened, other than the darkness. Did I say that it was dark? Got waylaid for about a month. Met a few dubious individuals. They all talked about my future boss, Kurtz. Saw a lot of suffering. Still pretty dark. Heard that Kurtz was going nuts. Heard he took charge of a tribe. They attacked us with arrows. We found him. He was nuts, all right. And sick, muttering, "The horror! The horror!" right before he died. It was too bad, and still pretty dark over there. Didn't have the heart to break his last words to his fiancé. So I told her he died calling her name.

So that's my story. It would have been too dark to tell her the truth. Too dark.

When Marlow finally shut up, I looked out towards the horizon, and it was pretty dark.

So that's my story. The end. Pretty dark, huh?

So I guess that if you're still with me by now you've probably guessed that the most overrated novella ever must be Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness. I have read this novella three times now. Or, I should say, I remember reading it three times. The story itself, not so much. If not for this blog post, which forces me to remember, I probably would have forgotten it once again. That's because, frankly, it is a murky, forgettable story. While a lot happens from an ideological standpoint, very little happens from an objective standpoint, and that's what I primarily care about.

Okay, so what does this mean? It means that if you are sympathetic with a certain ideology (in this case, anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism), then Heart of Darkness leaves you with enough clues and themes to reinforce this ideology and make you feel vindicated after reading. But if you are completely ignorant or apathetic to this ideology, then the story will sink into tedium like quicksand.

More on this as we go along.

From a technical standpoint, my objections to the story are twofold: lack of action and unnecessary degrees of separation. Let's get the latter one out of the way first, since it's the more easily summarized.

Basically, you have three levels of separation (or complication) between the author and the story. It goes from author, to anonymous narrator, to Marlow, to the Congo, to the reader.

Now why do we need this? Couldn't we just have made Marlow the narrator and have him tell the story as it happened? Couldn't all of Conrad's important plot points still be covered with this more direct approach? After all, it is Marlow's story. All this anonymous narrator business and the fact that Marlow is recalling his African adventures of long ago before a curiously quiet group of colleagues only separates the reader further from the story.

I can think of one reason such a separation could increase the novella's appeal: it reinforces the distance between Europe (where most of Conrad's readers were located) and the locus of the story: Africa, the heart of darkness itself. Africa: haunted by the specter of colonialism and ravaged and raped by imperialism. Africa: where bad, greedy Europeans go to lose their souls and where good Europeans filled with good European good intentions supposedly go to lose their minds. In so doing Conrad increases the exotic nature of the story, enhances its sense of adventure and mystery, and makes a very clear point that despite taking place thousands of miles away, this heart of darkness really exists within all of us. You see? Far away become really really close. I believe literature professors refer to such an obvious literary device as irony.

Okay, so what?

This only matters if you are either a committed colonialist or a committed anti-colonialist (or imperialist, but whatever). This only matters if you subscribe to a certain ideology before reading the story. But what if you don't? What if you're neither pro- or anti- in this debate? What if you're some 8th grade kid armed only with a tabula rasa and hopes that this story will have something interesting in it unlike the last dusty tome they just made you read? Better yet, what if you're a literature lover in India or East Asia who's looking for a universal story about the human condition and don't have time to weigh yourself down beforehand with ideological English baggage from a hundred years ago?

In that case you would be out of luck. Wouldn't you?

My second complaint is this: Nothing happens. Or, really, when things finally do start to happen towards the end of the story, the reader is too beaten down by boredom to care. Marlow gets a job in Africa. Goes there. Waits. Goes part of the way to Kurtz's station. Waits some more. Goes a little further. Waits some more. Finds a book about shipping. Continues searching for Kurtz and waiting. Meets some raving Russian guy. Then the action begins: they get attacked by Kurtz's tribe. One of the ship's crew is killed. They find Kurtz. He escapes. They find him again and put him on the boat. He says, "The horror, the horror." He dies. A year later, Marlow tells Kurtz's still-grieving fiancé that his last words were her name.

Now, is it me? Or is this tea a little weak?

Of course, Conrad tries to liven it up by constantly reminding us of how dark it is along the Congo River, even in broad daylight, and converts his novella into a veritable thesaurus of darkness. He uses the words "dark", "darkly", or "darkness" 56 times both metaphorically and otherwise. "Black" he uses 33 times apart from a racial or skin-color context. Variations on "night" he uses 30 times. He uses "shadow" or "shadowy" 20 times and "gloom" or "gloomy" 14 times. Similar terms include "dusk", "dim", "murky", "unlit", "obscure", and "pitch".

I'm reminded of a Woody Guthrie album called Dustbowl Ballads wherein 8 out of the 15 songs all have "dust" in the title: "Dust Storm (Dust Storm Disaster)", "Talkin' Dust Bowl Blues", "Dust Can't Kill Me". "Dust Pneumonia Blues", "Dust Bowl Refugee", "Dust Bowl Blues", "Talkin' Dust Bowl Blues (alternate take)", and the ever-popular "Dusty Old Dust". Something tells me that this is a concept album about dust.

The problem with this darkness motif in Heart of Darkness is not just that it is overdone and blatant, but that it is entirely manufactured by the author. It comes from Conrad, through the narrator, and finally through Marlow rather than stemming from the action itself. In other words, Conrad pulls it out of his bag of tricks in order to drum up tension and compensate for the chicken scratch plot line he's making us follow. This happens in horror movies a lot, except in horror movies the payoff is never too far away. In Heart of Darkness there really is no payoff. With all the creepiness, with all the macabre language and depictions of foreboding landscapes, you'd expect some grand finale, some catastrophic yet thrilling event from which Marlow barely escapes a completely changed man. Instead, the story dissolves before your eyes like a dream upon waking. Instead, Marlow finds Kurtz and takes him away. An anticlimactic ending like this threatens to leave a reader wondering where the story went.

So if Heart of Darkness is so underwhelming, why is it canonized? Why is it force-fed to millions of high school students across the English-speaking world? Why is it considered great? Well, for one, it's not a bad story by any means. It's a serious work of historical importance. If you're looking for a portrayal of colonialism in fiction, you could do a lot worse than Heart of Darkness. If you're paying attention, you can also tease out a lot of meaning in the story's recurring themes. You will have no trouble finding such exegeses on the internet. Also, I do kind of like how Conrad builds tension by having people incessantly talking, whispering, muttering, cursing the name of the mysterious Kurtz pages and pages before we meet him. H.P. Lovecraft uses a similar device pretty well in Call of Cthulhu and other stories, and may very well have taken a page or two out of the book of Joseph Conrad.

I think the main cause for the novella's canonization however is ideological. Most people in the academy assign Heart of Darkness because they agree with its perceived ideological message: Colonialism is Bad, imperialism is Bad, and because Europeans engage in colonialism and imperialism they have become Bad. Their hearts have become full of darkness, you see.

Now, you may agree with this or not, but it does not refute the claim that Heart of Darkness is propped up by ideology for its chief appeal. This means it will not last as a work of fiction since the expanse of time exhausts all ideologies. At some point in the future, when readers will have less emotion invested in colonialism or imperialism, Heart of Darkness will have to stand on its merits. And when that happens it will be exposed for its manifest limitations, no matter how dark Joseph Conrad makes it out to be.'

Powerpoint or Essay : How Far do you Agree that Heart of Darkness is actually not great writing, yet has a powerful message ?