

An Exploration of Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness through Scientific Perspective

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Abstract:

Generally science and literature are considered dissimilar. But without literature man wouldn't be able to develop the subtleties contained in what science discovers. Literature offers knowledge to those that seek it gives experience to those who understand it and pleasure to those that love it. Science on the other hand imparts knowledge, leads to experience and gives pleasure to the few who love it. In this paper I'm trying to bring an analogy between Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness and Charles Darwin's On the Origin of Species. Both these works belongs to different genre. One of the cardinal tenets of Darwinism is struggle for existence culminating in the survival of the fittest. These two Darwinian aspects can be viewed in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness. Thus it's an attempt to amalgamate the seemingly diverse branches of science and literature.

Keywords: Science, Literature, Struggle of Existence, Survival of the Fittest, Darwinian aspects

Darwin made a massive contribution to science. In the Victorian age Darwin published his theory of evolution which scientifically seemed to back up other author's literature that supported racist thinking. *The origin of species* published on 24 Nov 1859 is a work of scientific literature by Charles Darwin which is considered to be the foundation of evolutionary biology. The evolutionary idea contributed by Darwin is called Darwinism. Darwinism consists of five principles. They are 1) Over production 2) Struggle for existence 3) Variation 4) Survival of the fittest 5) Origin of species.

The application of these evolutionary ideas to human societies is known as Social Darwinism. Social Darwinism was used to promote the idea that the white European race was superior to others therefore destined to rule over them. Darwin himself stressed the struggle for existence .One phase of this struggle is between individual for supremacy and survival. Emphasis on this phase led to a school of thought called social Darwinism. Social Darwinism is generally understood to use the concept of Struggle for existence and Survival of the fittest to justify social policies which make no distinction between those able to support themselves and those unable to support themselves.

Struggle for existence and Survival of the fittest are the Darwinian aspects that are applicable in this paper. In the Struggle for existence only the stronger ones survive, the weaker species automatically become extinct and instead, the existing ones evolve further to get adjusted

to their natural surroundings and environment. Survival of the fittest refers to a situation in which only the strongest people or things continue to live or be successful while the others die or fail.

Conrad was a man with a simple philosophy and a straight forward moral vision. His life at sea and in foreign ports furnished the background for his works. His major interest was the human condition and the individual's struggle with good and evil. He wrote novels and stories often with a different setting that depicts trials of the human spirit in the midst of an indifferent universe.

Heart of Darkness is considered to be one of the great novellas in English language. It investigates the dark self of the human being. The story of *Heart of Darkness* (1899) by Joseph Conrad narrates the maddening horrors and sensations which Marlow experience and which Conrad too must have experienced during his stay in Congo. Apparently the white men go to Africa on a civilizing mission. Their mission is to take the light of religion and civilization to the natives of Africa who are barbarians with no ideas religion, or human value. But in reality they are exploiters and colonizers.

Here there are two types of struggle .The struggle between two races and the struggle between man and nature. The whites and blacks are the two races. The white's greed cruelty and savagery are fully exposed and condemned. In their struggle with the blacks, the blacks were the race who survived *Heart of Darkness* explores the issues surrounding imperialism in complicated ways.

As species of the same genus have usually though by no means invariably some similarity in habits and constitution and always in structure the struggle will generally be more severe between species of the same genus, when they come into competition with each other than between species of distinct genera.

(Darwin 77)

The next struggle is between Kurtz and the environment in Congo. Nature is something which passes out evil from it and enters the human heart. The entire atmosphere gets charged with a sense of impending disaster. The very hills and forests convey a suggestion of something sinister and distinctive and waiting for an opportunity. But even in the environment Kurtz survived.

Kurtz is the central fictional character in Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness*. He is an orator, writer, poet, musician, artist, politician, ivory producer and chief agent of the ivory company's inner station at Stanley falls. The time, nature and its many manifestation themselves become the sources and the symbols of evil. When he arrived at the heart of darkness the evil in him comes out. Kurtz became a thief, murderer, raider band and persecutor. He considers himself to be a god. He monopolizes his position as a demigod among native Africans.

The nature –background to the *Heart of Darkness* provided by the wild of the tropics. The tropical forest of Congo, its enormous rivers, its wilderness, its dense sky touching the trees, its unbroken silences will make an overhanging brooding spirit, filling with terror and a sense of doom in the entire story. Marlow attributes his weakness not to Kurtz himself but to nature.

The inter-relationship between man and environment is very complicated due to man's

laborite learned behavior culture. Culture has helped man to survive at any place of the world. Man is controlling environment and harnessing nature to his own benefit. To a great extent such changes in environment brought out by man have considerable effects on the biology of man and his evolution.

But the wilderness has found him out early and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he didn't know things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with his great solitude and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating. I echoed loudly within him because he has hollow at the core. (Conrad 110)

Exploitation of nature by man sometimes creates such condition that many life forms formerly beneficial to man's survival became extinct thereby affecting man himself. The nature had not only withered his body, but also his mind replacing his civilizing conceptions with native, wild and heathenish beliefs. It had stripped his soul bare of the layers, civilization had lain upon it, thus exposing the elemental man beneath illustrating his fundamental kinship with the natives.

The wilderness had patted him on the head and behold it was like a ball, an ivory ball. It had taken him, loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation. He was a spoiled and pampered favorite. (120)

The change in Kurtz's thoughts from idealism to cold, realistic brutality is indicative of Conrad's philosophy that evil pervade the world, man can protect himself from the taint of this evil, if he possesses such basic virtues as fidelity, truth, honesty, dedication and natural kindness. The evil pervading the world takes myriad forms. In the strange isolated world of the African jungle, Kurtz is stripped of the idealism bred in him by the civilization of Europe.. Kurtz's contact with evil in this form corrupts in his mind and deprives him of the veneer that civilization has put upon his inborn instincts.

Darwin noticed that, the number of given species remains more or less constant because many individuals in every species do not survive because of various factors. The individuals have to struggle for existence. Those who are better equipped are selected by nature and thereby they survive. This is known as the law of survival of the fittest.

The jungle corrupts Kurtz's mind; destroy the last vestige of morality that civilization has taught him, implants in its place a more terrible code, the code of exterminating one's enemies and regarding oneself as an absolute monarchy a divinity. Critics contend that by contrasting the harmony that exists between the native Africans and their natural environment with the lazy, brutish grotesque white imperialist in Africa, Conrad proves that it is the Africans who are the fittest to survive in their native land and that Darwin's theory was in fact never intended to be applied to races or nations.

In Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* the idea of Darwinism is evident through a contrast of the setting and the main character Kurtz. *Heart of Darkness* itself does not present an argument for or against the existence of Darwinism. Conrad attempt to show that Social Darwinism served

to justify European exploitation of Africa and other areas of the world by purporting that the indigenous people were in need of the superior technological and religious knowledge of Europe.

Africa itself with its forest, its heat and its mysteries is only of the larger darkness which is in the heart of man. The wilderness is very significant in heart of darkness .It is not only the backdrop against which the action of the story takes place, but also a character of the story in or of itself. Kurtz transforms into a different person as a response to the stimulus of his environment. While evolution occurs over several generations, Kurtz can be seen as a metaphor to the overall process of evolution

It is this lust and greed or wealth led to the intraspecific struggle that is the competition between the individual of same species. Here the greedy people were the whites. It is the white invaders who are almost without exception, embodiments of blindness, selfishness and cruelty. The white exploited the natives for their own gain and want only to kill and destroy them. The stronger one survives and weaker one diminishes. Here it is the Africans who were the survivors

Kurtz who came to Congo with a good intension changed into a beast. There is evil exist in every human being. At the right environment the evils in the heart will come. Here the nature in Africa itself responsible for this .Conrad states that darkness is not strictly limited to a continent. Darkness of humanity can appear anywhere. Just like Kurtz, darkness can infect the soul of any person.

It is difficult to exist there. Man like Kurtz can't live there. But he by accepting the evil spirit survived there. The natives there considered him as God. He misused this fear and adoration for evil needs. The jungle of Africa presents new challenges to the Europe and capitalists. Those who cannot undergo the necessary changes are not able to stay and adapt; those who do like Kurtz adapt successfully and become different people.

Literature is just varied and expansive as science is. There are hundreds of styles, millions of authors and thousands of language which make up literature. Instead of different fields, as in science there are different genres. A scientist could ask what if and logically and scientifically follow his what if through. A writer could ask the same and use his imagination, knowledge and perhaps a little research to guide his imagination. Literature and science are similar.

In Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the idea of Darwinism is evident through a contrast of the setting and the main character Kurtz. Struggle for existence and Survival of the fittest are the two aspects which are applicable in the Victorian novel *Heart of Darkness*. *Heart of Darkness* was one among the books which help to define the theory of Darwinism within the context of the novel. Conrad recognized the existence of social Darwinism. There is an influence of Darwinism in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

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