

An Ecological Analysis: the Sense of Loss from *Heart of Darkness*

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Abstract: Conrad is universally renowned for his cynical observations and ecological philosophy as well as his exceptional writing skills. Most of his works, especially *Heart of Darkness*, include intensive descriptions of the human-nature relationship which has been distorted by the ceaseless expansion of industrialization and imperialism, and thus fall into the category of ecoliterature. The ecological point of view refreshes the studies on Conrad's writings, and enables people to re-recognize the value of his stories. This paper analyzes *Heart of Darkness* from this new ecological scope by exploring the implied human-nature dichotomy and the resultant impact on both sides. By discussing the mutual loss, the paper attempts to shed light on the contemporary environmental problems, and to present a comprehensive assessment of Conrad's works.

Key words: Joseph Conrad; *Heart of Darkness*; Ecocriticism; Human/Nature Dichotomy

DOI: 10.3968/j.sll.1923156320110203.017

INTRODUCTION

Till now, the world has witnessed a boom of green cultural studies since nineteen seventies. The explosion of information and technology, the unprecedented development of diversified industry and manufacture, and the large scale of nature remaking have featured the time since twentieth century. Restless exploitation and inconsiderate destruction result in the ceaseless deterioration of the natural environment, which, observed by scientists, have posed great threats on the global balance and vulnerable relationship between humans and the nature. Confronted to the international crisis, scholars and researchers in literary field have begun textual studies from an ecological point of view, striving to find a solution.

Meeker raised the concept of "literary ecology" in his work *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology*. He analyzed the connection between literature and ecology, arguing that it was literature that "guide[d] imagination in the search for a more wholesome participation in natural processes". (Meeker, 1974, p.122). He creatively adopted ecological philosophies into the textual analysis of Shakespeare, Dante, and some Greek works.

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† Received January 11, 2011; accepted March 7, 2011.

The year 1978 marked the birth of ecocriticism. Rueckert, in his essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism”, coined the word “ecocriticism” and defined it as “the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature” (Rueckert, 1978, p. 107). He discussed that literature was an unfailing reflection of the natural crisis, and launched his appeal to the audience to promote the depraved human-nature relationship.

In the early stage of ecological research of literature, scholars and researchers worked independently and rarely combined their findings or cited each other. This situation was greatly improved in the nineteen nineties, when more articles were published and more seminars were held. In 1996, the first anthology on ecocriticism—*The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literature Ecology*, Athens, Ga. was published. A detailed introduction on theories and analyses on ecocriticism and eco-literature was provided in this anthology. Glotfelty defined ecocriticism in this anthology as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty, 1996, p. xviii), and advocated the anti-traditional approach of literary analysis. She suggested an ecocentric (i.e. earth-centered) research in criticism, and broadened the traditional research focus from the human society to the whole world.

Glotfelty renewed the concept of ecocriticism by shifting the research focus, which was inspiring to re-recognize the value of nature. However, to some extent, it encouraged the over-emphasis on the wild, and segregated nature from humans. Observing this trend, from the mid-1990s, scholars revised the theory and included humans into the whole system. The relationship between humans and nature gained more and more attention. Humans and nature are inseparable and exerting influence on each other. Humans need to learn the co-existence with nature, not only for survival, but for a harmonious future.

1. A DISTORTED RELATIONSHIP: INVASION VERSUS VENGEANCE

In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad uncovered a bleak picture of Belgian Congo to the readers. In his description, the supposed harmony between nature and humans was smashed by expansion of industrialization, and both their images were distorted in the picture. The nature, which was full of tranquil peace and beautiful isolation in Romantic lyrics, turned into a gloomy and grotesque monster in *Heart of Darkness*. Meantime, the “cultivated” Europeans, with their modern weapons and industrialization desire, became a group of greedy and aimless people, driven by the unstoppable longing for more ivory.

This inevitable conflict distorted the human-nature relationship. The harmony was broken and replaced by the dichotomy. A tense battle was implied in Conrad’s writing. One side, the white people intruded and brutally exploited resources and slaughtered the native black. The other side, the Wild paid them back with what they deserved, mercilessly and furiously.

1.1 Relentless Exploitation of the ‘Cultivated’ from the Wild

Conrad is renowned today for his then-radical attitude towards imperialism as well as his eminent writing skills. He questioned the ruthless invasion of the whites in Europe in most of his works. In *Heart of Darkness*, he expressed his doubt, saying “The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much.” (Conrad, 1994, p.10)

It is worth noting that, around the year 1900, Britain had reached its peak in conquest and intrusion, and “it was certainly a time when most British people—whatever their social class—were jingoists” (Watts, 2005, p. 60), singing for the correctness of imperialism and blinded by the brought-in wealth and success. However, Conrad let out his opposing voice. The apparent “cultivation” of the native Congolese was hypocritically concealing the dark intention to exploit the natural resources, wealth and hard labor from the black. It was a pseudo-cultivation and factual raid.

The evil essence of imperialism was revealed in *Heart of Darkness*, in the portrayal of the tarnished and suffering land of Africa. Conrad indicated the mysteriousness and sacredness of the Wild, and implied in *Heart of Darkness* a grotesque future for both mankind and the nature if the invasion continued to go deeper.

1.2 Brutal Vengeance of the Wild to the “Cultivated”

The Wild was holding a hostile attitude towards its intruders in *Heart of Darkness*, which was explicitly expressed in the vengeful barriers of the nature (for instance, the unearthly forest, the dangerous river, the threatening mountains, etc.) and the fierce attacks from the savage natives. The violation of their living environment aroused anger and vengeance, and they posed a hostile attitude towards the spreading industrialization and imperialism, flying on the intruders' throat, which sharpened the conflict and intensified the battle.

Nevertheless, it was not a battle in which one lost while the other won. It was a lose-lose battle. Both sides suffered great pain from the distorted relationship.

2. THE SUBSEQUENT LOSS OF THE WILD

2.1 The Loss of Vitality and Natural Resource

It is easy to observe the loss of the Wild in human destruction, because every action people have taken leaves track and evidence on earth. Amid them, the deteriorating situation of natural resource and Wild vitality is the most direct and concrete. Conrad, known as a primitivist, i.e. upholding the idea that “a relatively primitive state of being is better than a relatively sophisticated state of being” (Watt, 2005, p. 74), demonstrated in *Heart of Darkness* to the readers a realistic picture of the great sufferings of the Wild, using his extraordinary writing techniques.

2.1.1 The use of rhetorical devices

The free employment of rhetorical devices is a remarkable feature of Conrad's writings. In this novella, Conrad precisely used a series of rhetorical devices to depict the emasculation and damage to the Wild, including simile, personification, symbols, contrast, paradox, etc.

Conrad employed elaborate words to conceive picturesque images of the Wild and the European intruders. Similes are used in the uglification of the tarnished land, with rail-trucks lying “as dead as the carcass of some animal” and hard-labored blacks shaping like “phantoms” and “bundles of acute angles” (Conrad, 1994, p. 25) after the torment. The extreme exploitation and manipulation of Congo and its native people bring ivory to the Europeans, leaving the land in anguish and poverty.

The deprived vitality can also be found in the contrasted description. A prominent example is the scene in which the savage native sang while paddling, followed by the creepy portrayal of the hostile Wild. Conrad demonstrated to the readers the energetic spirit of the nature and the primitives:

The voice of the surf heard now and then was a positive pleasure ... It was something natural, that had its reason, that had a meaning ... Now and then a boat from the shore ... was paddled by black fellows. You could see from afar the white of their eyeballs glistening. They shouted, sang; their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks—these chaps; but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement, that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast. They want no excuse for being there. (Conrad, 1994, p. 19)

This description is a sharp contrast to the following portrayal of the Wild. In Conrad's novella, the natural environment was emasculated and rigid under human touch. Vitality and energetic movements were replaced by the extremely “chill stillness” (Conrad, 1994, p. 51). For example, in the voyage to Kurtz's inner station, Marlow witnesses this intolerable stillness most of the time, with the sun hanging over like “[a] blazing little ball”, a mist that “[does] not shift or drive”, that “[is] just there, standing all

round you like something solid”, the supposedly lively trees which seems to be “changed into stone”. (Conrad, 1994, p. 56) The nature turned into something dumbly immobile and silent, a silent in which “you begin to suspect yourself of being deaf” (Conrad 1994, p. 56). The contrast indicates the decline of the Wild in its inner vitality and resources, and implies that it is the humans that should be responsible to it.

2.1.2 Demonized descriptions of the jungle

Association about nature used to be full of peace and beauty in people’s mind. However, in the writings of Conrad, the image of nature is associated with a creepy, scary and Gothic air. Specifically in *Heart of Darkness*, the jungle is demonized like the hell. Conrad metaphorically indicated the African jungle to be the “heart of darkness” (Conrad, 1994, p. 50). When penetrating into the jungle, Marlow perceives a wild world in the voyage, a “strange world of plants, and water, and silence,” and the silence is “the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention. It looked at you with a vengeful aspect.” (Conrad, 1994, p. 48-9) The overwhelming and frightening immensity of the nature is intensively described in the story.

Besides, the savage and fierce nature of the primitives has been highlighted by Conrad. They attack the boat with spears, and communicate in cries and screams, which seem to be incomprehensible and threatening in the ear of the “cultivated” whites. Conrad exposed the horrifying picture of the native Congolese, with a purpose to create a literary environment rather than a bloody discrimination. It is true that Conrad associated the Wild with some bleak religious tradition. For instance, in the description of Kurtz’s mistress, the woman dresses herself in “striped and fringed cloths”, with “innumerable necklaces of glass beads on her neck” and “bizarre things, charms, gifts of witch-men” glittering at every step. (Conrad, 1994, p. 87) When she gets close to the boat, she suddenly “opens her bared arms and throws them up rigid above her head, as though in an uncontrollable desire to touch the sky”. (Conrad, 1994, p. 88) However, the deliberate demonization of the Wild does not serve for racists and geographic prejudice. It creates a sense of terror and segregation, implying that the mutual misunderstanding and fear is derived from the lack of communication, thus leads to the distortion of human-nature relationship.

2.2 The Loss of Innocence

As an isolated area, Africa had been nurturing her people since their settlement. In the self-supportive society, people were able to preserve their innocence owing to their simple way of life. Yet, the innocence was fragile confronted with capitalism and the Western commercialism. The industrialization and imperial expansion not only tore the African land down with exploitation and raids, but also made twists on the mind of native blacks, seducing them into deception and cannibalism and talking them into the gradual loss of innocence.

2.2.1 The so-called “cultivation” of the native black

Among the many brutal deeds to the native blacks, the training and so-called “cultivation” of the natives is the worst. The primitive innocence and respect of the natives are cracked under the invasion and implantation of a dominating culture and value. Some are “cultivated”, accepting the new value and obtaining a prejudice against other fellows. The gradual change of position breaks up the harmony of the natives’ living style and brings them with new reason of hatred. And resultantly, the whole relationship between humans and nature is inevitably going down.

Chapter 1 presents a sharp contrast to the readers on this distortion. After Marlow has arrived to the Africa, he notices on his way six black men “advanced in a file, toiling up the path”, each with “an iron collar on the neck” and “connected together with a chain whose bights swung between them”. (Conrad, 1994, p. 22) In contrary, there is another black behind them, “carrying a rifle” and dressed in “a uniform jacket”, reclaimed to be “the product of the new forces at work”. Seeing Marlow—a white man passing by, he “grin[s]”, and takes “a glance at his charge, seem[s] to take me into partnership in his exalter trust”. (Conrad, 1994, p. 23) This is a sad scene in which a black indifferently watches his fellows suffer. What the whites “cultivate” him has deprived him of his good nature.

2.2.2 The cannibalistic tragedy

In *Heart of Darkness*, the description of the disordered battle between the people on the boat and people in the jungle is exceptionally impressive. A gunshot as a trigger, the jungle primitives use arrows as their weapons, attacking against the bullets from the boat. In the battle, the helmsman, a trained black, is stabbed dead when he throws the shutter open and attempts to shoot the blacks in the jungle. A primitive black kills a “cultivated” black in the fight. Ironically, it is discovered in the following paragraphs that the blacks in the jungle attack the boat to keep it away from Kurtz. They are all devoted to Kurtz, a white man who has been manipulating and controlling them. This is a cannibalistic tragedy indeed, with two blacks desperately throwing spears and bullets to each other’s throat, fighting for the different whites, and not having the slightest knowledge of their being manipulated.

3. THE SUBSEQUENT LOSS OF THE “CULTIVATED” WHITES

3.1 The Loss of an Alternative Culture

The human-nature conflict has been caused by human destruction and expansion. Therefore, it seems that humans gain much more profit than the loss. However, the subsequent loss to the mankind is considerable and disastrous as well. The extermination and slaughtering of the natives almost brought an end to an alternative culture, and the conscience of people has been lost in the pursuit of ivory and fame.

As is mentioned before, Conrad was a hard ideal primitivist, which means he not only upheld the idea of living a simple life, but held great sympathy for the native Congolese and cynically criticized the hypocrisy and predatory behaviors of the Europeans. He regarded the primitive life as an alternative culture, which had certain connections with the cultivated, modern world. He expressed his mind by Marlow, who perceived the different complexions of the African people, and thought in shock: “They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar.” (Conrad, 1994, p. 51) He uncovered the truth that the black was “as much of a man as these on the shore”, and thus deserved the same respect. However, the “cultivated” whites kept evading this truth under the shields of development level and the sense of superiority. They swayed and drove men like animals. The concluding sentence of Kurtz’s pamphlet “Exterminate all the brutes!” (Conrad, 1994, p. 72) is the best reflection of the primitive culture to the eyes of the Europeans. By killing the native people, they were in fact killing an alternative culture, a culture which they were too proud and afraid to acknowledge its profundity.

3.2 The Loss of Conscience

3.2.1 The callous behavior to local natives

Most readers of *Heart of Darkness* would get startled by the candid description of the human cruelty and lust. The European intruders set out for Belgian Congo, taking the ivory and cold-bloodily manipulating the local people. They employ three main ways to achieve their dark intention:

Firstly, they violently slaughter and control the native blacks. An example can be cited here from *Heart of Darkness* when Kurtz finally decides to close up his proposal, using the fierce sentence “Exterminate all the brutes!” (Conrad, 1994, p. 72) The whites hire the blacks to do tough work, paying them “every week three pieces of brass wire” (Conrad, 1994, p. 58). Moreover, after the attack, a pilgrim talks excitedly, comparing the killing of the blacks in the bush to a “glorious slaughter” (Conrad, 1994, p. 74) All evidence marks the inhumane treatment and extreme exploitation on the natives.

Secondly, they alienate the primitive tribes, deceiving them to hate each other and ultimately obey words from the whites. Kurtz is a typical representative of this point. He is worshiped by all natives. Conrad used precisely chosen words to describe his position: “His ascendancy was extraordinary. The camps of these people surrounded the place, and the chiefs came every day to see him. They would

crawl...” For those who would not listen to his orders, Kurtz will have them executed and have their heads hung high, exclaiming them to be “rebels” (Conrad, 1994, p. 84).

Thirdly, they launch cultural invasion, poisoning the mind of natives with the talk of materialism and western value. It is the place where the subtle horrors, the “pure, uncomplicated savagery was a positive relief, being something that had a right to exist”. (Conrad, 1994, p. 84) The whites grow greedier and relentless in the pursuit of power and possessions, and undergo the gradual loss of their conscience.

3.2.2 The faction in Europe and the conspiracy against Kurtz

Conrad seemed to imply the African area to be the heart of darkness. The bush in the savage land is scary and grotesque. However, this horror cannot match the real darkness which lies in people’s heart.

Besides the cruel behaviors to the blacks, the whites argue for their interest groups and fight with each other. There is a covert plot in *Heart of Darkness* centered on Kurtz. Kurtz, renowned for his reputation in ivory purchasing and ability of eloquence, has been the center of the conflicts. Marlow once hinted that behind him, back in Europe, “many powers of darkness claimed him for their own”. (Conrad, 1994, p. 70) His capacity poses a great menace to the position of the Central station manager. After discussion with his uncle, the manager has the steamer wrecked and deliberately postpones the voyage time, delaying the rescue and wishing secretly that he might be dead already. Hints can be observed in the novella, uncovering the conspiracy against Kurtz and the hypocrisy of the European companies, represented by the manager and his uncle.

3.3 The Loss of Aspiration

As intruders, the whites come to the Africa with great ambition. They strive for the phantom of richness and success. However, time wears down their passion and breaks apart their illusion. A sense of estrangement, detachment and absurdity is created in *Heart of Darkness*. This change marks their loss of aspiration.

In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad is noticed to have “a predilection for a variety of techniques which lend an air of absurdity, futility or nightmare” in his descriptive methods. (Watt, 2005, p.114) Numerous pieces of evidence in *Heart of Darkness* can be found to support this predilection. In the hard voyage to Kurtz’s inner station, confronted with the extreme hostility of natural environment, Marlow develops an illusion that he, together with the crew of the boat, are all “wanderers on prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet” (Conrad, 1994, p. 51). When he first hears the loud cry of a native primitive, he is shocked by its mysteriousness, absently felling that “the rest of the world [is] nowhere”, that the world is “gone, disappeared; swept off without leaving a whisper or a shadow behind” (Conrad, 1994, p. 57). These estranged feelings of Marlow suggest a dreamlike environment, in which people do things idly and pointlessly.

Besides, in the scene which a French warship shelling the African continent, Conrad combined the absurdist techniques of reductive perspective and frustrating context, demonstrated in the following paragraph:

Once, I remember, we came upon a man-of-war anchored off the coast. There wasn’t even a shed here, and she was shelling the bush ... In the immensity of earth, sky, and water, there she was, incomprehensible, firing into a continent ... and nothing happened. Nothing would happen. There was a touch of insanity in the proceeding, a sense of lugubrious drollery in the sight. (Conrad, 1994, p. 20)

Everything seems absurd and futile in the aimless shelling. The damage to the African continent is disastrous, yet the destruction on human mind is fatal. People’s aspiration has been deprived beyond their awareness in the inhumane invasion.

3.4 The Loss of Faith in Truth

The word “truth” is highlighted in *Heart of Darkness*. Marlow seeks the truth; instead, he witnesses many dark, dirty secrets and facts. Kurtz loses his faith in truth, and depraves to a deceiver and tyrant.

The whole intrusion and adventure witnesses their conversions to the pagans, who have lost their faith in truth and been conquered in the intensified center of lust and desire.

3.4.1 Kurtz's conversion

Conrad used a paradox to depict Kurtz's gift of expression—"the bewildering, the illuminating, the most exalter and the most contemptible, the pulsating stream of light, or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness" (Conrad, 1994, p. 68). He comes to the Africa with his talent and some "altruistic sentiment" (Conrad, 1994, p. 72) to "cultivate" the savage people. However, during his years in Belgian Congo, his values are gradually distorted, and the altruistic belief is replaced by the dominant lust and longing for control. He hangs the heads of the rebellious blacks to frighten the others, turns greedier by day, and has a black mistress.

One piece of evidence on this conversion can be found in his pamphlet, in which he writes elaborately his proposal on how to cultivate the primitives, followed by a brief and self-contradictory concluding sentence "Exterminate all the brutes!" (Conrad, 1994, p. 72) Another piece of evidence is the reminiscence of his fiancé. Kurtz is spirited and noble-minded in her memory, yet after his years in Africa, he has turned into a person driven by desire, exclaiming "my Intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my—" as if "everything belongs to him" (Conrad, 1994, p. 70). And he betrays his Intended by keeping a black woman as a mistress. The nature takes revenge on them, using their own lust to destroy their belief.

3.4.2 Marlow's conversion

It is implied in *Heart of Darkness* that Marlow's state in Africa is actually the early stage of Kurtz's. i.e. Marlow would turn into a second Kurtz if condition meets. He is enthusiastic to explore the unknown area; he gets the courage of adventure and risk-taking; he is greeted with the extreme evil of imperialism and the gruesome of the jungle. After seeing so many brutal deeds and dark conspiracies, Marlow gains bitter knowledge. Compared with Kurtz, Marlow does not get the influence as much. It is the Kurtz's conversion and death that urges him to think over and doubt the whole thing—the nature of expenditure, the position of the black, and human-nature relationship.

Nevertheless, Marlow undergoes some change. He exclaims himself a person who dislikes lies and seeks for truth. Yet, in the closing paragraphs, he consciously tells a lie to Kurtz's Intended, comforting her that Kurtz pronounced her name when death fell down on him, instead of the truth that Kurtz died in great fear, left a faint cry calling "The horror! The horror!" (Conrad, 1994, p. 100) He tells this lie not only to Kurtz's Intended, but also to his own heart. He has seen the horrible torment and distortion in the Africa, but he is not ready to accept any of them. By the deception of himself, he evades the rigid reality and converses to a person who is afraid to tread on the darkness of heart.

CONCLUSION

The dichotomy of human/nature in *Heart of Darkness* is a product of the age. The surprising speed of industrialization promoted the expansion of imperialism, which stirred the vulnerable ecology of the Wild. The harmony was broken and conflict between humans and nature was aroused. It is a conflict in which both sides get hurt in a concrete or indirect way. The unrecoverable damage to the natural resources, a twisted relationship between humans and the wild, and the loss of good nature in the struggle for more wealth are all ill consequences of the conflict. Therefore, it is necessary for humans to change their lifestyle and shift from the manipulative system to a harmoniously co-existent system, and make their efforts.

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