

## Reviewing “Heart of Darkness” : An Environmental Perspective

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### **Abstract:**

‘Environmental challenges’ is a much-deservedly heated topic at present. As an interdisciplinary topic, ‘Literature’ has been using nature and environment as an integrated part of human life which influences human actions to a great extent, sometimes as a ‘protector/shelter’, as the Forest of Ardenin “As You Like It” or sometimes as ‘challenger’ as the island conditions in “Robinson Crusoe”. The Romantic Age of English literature is totally based on the relationship between nature and human being where nature plays the role of a teacher, mother, lover and philosopher. Tennyson’s “The Lotus Eaters” depicts that it is only the nature which provides us an escape to get out of the troubles of human life—something that soothes our soul.

Through this paper, I would like to draw your attention to one such text from the literary world. “Heart of Darkness” by Joseph Conrad projects the greed and materialistic tendency of human beings and to fulfill these desires, he delved deep into Congo African Jungle. The text was penned when environmental challenges were a matter of no concern. 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 and imposed their own on the primary habitants of Congo. All this was done to enhance the reckless industrialization of “The Empire”. The Europeans’ inability to adapt to the environment of tropical forests depicts natural resistance. They were not natural habitants of tropical forests hence they suffered with illness and weakness while on the other hand, the natives were much at ease because they were familiar with the conditions. Conrad has also used so many symbols, viz. the river as a snake, fog as lack of foresight, darkness as lack of information in the novel to show the superiority of nature over human beings. Considering the above, we can say that Conrad’s “Heart of Darkness” is a balanced literary document to showcase the limitations of a human being against the natural environment.

**Key Words:** Environment Challenges, Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness, Nature, Protector, Challenger, Destroyer

“Earth provides enough to satisfy every man’s needs, but not every man’s greed.”

Mahatma Gandhi

Since the beginning of mankind, we have collected everything from nature which is needed and wanted for a good life. Nature has its own balance of resources to satisfy the needs of all creatures but when humans try to exploit more out of it, other than the natural and permissible way, the whole ecosystem gets effected due to the imbalance created. In order to fulfill their overwhelming materialistic desires, humans disturb the natural cycle and ultimately, it leads to environmental disasters. So, we need to limit our needs because nature cannot fulfill our eternally elusive greed.

The earth is the most beautiful planet in the universe and it is the only planet in the galaxy that has natural resources and enough water to have any form of life in it. Unfortunately, the planet is suffering due to many environmental problems that may affect people, societies, and ecosystems. These problems can result in major consequences for everyone's daily life. The major environmental problems that are plaguing the world today are deforestation, global warming, and water pollution.

### **Ecocriticism**

The term "ecocriticism" was coined by **William Rueckert** in a 1978 article which called for the formulation of "an ecological poetics" (see Rueckert, "Literature and Ecology").

Eco-criticism is considered the branch of literary discourse which focuses on an investigation of the relationship between the nature and man, the ecosphere and the ecosystem. The approach primarily examines how nature and natural phenomenon are perceived by literary writers and how it is reflected in their literary works. Also, it tries to investigate how nature is invariably affected by the activities of man and the way nature influences and reacts to human actions. The awareness that humane actions must be held accountable for all the damages to this beautiful planet's ecosystem is the motive behind all Ecocritical work. The human world has always considered nature as its inferior, and abused it in the name of progress and civilization with man's self-imposed power and authority over the so-called 'bounty of nature'. Ecocriticism aims to bring a transformation in literary studies by linking theory and literary criticism with the ecological issues at large. Defining it, Cheryll Glotfelty writes, "Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (1996: xviii). Ecocriticism is actually a shout out to literature to connect to the issues of today's environmental crisis; in other

words, ecocriticism is directly concerned with both nature (the natural landscape) and the environment (landscape both natural as well as man-made).

A critique using the above mentioned approach is interested in how a work of art reflects nature in it. The critique studies the relationship between man, nature and literature—the role played by nature in the course of a story. The critique uses Ecocriticism as theory of literature to critically evaluate a work of art and is mainly concerned with how man’s activities affect nature and the significance, role and place of nature in a work of literary art which lays the path for a deeper study and therefore, a better understanding of a given literary work.

It is said that literature is, in a way, the depiction of society including human beings and his surroundings. Special attention has, therefore, been paid to the environment in Literature through various genres which have portrayed environment and nature in multifarious roles. Two types of environment can be considered while discussing the broad term ‘Environment’: they are the natural environment and the historical environment. Natural environment consists of all living and non-living things which happen to be naturally on the planet whereas, the historical environment constitutes ‘events’ that have happened in a person’s life and ‘culture’ that a person has lived in. Every person’s actions and beliefs are dependent on and formed by his/her environment. The environment is not constant and it varies across time and space. In some geographies, we have plenty of some of the natural resources whereas in others we have some other resources in abundance whereas there are some areas where natural resources are scarce. The same can be said about the historical environment. Organisms change the way they behave in response to conditions in their environment.

In literature, each character is put into a specific natural and a historical environment which affects his thoughts, beliefs and actions. In literature, the environment is depicted in the form of a protector or destroyer and as a symbol of purity or darkness. In “As You Like It”, the environment plays a crucial role. In this play, Shakespeare uses the Forest of Ardenne as a natural environment which provides shelter to the banished duke and his comrades. The forest in “As You Like It” is breathtakingly beautiful with great oak trees, running brooks, green pastures, banks of willows, flowers, birds, sheep and deer.

“Sweet are the uses of adversity,  
Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,  
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head;  
And this our life, exempt from public haunt,  
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,

Sermons in stones, and good in everything.”

This is a place where the sorrows, envy and danger of Frederick’s court are left behind. Here they find an escape from city. As we can see in a dialogue made by Duke Senior :-

“...Hath not cold customs made this life more sweet

Than that of painted pomp? Are not these woods

More free from peril than the envious court?”

“Robinson Crusoe” by Daniel Defoe is yet another good example where Nature is depicted as a challenger as it was Nature who challenged the crew and decimated their ship. On an alien land, Robinson tried to adapt to the environment and his basic needs of food and shelter were again fulfilled with nature only. This shows us that nature not only challenges but also protects by providing us the essential stuff for living, which establishes the thoughts by Mahatma Gandhi quoted in the beginning. One way to meet these environment challenges is to limit our never-ending “greed”. It is very exasperating to exploit natural resources overwhelmingly. Do we live in such a managed and ordered society that it is careless about management of our natural resources? Reckless modernization is a reflection of our materialistic living style. Just like Robinson could survive on the deserted island by some adaptation, we can also change and survive by adapting.

“Riders to the Sea” by J.M. Synge is also a brilliant example of nature’s dominance over mankind. The immense power of the sea is the main theme of the play: it acts both as a preserver as well as a destroyer; it provides life, in connection with the mainland, but it can also take away life. The dramatic structure of the play revolves around the sea. There is suspense in the beginning as to whether the sea has given back the dead body of the young man it has taken initially. Besides, there is also suspense at the end as to whether the last remaining son will survive the storm. In the opening scene, the power of the elements is demonstrated to the audience in the form of the wind as it tears open the door of the cottage.

“The door which Nora half-closed is blown open by a gust of wind.”

‘The Lotus Eaters’ by Tennyson depicts another example of the relationship between man and nature. Through this poem, Tennyson powerfully evokes the mariners’ craving to settle into a life of peacefulness and rest. He displays a tempting and seductive vision of a life which is free from toil. The Lotus Land emerges as “a land where all things always seemed the same.”

### **An Eco-critical Probe of the “Heart of Darkness”**

Joseph Conrad (1857-1924), considered one of the greatest English novelists at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century, began to write after more than his twenty-year career as a sailor. He is famous for his writing of sea-adventure. *Heart of Darkness* is his most famous novel, written on his experiences in the Congo in 1890. It was first published as a serial in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1899 and became extensively influential during the following decades.

The study focused on the European perception of the African environment and is reflected by the writer as a part of the issues surrounding the eco-critical discourse of literary works. The study reveals that the Europeans perceive the African environment as a jungle and a horrible environment where nature is considered to be conspiring to inhibit and militate against the well-being of human beings. It further strengthens the view that their ideas are rooted in their Eurocentric discourses.

The crux of this study is how the Europeans perceived the African environment as demonstrated in the novel and the author's viewpoint about this Eurocentric perception of the African flora and fauna.

The novel "Heart of darkness" by Joseph Conrad is an interesting novel that calls for a thorough reading and a fruitful eco-critical examination. The novel revolves around the interplay between man and nature and how both are dependent on each other. The setting of the novel is in the heart of a village in Africa. The timing of the novel is very relevant and apt for the message the author wants to convey to the readers. The story tries to recreate our traditional past, takes us to the time of our earliest contact with Europeans and the missionaries who came to bring western civilization and their religion to us.

"Heart of Darkness" reflects Conrad's deep concern for "despoliation of the earth in the name of 'progress'" and he criticizes the western viewpoint which reduces all relationships between the human and the natural world as relations which are solely motivated by the idea of profiteering. Nature is at the heart of "Heart of Darkness". The colonial experience was highly destructive for the environment, with the violent abuse of indigenous land. Nature was used as a means of imperial conquest.

Continuous expansion of imperialism and industrialization has led to a distortion of man-nature relationship and this has been exemplified through a detailed description in "Heart of Darkness".

In the book, Conrad describes his worries about ecological disaster in the Congo at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and illustrates a severe condemnation on people's upsetting destructive behaviors. He puts forth a hint that modern civilization has led to ecological crisis by breaching the harmony between nature and man and in the process, is destroying nature. Human civilization has not only led to the destruction of the beautiful planet and its nature, but has also resulted in

the hierarchical differentiation of society, thereby alienating the relationship between man and man himself. The capitalist industrial civilization and its gradual development over the decades has led to a deteriorating relationship between man and man as s/he is now becoming more unthinking over time. "When one has got to make correct entries, one comes to hate those savages—hate them to death." (Part 1, pg. 15)

People become selfish and greedy in order to maximize their own profit. The changes of man-nature relationship and man-man relationship not only harms nature and society, but have also hurt and impeded the human spirit, both overtly and covertly.

Through "Heart of Darkness", he tries to get to an ecological awareness from this man-nature relationship, although Conrad may not have been an expressly ecological writer. This paper analyzes *Heart of Darkness* from this new ecological perspective by exploring the implied human-nature relationship and the resulting impact on both sides.

Conrad uses very descriptive words to show the dense forest:

"Trees, trees, millions of trees, massive, immense, running up high; and in 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."

During the 1890s, at the time *Heart of Darkness* takes place, ivory was in enormous demand in Europe. It was used to make piano keys, jewelry and many other items. Conrad tells us that Kurtz was the best agent of his time, collecting as much ivory as all the other agents combined. In 1892, Leopold II declared all natural resources in the Congo Free State to be his property. This meant the Belgians could stop dealing with African traders and simply take what they wanted themselves. As a consequence, Belgian traders pushed deeper into Africa in search of new sources of ivory, setting up stations all along the Congo River. The Belgian traders committed many well-documented acts of atrocity against the African natives, including the severing of hands and heads.

The novel "Heart of Darkness" demonstrates a relation between the historical and natural environment. The natural environment is portrayed through forests and rivers whereas the historical environment is presented by effects and events due to the colonization and culture of the African people. The wilderness is represented as a character that plays a pivotal role during the course of the story. During Marlow's stay at the Central Station, he describes the surrounding wilderness as a "rioting invasion of soundless life, a rolling wave of plants, piled up, crested, ready to . . . sweep every little man of us out of his little existence" (49). Kurtz is the best example to show the dominance of wilderness. Through the influence of the wilderness, basic human nature is revealed in him. Consider the following comment by Marlow about the power of the wilderness over Kurtz:

. . . the wilderness . . . seemed to draw him to its pitiless breast by the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts, by the memory of gratified and monstrous passions . . . this alone had beguiled his unlawful soul beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations. (112)

His final statement of "The horror! The horror!" shows his judgment towards his whole life. The wilderness brings Kurtz to the point where he has a full-fledged awareness of himself, and from there, he makes his pronouncement about all mankind. The African natives reflect a very savage but actual quality of the wilderness. The jungle environment imposes no restraint upon the behavior of any individual. A person's ability to survive and hold on to sanity in the absence of any societal structure is tested in such a harsh and challenging environment. Let us consider Marlow's description of the natives living in the canoes on the coast:

". . . they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, and intense energy of movement that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast. They wanted no excuse for being there" (21)."

The jungles in Africa are so dense that even the sun-rays are unable to penetrate it but it also acts as a mirror on which one can see greed, darkness and brutality that lies under the noblest of ideals. The Colonizers began their quest in the African continent with a very different motto i.e. to illuminate and civilize the people of Africa but they spend their existence groping for ivory or plotting against each other for power and status. In this regard, Marlow comments: "The word 'ivory' rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed. You would think they were praying to it . . . I've never seen anything so unreal in my life" (37).

In Conclusion, we can aptly say that the novel 'Heart of Darkness' depicts an undercurrent of nature's superimposing vitriolic unleashed Eurocentric discourses and their unthinking mercenary pursuits. However benevolent and a so-called silent spectator as man may think her to be, Nature knows when and how to make man aware of her presence as both the destroyer and the preserver, as the case may be.

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