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Uniqueness in the integration of setting and theme in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

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Abstract

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is one of the finest works in English literature where setting plays a vital role upholding the theme. In this novella none of the themes is explicit in the surface of the story, rather the different themes are encapsulated with the different aspects of the story and one of them is 'setting'. This study goes on finding the uniqueness in the integration of 'setting' and 'theme' in this world famous text on colonization and primitiveness.

Keywords: *Setting, Symbolism, Theme, Darkness, Evil.*

1. Introduction

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, a world famous modern literary piece, often studied in the tertiary courses of the English departments at different universities all over the world, has achieved its global acceptance as a unique text not only because of its mere splendid narrative, but mainly for its mingling of the terms in the title 'heart' and 'darkness', i.e., 'center' and 'evil', often leading to the concept of primitiveness in the darker association of life: the life in Africa, the dark continent, though starting its journey in the white European background, which, as shown in the novella, is also rotten to its core wearing a ironic mask of a sophisticated civilized face.

Here, in the research, attempts have been made to justify the integration of setting and theme as a reasonably responsible factor in heightening the thematic value of the text. Evidentially, as the title focuses here the 'heart' of 'darkness', i.e., the core of corruption, the center of evils, and so on, obviously there lies scopes for the interpretation of the use of symbols through the different aspects of the setting of this comparatively shorter text with a high volume of universal appeal.

2. Hypothesis

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is a world famous text on colonization showing the primitives of human attitude in the mood of darkness in association with the evil intentions of human mind developed and nourished through the different mood-focusing settings of the text.

3. Objectives

The principal objective of the study is to evaluate the findings of the integration of setting and theme in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The study simultaneously focuses on how a literary narrative can achieve its success by the technical use of symbolism through setting to heighten its theme and uphold the thematic value.

4. Justification of the Research

The present study is fully original in its kind. The idea of this research has been developed from the classroom discussions on the same text in some tertiary level courses like Modern Prose and Postcolonial Writings in different universities in Bangladesh. Though many works have been done on the author and also on the text, nothing particular so far has been done exactly on the topic of the present study. So, the findings of the present study are expected to be an addition in the mainstream discussion on the author and also on the text.

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5. Scope of the Research

The present research preserves the scope to consider a comparatively shorter modern literary text, a novella, based on colonization to have a thread-bear analysis to bring out its success in achieving its thematic height through the integration of setting and its symbolic issues. Such an attempt of the present study is expected to contribute for the future researchers to initiate studies of the same kind on different texts of different ages.

6. Methodology and Literature Review

Observation method has no other alternative to proceed with such an initiative of a research work. And, to do so, different literary texts, especially Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and different literary criticisms and critical studies on the author and also on the text will be considered with much seriousness as the reference sources for the development of the present study. Some classroom discussions on the text and its author will also be considered with much importance to support the hypothesis.

Based on the criticism of *Heart of Darkness*, enough critical essays and analyses were published in the shapes of books and also as articles in many literary and research journals which are very useful as the supporting materials for further study of the thesis. Different critical books composed by – S. C. Sinha, Dr. S. Sen, Cliffs, Coles remain helpful for the part of the study on Joseph Conrad's novella. Moreover, the different literary websites are also helpful in this regard.

7. Discussion

7.1. Symbolic Features

The symbolic features mingled with the setting to heighten the theme of the text in Conrad's outstanding novella *Heart of Darkness*. Here are some noteworthy features which signify the focal subject matter of the main story.

7.1.1. The Sun-Set Episode: The Coming of Darkness

In *Heart of Darkness* several aspects of the setting give symbolic interpretation to its theme. The story starts with time setting of the sun-set episode and the place is the deck of Nellie anchored at the seashore. This very coming darkness of the evening, when the night is about to appear, indicates the coming of evil. In fact, it is a mood-focusing beginning adopting such a setting and a fine start towards the 'heart' of 'darkness'.

7.1.2. 'Evil': The Main Thread among All the Themes

'Evil' is the key-issue among the themes in *Heart of Darkness*. All the themes are somehow similar or interrelated with each other with their evil bond. Here, even from the title of the novella, we get an idea of the kinds of themes there might be in the text. It is the 'heart' of 'darkness' – the center of corruption, greed, primitiveness, brutality, mystery, etc. – and all these 'evils' are the thematic issues here integrated with the different settings of the story. (Spark Notes Editors. "Spark Note on Heart of Darkness." SparkNotes.com. Spark Notes LLC. 2002. Web. 20 July. 2014.)

7.2. Different Geographical Settings of the Novella

The different geographical settings of *Heart of Darkness* can generally be classified into two major groups – one is Europe, and the other Africa – the first is the place where we get the corrupt civilization of the white people, and the second is the place of primitive darkness.

7.2.1. 'Europe': The Opening Geographical Setting

Though the main attraction of the novella is Congo in Africa, the European corrupt white setting cannot also be ignored for its thematic importance in upholding the inner ugliness of the civilized European people. By the proper rule, Marlow is not supposed to get a job at the ship, but he gets that only because of his aunt's interference. Such a thematic issue of the inner corruption of the white people is placed in the European civilization. Actually, the city of Brussels symbolizes the inner evil, the darker soul of the white civilized people. To Marlow, Brussels is the whitened sepulcher, which is outwardly pleasant and holy but inwardly rotten. In fact, the whole of the then Europe was rotten to the core, which is suggested here in this setting. And, thus this place becomes a symbol of degeneracy of the white men.

7.2.2. Africa: The Center of Corruption and Primitiveness

Africa, the other geographical setting in the novella, represents the darker primitiveness. And to initiate this theme Conrad has introduced here the deep and dark forest of Congo. In this setting, the people are also dark. There is not the slightest touch of civilization. The full primitiveness is there. Even the white people who have gone there to civilize that area have also become primitive in this dark setting, as if the white people have lost their civilized values when they are placed 'in the dark' and 'with the dark'.

7.2.3. The Outer and Inner Stations

This very dark setting of Africa can again be categorized into two steps as the geography is concerned – the outer station, and the inner station. Both the places are dark, but the inner one is the darker than the outer one – darker in two senses – according to the depth of the jungle and also according to the evil acts. Much darker actions are there in the inner station than that of the outer one – the darker the setting, the eviler the theme.

In the outer station Marlow needs rivets to repair the ship but did not get a single. He is told by the station in-charge that there is no rivet in the station, whereas, there are too many. Moreover, the conspiring conversation that Marlow hears in the dark night symbolically represents the evil of the time and of the place. Everything is like a muddle there. And, in the inner station, there is much more corruption and greed for wealth and power. It is the inner station where the people like Kurtz being posted as an ivory supplying agent rejects to supply the costly ivories and starts his own ivory business. Not only that, he starts practicing his evil power over the natives. He becomes so powerful over the natives that he almost becomes a god to them. And, the most striking thing is, his main motto for going to the Dark Continent was to civilize the area, but in spite of doing so, he himself has turned into a primitive person. No doubt, it is a unique style to produce such a theme of primitiveness with evil power, greed and corruption in such a dark area. If the total area is the body of 'darkness', the inner station is the 'heart', the center of all the 'evils' that this 'darkness' associates.

7.2.4. 'Jungle' and/or 'Forest': The Place of 'Evil', 'Violence' and 'Conspiracy'

In *Heart of Darkness* the jungle or the forest has been presented as a matter of the profound dark setting. The jungle and all that it signifies in this novella is a symbol of evil, the major thematic issue of the text. The jungle has been

described as ‘lurking death’, ‘profound darkness’ and ‘evil’. “The vegetation imagery means much more than female menace; it means the truth, the darkness, the evil, the death, which lies with us, which we must recognize in order to be truly alive.” The jungle, here, is like a cage that society has made for Kurtz. Cannibalism and sexual perversion exist in the jungle, and behind every bush death is lurking.

This deep jungle setting also indicates the mystery of human life, which remains as the unfolded riddle to us. We understand that Kurtz is staying in the inner station, in the darkest center, only because of the fact that he is greedy for wealth and power. But, one general issue is supposed to arise in the curious readers’ minds, i.e., being originated and brought up in a materially civilized society, Kurtz, in his early life, was supposed to get the material comforts, which, now, he is deprived of. The wealth for which he stays in the dark African forest cannot give him any sort of material comfort and security. Then, why is he staying here in the deep jungle with the uncivilized native Africans? Is it mainly because of the power that he can practice here? Or, is there something else behind the surface facts? He is so greedy that even after his death, his mouth remains open – open for hunger – open for greed. Why does a man become so? All these are the unanswered questions. And, these are the mysteries of the life in the ‘heart’ of ‘darkness’. Such a devilish thematic effect in such a mysterious setting is undoubtedly mysterious to the readers, as well as, to the critics.

8. Limitations of the Study

It has already been mentioned that the topic of the present research has its uniqueness in being an original one. Even though, works are available on the author and also on the text concerned to this research, yet exact works on the topic of the present research are very rare, almost none available, even though the idea has been generated in the classroom discussions in the tertiary levels in the English departments of different universities in the Bangladesh context. So,

obviously there might remain some weakness, flaws or incompleteness in the findings of the present work. But still the research concludes with a high hope for further generation of ideas on the similar kind of study by the future generation of literary researchers, may be having some guidelines from this work.

9. Conclusion

The ‘Heart’ of ‘Darkness’ indeed means the center of the evils. In fact, here, in *Heart of Darkness*, ‘darkness’ and its ‘heart’ give an idea, which associates and relates the themes with the symbolic aspects of the different settings of the story. And, finally, the findings of this work lead us to accept that the setting and theme, together, have created an artistic beauty – it is the well-organized way of arranging and presenting the setting where the theme is integrated with its depth.

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