Mysteries in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness

by

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Abstract:

Despite the fact that mysteries play a vital role in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness, they have hardly been investigated. Pivotal as they are to understanding that fictional masterpiece, mysteries, that abound in the novella, turn out into a motif that crosses and recrosses throughout the work. Such include ones related to trees, abandoned villages, burnt grass, dead donkeys, the Brickmaker, the upkeep and the native found killed with a bullet piercing his forehead. Obscurities underlie almost everything in the Congolese land/forest. Unable to resolve, avoid or ignore the unaccountable, countless mysteries besieging him, Marlow always felt disturbed and was never at ease in the Congo land (of mysteries). The ecocritical approach is adopted to expose the gross atrocities European intruders practiced against both nature and natives. The Conrad/Marlow identifications are significantly explored as these diminish the boundaries between the fictional and the factual.

Keywords: Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness, Mysteries, ecocritical approach

ملخص:

الغموض في رواية قلب الظلام لجوزيف كونراد

يستكشف هذا البحث ظاهرة الغموض التي تكتنف الكثير من الأماكن والأحداث والشخصيات في رواية قلب الظلام لجوزيف كونرد. بالرغم من أهمية هذه الظاهرة في الرواية الا أنه لم تتم دراستها دراسة مفصلة قبل ذلك. تعد هذا هي نقطة إسهام هذا البحث. يدرس البحث الغموض المسيطر على رواية قلب الظلام وبشمل ذلك الغموض الذي يحيط بالقري المهجورة والعشب المحروق وصانع الطوب وغير ذلك من الأسرار الغامضة التي تزخر بها هذه الرواية الهامة. يحاول البحث الربط بين بعض الأحداث والوصول بذلك الى تفسير مقبول يمكن أن يساعد في الكشف عن ذلك الغموض المسيطر على الرواية وهذا يساعد في فهم الرواية بشكل أفضل.

كلمات مفتاحية: رواية قلب الظلام، جوزيف كونرد، الغموض، النقد البيئي

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More than any other English novelist before him probably, Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) was the first to explore and introduce the ecological world with such depth, meticulously scrupulous and unique attentiveness. Going against the grain, he can be considered a forerunner in this respect. He can be said to have redirected the needle of the English fiction into the direction of eco-awareness. Exploring Conrad's Heart of Darkness from an ecocritical perspective can, therefore, prove rewarding. This article aims at investigating the mysteries in the work through an ecocritical perspective. This will be mainly through exploring the mysteries that proliferate throughout the work. Almost all of the mysteries in the novella are directly or indirectly related to the ecological world. Ecocriticism, that takes "ecoliterature" (Weilin) to its focal interest, is the critical approach adopted here. It is a comparatively new critical stance that has been gaining new audiences in the last few decades (260). In his book Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory, Peter Barry explains ecocriticism as a method of approaching a literary text via a counter way of thinking. To quote Barry's explanation of the discipline as a counter movement:

The offices in my college department have what I think of as 'counter-intuitive' door locks – you unlock the door by turning the key *towards* the door jamb, rather than *away* from it. The result is that you must consciously reverse the intuitively obvious procedure every time you unlock the door...in the case of ecocriticism, the intuition we have to counter is a long-standing, deeply ingrained Western cultural tradition of anthropocentric attitudes, which are both religious and humanist and often enshrined in commonplace references and sayings: thus, the early Greek philosopher Protagoras (fifth century BC) makes the

famous statement 'Man is the measure of all things', which places us confidently at the centre of everything. (261)

Marlow's experience in the land of the Congo, as revealed in J. Conrad's The Heart of Darkness, was far from being enjoyable or even comfortable. Rather, it was full of aweprovoking mysteries that Marlow, like other intruders, could by no means avoid, solve or ignore. More than anything else, the Congo landscape is represented as one full of unsolvable secrets, a continual source of mysterious manifestations which aroused the narrator's sense of unease and fears. The words "mystery", "mysteries" and "mysterious" occur twenty four times throughout the text. This turns the idea into a preoccupation that captivates the narrator's mind and keeps it agitated. Furthermore, the fact that almost all of these mysteries remained enigmatic to the narrator himself till the end of the novella left the readers. like the narrator himself, teasingly tantalized and similarly bewildered.

Prior to getting to grips with the mysteries that proliferate throughout the novella, it is appropriate to highlight some points of identification, or convergence, between the author and Marlow, the main narrator. Indeed, the factual/fictional interchangeability that seems to be intertwiningly overlapping throughout the book is worth pinpointing; such a duality was significantly marked by the notable Nigerian novelist C. Achebe who asserts that Marlow is Conrad in disguise (Achebe 20). Achebe found that the Conrad/Marlow duality is hardly separable. As Achebe observes, "[Marlow] would not use the word "brother" to refer to any of the Congolese natives. Achebe advances to unmask and expose Conrad that is hiding behind the fictionalized Marlow. He even passes a judgment that, "Joseph Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist" (Achebe 21). What makes

this fictional account really interesting is that it is based on a true personal experience of Conrad's. It is not Alice in Wonderland in the sense that it is not such a fantastical work of art; rather, it is a realistic one with an approximate, closely associated authorial, biographical background: "Conrad was helped by "the wife of a distant relative (like Marlow's aunt) that helped Conrad secure a job with a trading company. Like Marlow again, Conrad was preceded by a captain that had been "killed in a scuffle with the natives".

Countless similarities associate the author with the narrator. Both of Conrad and Marlow "followed the sea" (3). The novelist and the narrator are infatuated with the sea; it was the unbreakable "bond of the sea" (1) that kept them always related to it. Like Marlow, Conrad voyaged to the Congo, in 1890. Interest in maps is another point in common between the author and the narrator (Meyrs). It goes without saying that maps are of great significance in ecocritical studies. Indeed, so thin is the bordering line that separates the factual from the fictional. More often than not, the biographical world seems to merge with, and seep into, the fictional one; the claimed fictional borderline diminishes and almost disappears. Convergence rather than divergence is stressed between the author and the narrator all through the novella.

It is worth mentioning that Conrad put himself in the character of Kurtz as well. Like Kurtz, he contacted a serious respiratory disease while he was in the Congo (viii). Marlow himself sometimes coveted to take up the role played by Kurtz after the death of the latter, even though Marlow claimed that "Kurtz was no idol of mine" (78). Such Conrad/Marlow and Conrad/Kurtz identifications lie within the very scope of this critical reading of the novel. Kurtz is, thus, another representation

of Conrad himself. Interestingly enough, Conrad himself acknowledged of this similarity that associated him with Marlow. In his 1917 introduction to the novella, Conrad asserted, "Heart of Darkness is experience pushed a little (and only very little) beyond the actual facts" (webpages.uidaho.edu).

Mystery is pivotal to the work; it is such a motif that crosses and recrosses throughout the fabric of the novella creating an internal unity. Such is, undoubtedly, one of the basic formative granules or atoms, one of the very constituent elements, that comprise this fictional masterpiece of Conrad's, and from which this, so to speak, fictional edifice is made up. As mentioned in the introduction to the York Classics edition of the novella, Conrad "was writing a new kind of fiction which required much thought about technique" (viii). This is one of the essential ways Conrad's work "broke...narrative conventions" (puneresearch).

The natural world that has, for a long time, been backgrounded is remarkabley foregrounded in Conrad's Heart of Darkness. Even though this may sound striking to many readers as well as critics who have almost entirely focused on the interactions that take place between the characters throughout the novella. Ecocentricity provides a different perspective that readers and critics alike can avail themselves of significantly this reading of the novella.

Importantly, most of the mysteries, such as those related to the land, the forest, the trees, are natural ones. Amidst such a world of unaccountable and unfathomable mysteries, Marlow is stupendously appalled, and sometimes even mesmerized. Interestingly, variations of "look" and "look like" occur more than one hundred twenty five times throughout the course of the novella. Despite the fact that it teems with mysteries that remain unresolved, the novella is not a detective one. It puts on the mask of a travelogue, even though, as this article asserts, this is only of secondary importance to an in-depth reading of the work.

Narratologically speaking, Conrad's Heart of Darkness is a story within a story; it is, a frame story that, so to speak, incubates another embedded story. The story Marlow tells, that of Kurtz and the pilgrims, of the silenced, dehumanized natives and of the Congolese ivory, is itself inculcated within the (outer) frame story of a group of passengers on a steamboat, in a manner somehow comparable to that in Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. Strikingly as it may sound, however, this article assumes that even this second layer of the story can itself be looked at as a frame story of the essential, third-layer story that mobilizes and engineers actions throughout the book. The essential story the book tells, it is assumed, is that of the actions and reactions of a mysterious, ecological world. To the heart of this concisely interwoven, multilayered book exists this core story that, undoubtedly, captures the gist of the book. Missing such a message means parting with the true morale of the story the book tells.

To elaborate on this difference of Conrad's fictional bent and his introducing of a different fictional style, Anthony Domestico asserts that Conrad "developed an elaborate, beautiful English prose style [that] probed many of the deep questions of modern fiction" (campuspress.yale.edu). Noticeably, this is, after all, a novella with comparatively fewer words uttered by the characters, and the same thing is applicable to the actions of the characters. This is meant to encourage readers who read this novella to read it anew, with a new vision and a new point of focus, that is of tracing the role played by the ecological world.

The Congolese land stood out as a mystery to Marlow! Since he first set foot in the land of the Congo and throughout the course of the novella, the narrator has kept keen eyes on the endless mysteries that turned out in sequentially. From the start of the book, on page 1, the narratotr refers to "the mystery of an unknown earth" (3). Marlow was engulfed into a world "full of myster[ies]" (81). He was sometimes lost "into such mysteries" (6) that besieged him, took complete hold of his mind and led to his profound realization of the "life", of the ecological world. Outright, the mysteries that the narrator faced in the Congo landscape posed countless, unanswerable questions that left him no longer at ease as understanding or resolving such mysteries was beyond his comprehension and that is why he simply described them as being "inconceivable" (101).

On arriving in the Congo, Marlow got obsessed with the idea of restlessness; a sense of being trapped engulfed Marlow's mind. More often than not, he refers to "the mystery of the wilderness" (50). "Stillness", in its turn, was a "mysterious" (49). Even sounds, silence and stillness (motionlessness) were all and land-specific. They were all enigmatic discomforting to Marlow who got deeply irritated and alarmed by whatever surrounded him in the Congolese forest. Sounds of trees, branches and leaves were far from being soothing to Marlow; they "sound[ed]" "mysterious" (22); they were "full of mystery, desolation, and sorrow" (115). In their turn, trees were awfully mysterious:

Trees, trees, millions of trees, massive, immense, running up high; and at their foot, hugging the bank against the stream, crept the little begrimed steamboat, like a sluggish beetle crawling on the floor of a lofty portico. It made you feel very small, very lost, and yet it was not altogether

depressing, that feeling. After all, if you were small, the grimy beetle crawled on". (51)

It was not difficult for Marlow to reach the conclusion that the wilderness where he got destined had a life of its own, such "mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs in the forest, in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men" (6). Such a conclusion is essentially significant to this reading of the novella as it is captures an essential point of the novella.

All actions can be interpretted against the ecological world which lies significantly at the background sometimes, and at the foreground oftentimes. Everything in the forest is seen in relation to the environment. In addition, everything there looked and sounded mysterious to the foreign intruder, that is Marlow himself. Even silence itself was a great source of mystery, and even a threat, to the narrator, and it alarmed him greatly, "the silence of the land went home to one's very heart—its mystery, its greatness, the amazing reality of its concealed life" (36). As revealed in both this quotation and the previous one, such very realizations that the wilderness has a "mysterious life" and that land has a "concealed life" of its own should be importantly taken into consideration as they usher readers into the novelist's own ecoconsciousness.

The railway network that extended mesh-like crisscrossing the country reaching all lands was a great mystery to the narrator as the railways, to Marlow's great astonishment, led nowhere:

Paths, paths, everywhere; a stamped-in network of paths spreading over the empty land, through the long grass, through burnt grass, through thickets, down and up chilly ravines, up and down stony hills ablaze with heat; and a solitude, a solitude, nobody, not a hut. The population had

cleared out a long time ago. (26)

Hypothetically speaking, can this imply there were cryptic holes at certain points through which intruders could get underneath the ground? This may account for the empty lands, the abandoned villages and the "burnt grass" that, in their turn, posed extended along the railways, and which preoccupying mysteries to Marlow who became, so to speak, Marlow in (the Congo) wonderland! Indeed, these mysteries stand out challengingly to readers who find themselves, like Marlow himself, bemused by such a world of mysterious wonders, and try, in their turn, to account for or solve one mystery or another. The novella, thus, requires Sherlock Holmeslike readers who must always be on the alert for every single detail as readers may try to make out riddles and find out answers to the countless questions, and solutions to the mysteries proliferating all through such a profoundly thought-provoking novella.

If such mysteries can be resolved as such, these may provide a clue to resolving another mystery that busied the narrator's mind, specifically speaking, that of the Congolese native found killed, "with a bullet hole in the forehead" (27). A certain top-confidential plot, it can be inferred, was being implemented; the greater part of such a plot was carried out underneath the ground. The natives were not allowed for whatever reason to know about it. European workers themselves "were sworn to secrecy" (43). Marlow was further struck as he passed through abandoned villages without a citizen that may explain to him what happened to native inhabitants of such villages, "the dwellings were gone, too. Still I passed through several abandoned villages. There's something pathetically childish in the ruins of grass walls" (26-7). This is reminiscent of the villages Keats described in his "Ode on a Grecian Urn":

What little town by river or sea shore,
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?
And, little town, thy streets for evermore
Will silent be; and not a soul to tell

Why thou art desolate, can e'er return. (public-library)

In its turn, the upkeep stood out enigmatically to the narrator. Once more, Marlow is confronted by another mystery that leaves him spellbound, namely that of the upkeep:

Once a white man in an unbuttoned uniform, camping on the path with an armed escort of lank Zanzibaris, very hospitable and festive—not to say drunk. Was looking after the upkeep of the road, he declared. Can't say I saw any road or any upkeep". (27)

Astonishingly, even the donkeys that carried the so-called pilgrims of Eldorado Expedition turned into another mystery as they were found all dead (or killed). Dead donkeys were another mystery:

In a few days the Eldorado Expedition went into the patient wilderness, that closed upon it as the sea closes over a diver. Long afterwards the news came that all the donkeys were dead. I know nothing as to the fate of the less valuable animals. They, no doubt, like the rest of us, found what they deserved. I did not inquire. (48)

Diggings crisscrossed the country underneath the ground. Such intruders, or "robber[s]" (6) as Marlow calls them

elsewhere, were determined to loot the resources of the country, sack its natural resources and, above all, rob the country of its most valuable treasure: ivory. After all, European intruders got to the Congo lands with a "singleness of purpose" (35), specifically to loot the country's natural treasures, particularly ivory. To reach this goal, they enslaved the citizens to work for them, dug out the land, killed elephants and other animals. The novella, thus, exposes the "socioecological violence, waste, and exhaustion" that were practiced by such Belgian (European) powers. It shows how such practices brought about "the Congo's ecological collapse" (McCarthy), and how, due to such ecologically ruining practices, land turned into, "a waste of excavations" (19). In her article "Reviewing "Heart of Darkness": An Environmental Perspective", Lavanya Lata explains that, "Colonizers encroached into the lungs of the Earth and killed millions of elephants for ivory and skin; they cut jungles and disturbed the ecosystem; they made blasts for mineral mining and they ruined the native culture" (280). As Marlow observes, "You would think there was not a single tusk left either above or below the ground in the whole country" (71). The reason why a native was killed with a bullet in the forehead maybe that he discovered something about an underground world that extended longwise and crosswise the country.

In his turn, the Brickmaker was another mystery that kept Marlow confounded. In the Congo, Marlow meets the Brickmaker, one who seems to be in the wrong place as he never makes a single brick. This is believed to be due to the Brickmaker's lack of the materials needed for making bricks:

there wasn't a fragment of a brick anywhere in the station, and he had been there more than a year—waiting. It seems he could not make bricks without something, I don't know

what—straw maybe. Anyway, it could not be found there, and as it was not likely to be sent from Europe, it did not appear clear to me what he was waiting for. (33)

Conclusive to this investigation of the mysterious world Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* puts forth is that mysteries are elemental to understanding the work. To Marlow's kindled and inquisitive mind, such mysteries stood out like questions requiring answers. It was bafflingly disappointing to him that he could not resolve the greater part of such enigmatic mysteries. To him, most of the mysteries remained "insoluble" (20), till the end of the novella.

Equally conclusive to this reading of the work is that European civilization was introduced to the Congolese (African) natives in its worst and vilest forms: European underground excavations aimed at looting the country's wealth and robbing it of its resources, and turned the country into "a waste of excavations" (19). Further, silenced, poor native citizens were not only bedeviled, "lusty, red-eyed devils" (21), and considered enemies by white European intruders (18, 108), but their share of European civilizations was bullets from European guns, rifles and revolvers (90), such as the one that pierced the forehead of the Congolese native that was found killed (27). Not a brick was made. This simply implies that no progress of whatever kind can be expected or aspired for under European colonization, as European powers broke into such lands with "singleness of intention" (55). In short, through such mysteries, the novella unmasks the ugly face of European evil practices against the Congolese ecological world including native citizens.

The Marlow/Conrad interchangeability gives credit and makes the tale more credible. Marlow/Conrad was an attentive witness to whatever went on around him in the Congo land (of

wonders), despite the fact that he remained unable to resolve many of the mysteries, a fact that troubled him throughout the novella. Even though they were kept unresolved to the very end of the novella, the mysteries in Conrad's Heart of Darkness bear a strong testimony of condemnation against Europeans that ravished the Congolese ecological world in its entirety. The destructiveness of the European civilization has been countlessly indicated. Significantly, gross atrocities and violations committed by Europeans against the Congolese natives and environment are exposed without being directly stated.

Through investigating such mysteries and their violations of the Congolese (African) world and the evils that befell that previously quiet, peaceful and harmonious world, European false claims of civilizing and enlightening the Congo, as well as the other African nations that were seen as "dark place[s] of the are all refuted, falsified earth" (Aydin), and exposed. Significantly, the closing vignette that takes place between (European) Marlow and the (Congolese) Intended, Kurtz's native mistress, sums up the deceitful relation between Europe and Africa, the former lies, and the latter innocently, rather than naïvely, believes lies.

Significantly enough, almost all of the mysteries the novella abounds with are related to the ecological world. More specifically, such mysteries, in one way or another, expose the atrocities practiced by (the white) man not only against animals, plants and the land itself, but it exposes (the white) man's inhuman practices against Congolese fellow men, the natives themselves. It was through questioning and investigating the mysteries in the text that this article unveiled European intruder's harmful, cunning practices against the natives and the Congolese ecological world in its entirety.

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