

**A SEMINAR PAPER**

**BY**

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## Introduction:

Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness," penned in 1899, stands as a seminal work in the realm of literature, inviting readers to delve into the depths of human nature and the murky waters of colonialism. As scholars and critics continue to unpack its themes and symbolism, one lens through which to explore Conrad's masterpiece is through environmental and ecocritical perspectives. By examining the ecological and human exploitation depicted in the novel, we gain deeper insights into the intertwined relationship between humanity and the natural world during the late nineteenth century. William Rueckert's groundbreaking article in 1978 introduced the term "ecocriticism<sup>1</sup>," urging scholars to explore the connections between literature and the environment. Ecocriticism emerged as a vital branch of literary discourse, seeking to understand how writers perceive and represent nature in their works, as well as how human activities impact the natural world. Through this lens, "Heart of Darkness" offers a rich tapestry of colonial exploitation and environmental degradation, shedding light on the complex interplay between society, nature, and human agency.

In this paper, we delve into the intricate interplay between literature, ecology, and colonialism<sup>2</sup>, with a particular focus on Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" through the lenses of ecocriticism and postcolonial studies. By examining Conrad's portrayal of Africa, its inhabitants, and the exploitation of its natural resources, we uncover the intricate web of human and environmental exploitation within the narrative. Through close analysis of Conrad's thematic concerns, character dynamics, and narrative strategies, we aim to elucidate the complex relationships between humanity, nature, and power in the Victorian era and beyond. Through this exploration, we endeavor to shed light on the profound

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<sup>1</sup> the interdisciplinary study of the connections between literature and the environment

<sup>2</sup> is the pursuing, establishing, and maintaining of control and exploitation of people and of resources by a foreign group of people.

implications of colonialism and environmental degradation on both the natural world and marginalized communities, urging for a critical reevaluation of our understanding of literature, ecology, and social justice.

### **Ecocritical Analysis of "Heart of Darkness"**

As we journey through the pages of "Heart of Darkness," we will confront questions of morality, power, and identity, all against the backdrop of an environment in peril. By examining Conrad's portrayal of the Congo<sup>3</sup> and its inhabitants, we will gain a deeper understanding of the ecological and ethical implications of colonialism and imperialism<sup>4</sup>. Ultimately, this paper seeks to contribute to the ongoing dialogue within environmental studies and literary criticism, highlighting the importance of literature in shaping our understanding of humanity's relationship with the natural world.

William Rueckert coined the term "ecocriticism" in a 1978 article, advocating for the development of "an ecological poetics" (Rueckert 36). Ecocriticism is a branch of literary discourse that explores the relationship between nature and humanity, the ecosphere, and the ecosystem. It examines how literary writers perceive and represent nature in their works, as well as how human activities impact nature and how nature reacts to these actions. Ecocriticism seeks to hold human actions accountable for the damage inflicted upon the planet's ecosystem. Throughout history, humanity has often viewed nature as inferior and exploited it in the name of progress and civilization, exerting power and authority over the natural world. Ecocriticism endeavors to transform literary studies by integrating theory and criticism with broader ecological concerns. As Cheryll Glotfelty defines it, "Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii). Essentially, ecocriticism

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<sup>3</sup> The Congo River, formerly also known as the Zaire River, is the second-longest river in Africa, shorter only than the Nile, as well as the third-largest river in the world by discharge volume, following the Amazon and Ganges rivers. It is the world's deepest recorded river, with measured depths of around 220 m.

<sup>4</sup> a policy of extending a country's power and influence through diplomacy or military force.

calls upon literature to engage with contemporary environmental crises, focusing on both nature (the natural landscape) and the environment (including both natural and human-made landscapes).

“Nature is at the heart of *Heart of Darkness*”. Joseph Conrad's novel, written in 1899, vividly portrays the detrimental separation between modern society and the natural world, set against the backdrop of the ecological<sup>5</sup> collapse in the Congo. Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. The air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish. *Heart of Darkness* delves into the contrasting views of nature prevalent in turn-of-the-century Britain, presenting readers with a thought-provoking reflection of themselves. During this period, British readers perceived nature in two main ways: as a passive commodity for imperial exploitation and as a stage for evolutionary competition based on fitness. This paper aims to explore how these distinct perspectives influence the novel, while also introducing a third role that disrupts Victorian self-perception. Conrad's narrative challenges the confidence of colonizers by presenting a landscape that foreshadows ecological disasters, highlighting the evolving relationship between Europe's understanding of nature and its own identity. Ultimately, *Heart of Darkness* examines the cultural boundaries separating individuals from their environment, advocating for a reevaluation of humanity's place within the natural world.

This novella highlights the interconnectedness between the moral implications and ecological consequences of imperialism. Central to any interpretation of the novel is the devastating ecological state of the Congo, a result of relentless exploitation. Marlow's narrative revolves around the pursuit of ivory, which has led to the degradation of the Congo's ecosystem. European extraction of ivory<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> is the natural science of the relationships among living organisms, including humans, and their physical environment.

<sup>6</sup> a hard, white, creamy-yellow, or yellowish-white material that comes from the tusks and teeth of mammals, such as elephants, walruses, hippos, narwhals, sperm whales, and warthogs.

from the Congo, averaging 70,000 tons annually from 1875 to 1905, fueled the demand for this coveted resource in Victorian<sup>7</sup> society. Ivory permeated every aspect of Victorian life, from household items to personal adornments. In Marlow's Congo, the obsession with ivory is palpable, with the word "ivory" echoing throughout conversations as if it were an object of worship. However, despite the incessant talk of ivory, the absence of elephants is glaring. While Conrad mentions elephants in his correspondence from the Congo, they are conspicuously absent from the novel itself. Despite the abundance of ivory shipments and aspirations of wealth derived from ivory, the reality of elephant extinction remains unspoken, underscoring the destructive consequences of unchecked exploitation. The Heart of Darkness contains vast amounts of situations that portray nature as a dark, mysterious, and untamed wild. The fear of the jungle's relationships between natives and the company, and Kurtz's conversion are three aspects that are affected by the power of nature. The mysteries of the jungle give Marlow a dark impression by saying, "The edge of a colossal jungle, so dark-green as to be almost black, fringed with white surf, ran straight, like a ruled line, far, far away along a blue sea whose glitter was blurred by a creeping mist" (Conrad 10). The jungle's vastness is daunting, Marlow's description states, "Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. The air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish. There was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine" (Conrad 30). Kurtz also harmed nature with his oppression of the native people and his hatred of the savages. He even wrote, "Exterminate all the brutes," in a report (Conrad 46). His warped thinking is evidence of nature's influence on him. Conrad uses many ecocritical elements in Heart of Darkness. The mysterious wilderness envelopes the book's characters in a fog of confusion and danger, while falling prey to its power. Nature is everywhere in this story,

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<sup>7</sup> of, relating to, or characteristic of the reign of Queen Victoria of England or the art, letters, or tastes of her time

that lets nature affect almost every aspect of this story. Marlow, Kurtz, and all of the other characters react to nature differently. Some thrive in it, and some perish.

### **Postcolonial Ecocriticism and Victorian Studies:**

The convergence of postcolonial<sup>8</sup> studies and ecocriticism has become increasingly significant in academic scholarship, particularly since the turn of the twenty-first century. The emergence of postcolonial ecocriticism aims to bridge the gap between these two critical perspectives and develop a more ecologically aware postcolonialism and politically conscious ecocriticism.

The intersection of postcolonial studies and ecocriticism has garnered increasing attention in academic circles, reflecting a growing awareness of the interconnectedness between social justice and ecological crisis. "The emergence of postcolonial ecocriticism, however, has aimed to move beyond the mutual unease that has characterized the relationship of these two critical perspectives, formulating a more ecologically aware postcolonialism and a more politically conscious ecocriticism" (Miller).

The origins of postcolonial studies and ecocriticism trace back to the late twentieth century, marked by seminal works such as Edward Said's "Orientalism" and William Rueckert's coinage of the term 'ecocriticism.' Despite their shared materialist concerns, these two critical perspectives historically maintained a distance from each other, characterized by mutual unease and mistrust. However, the early twenty-first century witnessed the emergence of postcolonial ecocriticism, which sought to reconcile the political and ethical dimensions of postcolonialism with the ecological concerns of ecocriticism. This convergence was driven by a recognition of the interdependence between social and

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<sup>8</sup> Postcolonialism is the critical academic study of the cultural, political, and economic legacy of colonialism and imperialism, focusing on the impact of human control and exploitation of colonized people and their lands.

ecological justice, encapsulated in Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin's assertion that "no social justice without environmental justice"(Huggan and Tiffin).

Postcolonial ecocriticism interrogates the intertwined issues of social justice and environmental conservation by approaching 'nature' as both a material environment and an ideological construct. Drawing on insights from postcolonial theory and environmental criticism, this critical approach examines the historical and contemporary dynamics of colonialism, globalization, and ecological degradation. Ursula Heise's concept of the "intertwining of concerns over social justice and environmental conservation" underscores the central concerns of postcolonial ecocriticism, which include colonial geography, the nature-culture dyad, deep time, and agency in representation. The novel represents Africa and its inhabitants, highlighting issues of representation, language, and the human-nature relationship in the colonial context and “examined how the limited and false knowledge of the Europeans has caused the pilfering of the distinct identity and culture of Africa as a land and people” (Tejoswita).

The Victorian era, characterized by intensive imperial expansion and industrial development, represents a pivotal stage in the intersection of ecological and political violence. Despite the wealth of scholarship in Victorian Studies on material culture, literary production, and colonial interests, there has been a lack of systematic engagement with environmental themes. However, the emergence of postcolonial ecocriticism offers renewed impetus to colonial discourse analysis in Victorian Studies, promising to enrich our understanding of the environmental dimensions of literature from this period. While current scholarship in this area is limited, the collision of imperial and environmental themes in Victorian literature provides a fertile ground for future research within a postcolonial ecocritical framework.



Postcolonial ecocriticism represents a crucial convergence of critical trajectories, shedding light on the historic interdependence of social and ecological justice. By interrogating the environmental dimensions of literature from the Victorian era, this critical approach offers new insights into the ecological legacies of imperialism and industrialization. Moving forward, further research in Victorian Studies informed by postcolonial ecocriticism promises to deepen our understanding of the complex relationships between literature, environment, and power in the nineteenth century.

### **Ecological and Human Exploitation in Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness"**

In "Heart of Darkness," Conrad attempts to scrutinize the colonial endeavors of white Europeans but falls short in fully incorporating the perspectives of the colonized land and people into the narrative. His portrayal is hindered by an underlying, subconscious sense of paternalism, where he feels responsible for seeking justice on behalf of the oppressed. However, he neglects to provide them with a platform to express their grievances against their exploitation. Africa and its inhabitants are depicted as voiceless and dependent on a white, male savior, disregarding their inherent identity and agency that have existed since ancient times.

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is a monumental work that has invited a lot of debate and discussion in the field of postcolonial criticism. It is considered to be a critique of the colonialist policies of Belgium as practiced in the Congo under King Leopold II in the later part of the nineteenth century. Though a critique of colonialism, the authoritative image of Africa that the novel has disseminated is a subject of much contestation. Writers like Chinua Achebe<sup>9</sup> have dismissed Conrad's portrayal of Africa as Eurocentric and hence as greatly limited and misleading. While reading the novel

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<sup>9</sup> Chinua Achebe was a Nigerian novelist, poet, and critic who is regarded as a central figure of modern African literature.

from the perspective of ecocriticism the work of critiquing the text becomes even more problematic. Apart from denying language to the natives, the novel also shows that the transposition of the western ideas of human/nature relationship to the colonies and their displacing of the completely different ideas and practices of the colonies has a transformative effect on the colonizers themselves. However, this transformation, portrayed primarily through the character of Kurtz, seems to be self-destructive and one of 'horror'.

Speciesism<sup>10</sup> and racism<sup>11</sup>, much like postcolonial criticism and ecocriticism, are deeply intertwined in the history of human oppression of the 'other.' In Western thought, animals are often viewed merely as natural resources at the disposal of humans, with little consideration for their intrinsic value or rights. Consequently, animals are frequently relegated to the realm of metaphor or symbol in literature, particularly in genocidal and marginalizing discourses, where they are used pejoratively to justify the exploitation, objectification<sup>12</sup>, and slaughter of marginalized human groups.

The creation of a human/animal dichotomy serves to dehumanize and vilify marginalized populations, such as the Africans depicted in "Heart of Darkness." Their dehumanization is evident in Conrad's portrayal of them as "bundles of acute angles," with movements and actions likened to animals such as ants. The natives are stripped of agency and language, denied a place of identity, while the animals responsible for imperial wealth, such as the elephant, remain conspicuously absent from the narrative.

Cannibalism<sup>13</sup>, another trope used in colonialist discourse, further reinforces the 'othering' of both humans and animals. Despite being a rare phenomenon with ritualistic significance, cannibalism is sensationalized by colonizers to emphasize their perceived moral, cultural, and civilizational

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<sup>10</sup> the practice of treating members of one species as morally more important than members of other species

<sup>11</sup> Racism is discrimination and prejudice against people based on their race or ethnicity.

<sup>12</sup> objectification is the act of treating a person as an object or a thing.

<sup>13</sup> the consumption of another human's body matter, whether consensual or not

superiority over indigenous peoples. Even though Marlow critiques colonialist oppression, his thoughts remain Eurocentric, reflecting a prejudiced perspective.

The Cartesian idea <sup>14</sup>of cogito ergo sum, which dichotomizes mind and body, is employed to justify the subjugation and silencing of both natives and animals. By denying them language and representation, colonizers portray them as lacking in mental faculties, reinforcing their perception of superiority. However, critics of postcolonial studies and ecocriticism challenge this notion, advocating for the recognition of consciousness and intelligence in both natives and animals, as well as the acknowledgment of their unique languages and modes of communication.

Furthermore, the Cartesian idea is also used to oppress and silence women, who are deemed closer to nature due to their roles in childbirth and child-rearing. This patriarchal discourse portrays women as uncivilized and brutish, denying them agency and reducing them to objects of exploitation. In "Heart of Darkness," Kurtz's African mistress symbolizes the primal wilderness, while Kurtz himself is depicted as a domesticated, animal-like being, reflecting the misogynistic and colonialist ideologies prevalent in the narrative.

Edward Said argues that in Heart of darkness, "Conrad wants us to see how Kurtz's great looting adventure, Marlow's journey up the river, and the narrative itself all share a common theme: European's performing acts of imperial mastery and will in Africa ". Conrad shows us a Kurtz who is obsessed with accumulating tons of ivory that will be shipped back to Europe. However, Kurtz's obsession with ivory did not only follow a personal desire, but the desire of a European system that saw in ivory a form of economic income. The exploitation and demand for ivory conformed to a form of life that controlled Europe's late nineteenth and early twentieth century. McCarthy points out that

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<sup>14</sup> adopted an ontological dualism of two finite substances, mind (spirit or soul) and matter.

" From 1875 to 1905, Europeans extracted 70,000 tons of ivory from the Congo every year. It decorated Victorian life from the billiard balls and walking sticks at the club, to the piano keys and chess pieces in the parlor, to the combs and crucifixes in the bedroom". In other words, ivory made into the everyday manifestations of European's lifestyle, and Conrad is clear in making us aware of this sort of invasion of ivory to the point of regarding it as a godly presence: " the word 'ivory' rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed. You would think they were praying to it". However, Conrad fails to communicate to his readers that the vast production of ivory was leaving behind massive destruction of life: elephants. It is clear that elephants represent the source of ivory, and that the latter would not exist without the presence of the former. While Kurtz is interested in collecting, and stacking loads of ivory, an abused, exploited nature suffers the extermination of one of its permanent occupants.

As readers, we can infer from Marlow's description of ivory management that are in front of an economic enterprise that will use up its ivory supply in a very limited production time due to the collapse of elephant herds.

McCarthy affirms, "In the actual Congo where Conrad worked for eight months in 1890, the ivory trade was already beginning to expire. Traders turned to digging for fossil ivory, and the ambitious were forced ever deeper into wild areas to find elephants". Besides the destruction of animal life, Kurtz also exerts abuse over nature itself. In one of his first encounters with African land, Marlow describes what seems to be one of the main ecological concerns of today's world: environmental degradation. In Marlow's description, readers can see how nature is being depicted as a run-down sort of *dumb*, and how it is being displaced by what socio-economic critics see as the powerful discourse of modernization:

The thing looked as dead as the carcass of some animal. I came upon more pieces of decaying machinery; I stepped up rusty rails. To the left a camp of trees a clump of trees made a shady spot, where dark things seemed to stir feebly. A heavy and dull denotation shook the ground, a path of smoke came out of the Cliff, and that was all. No change appeared on the face of the rock. They were building a railway. (12)

The railway construction is just one more piece in the long chain of events that seek to transform anything natural into an object of commodification<sup>15</sup> Glen love describes how the wise use movement sees nature in constant change “to the point where there is nothing natural left and where there is no reason to consider nature as anything but another venue for doing what we do control it change it use it up” (21). There is no doubt in my mind that attitudes like one of the wise use movements which try to favor big industries and development interests are causing irreversible damage to the environment. Some of this damage is present in today's world in the form of global warming radiation and chemical poisoning, destruction of the ozone layer, extinction of plants and animals.

However, the extermination of elephants and the abuse against nature are not only forms of ecological disaster that take place in Conrad's heart of darkness. If ecology has been understood as the branch of biology that deals with the relations between living organisms and their environment, I would affirm that human beings play a key role in this relationship. Kurtz's exploitation and extermination of the native people of Africa can also be regarded as a form of ecological disaster following the same logic of the exploitation of nature Kurtz has been consumed by the imperialistic attitude of economic power and has broken all moral limitations to pursue his enterprise. He had been saying to do a job but instead he had betrayed the company's method to use his own method that were observed by Marlow and others as unnecessary and without limitations: “I am not disclosing my trade secret in fact the

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<sup>15</sup> Commodification is the process of transforming inalienable, free, or gifted things into commodities, or objects for sale.

manager said afterward that Mr. Kurtz's method had ruined the district." I have no opinion on that point but I want you clearly to understand that there was nothing exactly profitable in these heads being there the only they only showed that Mr. Kurtz's lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lasts. The heads on the stick that decorate curse dwellers in dealing are to my opinion the worst case of human degradation Kurtz's desire for wealth has made him lose all moral judgment to the point of making him incapable of finding value in human life. He has lost the battle of moral limitations against the imperialistic attitude of exploitation in all forms.

Kurtz's connection with the wilderness offers a perspective that literary critics have yet to fully explore. Deep ecology, a twentieth-century philosophical movement, proposes the idea of a profound kinship between humans and their environment, challenging anthropocentric humanism. According to philosopher Warwick Fox, deep ecology rejects the notion of a strict divide between human and non-human realms, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all existence. This worldview, which refutes beliefs in human exceptionalism and Cartesian dualism, asserts that "there is no bifurcation in reality between the human and non-human realms" (Fox, qtd. in Devall 66).

In "Heart of Darkness," there is a pervasive unease surrounding the acknowledgment of primal, untamed forces that challenge the construction of a confident, imperial, and civilized identity. Kurtz's immersion in the forest and his tendency to lose himself deeply troubled his peers due to nature's powerful inclination towards what deep ecologists' term "identification"<sup>16</sup>. Marlow's complex reaction outlines the cultural systems of resistance to this natural pull and the suppression of emotions associated with identification.

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<sup>16</sup> Identification is a psychological process whereby the individual assimilates an aspect, property, or attribute of the other and is transformed wholly or partially by the model that other provides.

## Character Analysis through an Ecocritical Lens

In Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness," characters' interactions with their environment serve as a lens through which broader societal attitudes towards nature are examined. Through Marlow's journey into the heart of Africa, the novella explores themes of exploitation, degradation, and the loss of innocence, shedding light on the complex relationship between humanity and the natural world.

Marlow's encounter with the Congo River acts as a pivotal moment in the narrative, symbolizing the untamed wilderness and the darkness lurking within humanity. As Marlow navigates the river, he is confronted with the destructive impact of European colonialism on the natural landscape. The dense jungle and mysterious depths of the river serve as a backdrop for Marlow's exploration of the human psyche, reflecting the darker aspects of human nature "The edge of a colossal jungle, so dark green as to be almost black, fringed with white surf, ran straight, like a ruled line, far, far away along a blue sea whose glitter was blurred by a creeping mist" (Conrad 10). The jungle's vastness is daunting, Marlow's description states, "Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. The air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish. There was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine" (Conrad 30).

Kurtz, the enigmatic figure at the center of the story, embodies the destructive power of unchecked exploitation of the environment. His relentless pursuit of ivory leads to the degradation of the Congo's ecosystem, highlighting the moral and ecological consequences of imperialism. Kurtz's descent into madness mirrors the degradation of the natural world, underscoring the interconnectedness between human actions and environmental degradation. In the first instance, Kurtz is regarded as an "exceptional man, of the greatest importance to the company" (50). This reveals that Kurtz is expected

to possess qualities worthy of emulation. However, Kurtz exploits the natural environment so much that the narrator narrates “You would think there was not a single tusk left either above or below the ground in the whole country” (76). Kurtz raids the villages of the country with weapons and forces the natives to give up their treasured natural resource. This reveals that Kurtz could do anything to obtain ivory. One instance of Kurtz's extremism is narrated thus: "I don't mind telling you, he wanted to shoot me too one day – but I don't judge him” “shoot you?” I cried 'what for?’ “Well, I had a small lot of ivory, the chief of that village near my house gave me... well he wanted it and wouldn't hear the reason... I gave him the ivory... he had a fancy for it and there was nothing to prevent him killing whom he jolly well pleased (Conrad 84).

Additionally, the character of the women knitting at the Company's station and the Station Manager offer further insights into the complex relationship between humanity and the environment. The women, knitting quietly amidst the chaos of the station, symbolize the indifference of society towards the destruction of nature. Their presence serves as a reminder of the complicity of those who benefit from the exploitation of the natural world, turning a blind eye to its consequences.

Furthermore, the Station Manager represents the bureaucratic machinery of colonialism, driven by greed and exploitation. His indifference towards the suffering of the native Africans and the destruction of the environment underscores the moral bankruptcy of the colonial enterprise. Through the Station Manager's character, Conrad highlights the systemic nature of environmental exploitation and its corrosive effects on both society and the natural world.



## Water Imagery in "Heart of Darkness"

Although the images of darkness and light get the most scholarly and critical attention in Joseph Conrad's highly symbolic novel *Heart of Darkness*, the abundant references to very different bodies of water strike me as equally intriguing and worthy of examination.

The outer frame of the story begins and ends on a seafaring boat in an ocean port. The inner frame, the story told by an exemplary seaman named Marlow, is prefaced by his reflections on ancient Roman use of the Thames River and his reminder that he had once turned fresh-water sailor, just after having sailed the Indian, Pacific, and China seas. He begins his narrative by describing his childhood fascination with the "immense snake" of the Congo River and his attempts to get a job as a skipper of a river steamboat. When he gets the job, he crosses the Channel to sign the papers, and soon arrives at the Company who runs an oversea empire. Once he boards the steamboat, the story takes place almost entirely on or beside the Congo.

In a longer essay I would examine Marlow's multitude of descriptions of the Congo and the possible symbolism behind each of them, but for this seminar paper it to say that there are lots. One observation worth noting is that the bodies of water that carry Marlow from his London home to the heart of darkness begin with the great wide ocean and then, like arteries on their way to the heart, narrow as he proceeds. From the wide Channel his passage is narrowed to the mouth of the Congo, a river which continues to narrow until, at a mid-stream chain of shallow patches resembling a "backbone," he is forced into a channel "much narrower than I had supposed. To the left of us there was the long uninterrupted shoal, and to the right a high steep bank heavily overgrown with bushes' ' (59). Penned in by land and foliage, he makes the continually narrowing approach to Kurtz. It is as

if he has traveled through the larger arteries of the body, following along the backbone, and arrived in the heart of darkness.

In a way, the inner story told by Marlow also ends on the water. Marlow is returning “a slim packet of letters and the girl’s portrait” (90). This can only be the portrait painted by Kurtz of the draped, blindfolded woman carrying the torch against a somber background, which he was said to have painted about a year before Marlow arrived (40). The Intended is, of course, draped in mourning in a somber, darkening room with draped columns. Even more interestingly, the name Helen is Greek for “Light” or “Torch-Bearer,” so if we presume the Intended name to be Helen, then it follows that her nickname would be Nellie -- the name of the boat where this story started.

### **Nature's Influence: Ecocritical Insights in Literature**

In literature, the environment, including both natural and historical aspects, plays a significant role in shaping characters' thoughts, beliefs, and actions. Each character is situated within a specific natural and historical context, which influences their portrayal as either protectors or destroyers, symbols of purity or darkness. For instance, in Shakespeare's "As You Like It," the Forest of Ardenne serves as a refuge for the banished duke and his companions, offering solace away from the sorrows and dangers of the court. The beauty of the forest is depicted through imagery of oak trees, running brooks, green pastures, and wildlife, symbolizing a retreat from the constraints of city life.

Similarly, in Daniel Defoe's "Robinson Crusoe," nature presents both challenges and opportunities for survival. After being shipwrecked on an alien land, Robinson learns to adapt to his environment, relying on nature for his basic needs of food and shelter. This illustrates nature's dual role as a challenger and protector, echoing Mahatma Gandhi's notion that nature provides essential resources

for life. To meet environmental challenges, Gandhi suggests curbing human greed and adopting a more sustainable lifestyle.

J.M. Synge's "Riders to the Sea" further explores nature's dominance over humanity. The sea serves as both a preserver and destroyer of life, providing sustenance from the mainland but also posing threats during storms. The play's dramatic structure revolves around the sea, with suspense heightened by its power demonstrated through elements like the wind tearing open a cottage door.

Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem "The Lotus Eaters" presents yet another perspective on the relationship between man and nature. Through vivid imagery, Tennyson evokes the mariners' longing for a life of tranquility and rest in the Lotus Land, where time seems to stand still. This portrayal reflects humanity's desire for escape from toil and the allure of a serene existence in harmony with nature.

In each of these literary works, the environment serves as a dynamic backdrop that shapes characters' experiences and influences thematic elements of the narrative. Through various depictions of nature's power and allure, these texts invite reflection on humanity's relationship with the natural world and the need for balance and stewardship in our interactions with it.

In Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" and T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," I've observed a recurring motif: darkness emerges where the fabric of civilization unravels. This unraveling, encompassing the breakdown of standards, order, and authority, seems intricately linked to the concept of "nature" – a nebulous chaos entity in Western discourse. As I delved into the symbolism of light across Western traditions, a consistent theme emerged: light often becomes a symbol for dominant socio-cultural, political, military, and economic authority. Conversely, darkness tends to stain anything that opposes or challenges this projected dominion.

Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" navigates the perilous territory between civilization and the wilderness, symbolized by London's light and the Congo's darkness. Kurtz, "as the light of civilization embodies an "impenetrable darkness," his hunger for greatness mixing base lust for gain with the noblest of aspirations" (Berry).

Marlow, the narrator, confronts the unsettling kinship between civilized savagery and the primal forces of nature, challenging the Eurocentric vision of masculine heroism. The novel's exploration of humanity's relationship with nature reflects the anxieties of Modernist thought, grappling with the ecological consequences of colonial exploitation and the collapse of traditional moral certainties. Ultimately, the narrative suggests that nature, as an impersonal force, defies civilization's attempts at mastery, inviting a reevaluation of humanity's place in the natural world.

### **My Reflection on 'Heart of Darkness' through an Ecocritical Lens"**

As I reflect on my analysis of "Heart of Darkness" through an ecocritical lens, I find myself deeply struck by the intricate layers of environmental degradation and human exploitation woven throughout the narrative. Joseph Conrad's portrayal of the Congo as a landscape ravaged by colonial greed and moral decay serves as a stark reminder of the profound impact of human actions on the natural world.

One aspect of the novel that particularly resonates with me is the symbolism of the heart of darkness itself. It embodies not only the physical deterioration of the Congo but also the moral decay that accompanies imperialism. Through Conrad's vivid descriptions of the landscape and its inhabitants, I am reminded of the profound interconnectedness between human society and the environment, and the devastating consequences of exploitation.

In my analysis, I delved into the character of Kurtz as a symbol of unchecked greed and corruption. His descent into madness and moral depravity serves as a haunting reminder of the existential crisis

faced by individuals who prioritize material wealth over ethical considerations. Kurtz's obsession with ivory mirrors the insatiable desire for profit that drives the exploitation of natural resources, leading to ecological devastation and the marginalization of indigenous peoples.

As I grapple with the themes present in "Heart of Darkness," I am struck by the urgent need for a more sustainable and equitable relationship with the environment. Conrad's critique of imperialism serves as a powerful call to action, urging readers to confront the destructive consequences of human exploitation of nature and to strive for a future in which environmental justice is prioritized.

Overall, my exploration of "Heart of Darkness" through an ecocritical lens has deepened my understanding of the novel's themes and underscored the relevance of ecocritical perspectives in contemporary literary analysis. It has prompted me to reflect on my own relationship with the environment and to consider how I can contribute to building a more sustainable and ethical world. Finally, I find how different critics have tried to come up with possible explanations to interpret the underlying meaning in the last words pronounced by Kurtz before his death. I cannot stop wondering if they meant to describe the demoralizing condition of humanity in the face of irreversible damage penetrated against the environment they inhabit: "The horror! The horror!"

**Conclusion:**

In conclusion, the analysis of Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" through an ecocritical lens illuminates the intricate relationship between human civilization and the natural environment. Through characters like Kurtz and Marlow, Conrad masterfully intertwines themes of imperialism, environmental degradation, and moral decay, inviting readers to contemplate the profound ecological implications of human actions. As I reflect on the themes and characters within the novel, it becomes evident that Conrad's narrative serves as a compelling reminder of the fragility of the natural world and the devastating consequences of unchecked ambition and exploitation.

Throughout the exploration, it is striking how Conrad's work challenges readers to reconsider their relationship with the environment and recognize the interconnectedness between human society and the natural world. The analysis underscores the enduring relevance of "Heart of Darkness" in contemporary ecological discourse, emphasizing the imperative of integrating environmental perspectives into literary studies. Conrad's narrative prompts us to confront uncomfortable truths about the consequences of colonialism and industrialization, urging us to strive for a more sustainable and harmonious relationship with the natural world. As we navigate the complexities of the modern world, Conrad's narrative serves as a powerful reminder of the profound ethical and ecological implications of human actions, urging us to collectively steward and preserve the environment for future generations.

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