

Symbolism in Heart of Darkness

Heart of Darkness is one of the most popular works written by Joseph Conrad. Conrad occupies an important place in the history of English fiction. By common consent he was one of the most original novelists with a wide experience of the sea and of Asia and the Americas and the parts of the world he wrote. He was a complete foreigner who chose to write novels in English. His best work represents a body of achievement unequalled in English fiction of this century by any writer except James. Conrad should be put at the bottom of the catalogue of Edwardian novelists because he was temperamentally more akin to the troubled minds of the inter-war age of anxiety, confusion and brooding, moral questing and shared, at the same time, the later novelist's conception of fiction as the most serious art form, deep as poetry but freer and more flexible in its form and requiring a style colloquial and prosaic in its flat places but acquiring all the colour, precision and richness of suggestion, symbolism and imagery in the passages of profound thought and passion.

Conrad was a novelist with a mixed cultural background. By birth a Pole, he became a naturalized English subject in 1886. French was almost his mother tongue and English, of which he became one of the most fastidious pictorial and eloquent artists, his language by adoption. He is in the direct line of descent from Henry James and his affiliations are more French than English. "From Flaubert and Maupassant, whom he admired with moral reservation, Conrad took not method but attitude and some notions of style. He admired their disinterested art - their ideas of diction, and, hunting precise word he endeavoured to make the reader, see, hear, smell and taste experience. Conrad used many precise words, succumbed to the vice of word-painting."

Heart of Darkness has a high symbolic significance. Broadly symbolism implies a deeper meaning in

what has been written than meets the eye. In Heart of Darkness, every character and every situation means more than what appears on a superficial view. Kurtz and Marlow are highly symbolic characters. About Kurtz Baker is rightly observed that "The heart of darkness is not the heart of Central Africa but the darkness in to which Kurtz has descended. Just before his death, Kurtz realizes that he has been living a meaningless existence and all that he has gathered in his life is horrible. In fact, Kurtz symbolizes the repentant sinner. So long as he remains with the savage natives, his image of horror and fear around him is reflected in his actions against the natives. He plays the role of a tyrant in order to make them surrender before him all the ivory tusks. Finally he hangs the heads of the rebel on the pillars of his residence. But all these actions of Kurtz can not be deemed to be the symbol of his bravery, but they reveal his utter fear of the danger of his life from the savages. Kurtz's transformation from the civilized person to the level of being a savage symbolizes the primitive evil instinct in human beings.

Marlow has an equally symbolic role in the story. He is the symbol of the spirit of adventure and a love of knowledge. In fact, Marlow is no less than Tennyson's Ulysses whose aim of life is "to strive, to seek, to find, not to yield." Marlow had always cherished a dream of being a fresh-water sailor. His boyhood dream turns in to reality when he grows up and he embarks upon his mission to the unexplored region of the Congo. In the novel, Marlow's unconscious has been explored. On a different level of symbolism, Marlow symbolizes the thoughtful observer of human life and human nature. He is seen to ponder over all that he observes. Thus he stands for a philosophical approach to human life.

Symbolism is seen in other characters also. The manager of the Central Station symbolizes spiritual emptiness. He fails to inspire others because he is devoid of original thinking. His mind is not fertile, though he has been running the Central Station to the full satisfaction of his employers. But as Marlow also tells that this man is spiritually barren as there is nothing inside this man. The spy of the manager, the brick maker whom Marlow calls as a 'papier-mache Mephistopheles', symbolizes cunning and trickery. Among other symbolic characters, the cannibal crew on the steamer of Marlow symbolize self-restraint as they abstain from satisfying their hunger by killing the whites and eating their flesh. The knitting women are no less symbolic. In fact these creatures remind us of Fates who determine the future of every human being at the time of birth. These women know, as it appears, everything about the visitors of the company's office. Marlow has a feeling that these women are knitting a coffin for a dead body. Hence it may be said that the knitting women symbolize some impending danger in store for Marlow. The majestic-looking native woman, who is seen on the river bank when Kurtz is being taken away, stands for steadfast loyalty and unflinching devotion of a woman to her lord. The Russian who looks like a harlequin symbolizes inquisitiveness or the desire to learn. The Russian also symbolizes loyalty and fidelity. In this the Russian comes very close to Marlow.