

# JOSEPH CONRAD'S HEART OF DARKNESS: READER-RESPONSE THEORY

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The study is intended to prove that Heart of Darkness of Joseph Conrad can be studied from different perspectives according to the theory of reader-response. The text of the novel is probably considered thematic evidence, as it is called by Stanley Fish, in which the characters are considered to be the representative of the readers within the context itself. Moreover, Conrad's literary work is a transactional, since the meaning of the text is expressed and conveyed essentially throughout the mutual collaboration between the reader and the text of the novel. Furthermore, the current study reflects that Conrad's novel offers limitless space for the reader just to make him participate in the creation of its meaning basically by melting his own experience with that of the novel.*

**KEY WORDS:** *Wolfgang Iser, implied reader, binary opposition.*

## **I. Introduction**

Joseph Conrad (1857-1924), the Polish-British writer, was born in the city of Ukraine. He is considered one of the greatest novelists for his contributions to the literature. He wrote many literary works. One of them is *Heart of Darkness* (1902) which is regarded as Conrad's master piece (Zuehlke 49). The novel recounts the facts of Charlie Marlowe's voyage to the pampas of African, following the European task there. In his expedition, Marlowe observes that the white European people, by oppression and aggression, are making use of the African people, regarding them as lifelong slaves. At the same time, Marlowe gets astonished to perceive that Africans are ordinary people; they are not savages, not feral, and most unquestionably not cannibals as Europeans say. Disillusioned of the European ideologies concerning the discrimination and superiority over the blacks, Marlowe expresses sympathy with the African black natives, trying to help them for improving their life (Youngs 183).

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It is believed that Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* can be studied according to the reader-response theory. This kind of criticism appeared between 1960s and 1970s, particularly in Germany and United State. It is flourished by the theorizing of many critics, especially Stanley Fish and Wolfgang Iser who are regarded as the pioneers of this theory. Generally, reader-response criticism revolves around the fact that the text of any literary work can be changed depending on who is reading or viewing it (Bennett 34).

According to Stanley Fish, the readers are energetic participants who have the ability of creating a literary work throughout the process of reading its text. That is, according to the reader, the meaning of a text can be found somewhere amongst both the mind of the reader and the words of the text. So, the reader is the producer of the meaning rather than only a consumer. He is a hypothetical construct of norms and expectations that can be derived or projected from the literary work (Wolfreys 147).

Through applying this theory on a certain text, it is practical that the reader would become, as it is called by Wolfgang Iser, the "implied reader" of the literary work. This concept is the virtual and the imaginative reader that might have been imagined by the author while composing the literary work (Cuddon 358). The implied reader, in fact, is not necessary to be a reader in the actual sense of the word. It could be the readership, the public in general, the historical background or the community. Iser, also, believed in the idea that the excellent readers would fill in the gaps of the text; the spaces involved in the sentences, events, details, sections, characters, viewpoints of the narrative and textual perceptions that are left intentionally to fill in by the readers (Bennett 47). They also have to identify the text's binary oppositions. For instance, the expression 'heart of darkness' is used differently in its reference to the Thames and the Congo River in order to indicate the contrast between the dark side of England and the darkness of Africa.

From another perspective, one of the methods that follow reader-response theory is psychoanalytical criticism in which the reader reflects his own personal responses, feelings, and point of view concerning the literary work. Norman Holland, the founder of psychoanalytical criticism, says that people interpret and understand literature in association with their own ideas and knowledge (ibid. 36-37). It means that they recreate and reconstruct the texts of literature according to their distinctive patterns of adaptation to real life:

We interpret (the text) in such a way as to cast it in terms of our characteristic ways of coping with the world. That is, each of us will find in a literary work the kind of thing we characteristically wish or fear the most. (Holland 142)

Commenting on Holland's belief, Iser says that the interpretation processes are typically unconscious for many readers. He declares that if the readers could make the processes of reading

unambiguous and comprehensible, they would be able to "gain a greater control over them as well as a greater understanding of how authors influence and interest" the reader. Thus, the knowledge of the reader's processes of reading is a form of personal authority that might be used to manage the live rather than to be under the direction of others (Thomson 128).

Thus, reader-response theory is very interesting. It sometimes leaves the door open to the reader to interpret the text by reflecting his own inner side. Most of the principles which are mentioned above are going to be applied on the novel, *Heart of Darkness*, so as to show the effect of this theory on this novel.

## **II. The Reader-Response Analysis of Heart of Darkness**

To begin with, *Heart of Darkness* highlights a number of expectations of a narrative about heroic accomplishments and the civilizing responsibility of British imperialism. It aims to weaken them for making the readers perceive the social forms differently (Rubin). These expectations can be seen through the tone of the narrator's voice that creates a kind of relaxing and romantic ambiance by depicting the tranquility of the Thames River and the becalmed ship in these minutes before the rushing of the tide:

The Nellie, a cruising yawl, swung to her anchor without a flutter of the sails, and was at rest. The flood had made, the wind was nearly calm, and being bound down the river, the only thing for it was to come to and wait for the turn of the tide (Conrad 1).

There is also a mention for the things that arouse loyal reminiscences of the great sailors of a proud country and their feelings of contentment in what they achieve. Nevertheless, this beautiful picture is going to vanish. The peace and the quietness are impermanent, the tide is going to run and the sun is setting. Furthermore, these expectations are crushed by the first words of Marlow, the narrator of the story, when he says, "[a]nd this also has been one of the dark places of the earth" (Conrad 14).

Consequently, for becoming the implied reader of a certain text, it is important to settle the challenges among two textual perceptions: Marlow and the frame narrator. The marvelous image of English imperialism that is portrayed by Conrad, who is the frame narrator, is drilled by Marlow's comments. So, it is significant to recognize the contrast between those two narrators which is essential for analyzing the novel according to reader-response theory.

A simple-minded reader would basically believe that Conrad is describing the principles of an implied author. That is, the naïve reader would perceive that Conrad points to the implied readers at the time of Conrad age with their interpretive community. Whereas the dexterous implied readers can melt

their interpretation of the whole world under the impact of this novel, just like the norms of the frame narrator which are changed under the impact of Marlow's story. As a proof, the final words of *Heart of Darkness* said by Conrad are completely opposite to his opening description:

The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed somber under an overcast sky - seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness(Conrad 87).

This divergent of the structure between the beginning and the ending lines of the novel is what Iser identifies as the "reciprocal spotlighting of textual perspectives" which occur as the text provides essential elements just like "the cultural norms or tactual perspective in which the reader accumulates in the reading process and synthesizes into a meaningful whole" (Malpas and Wake 248).

Moreover, *Heart of Darkness* consists of the binary oppositions that are used by the theorists of reader-response theory . These opposites are based on De Saussure's theory of language as a sign. According to De Saussure, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary (Culler 31). This arbitrariness of the language is based on the use of binary oppositions in which one concept is recognized through the absence of the other. In this novel, one can trace clearly these oppositions that are used by Conrad which are: light/dark, white/black, Englishman/savagery, and civilization/ignorance.

Throughout the novel, it is obvious that Conrad gives priority to the concept of darkness over the concept of lightness. For instance, the Romans at the beginning of the novel are **not** merely a source of light that faced the gloomy and the darkness of prehistoric Britain, but also an agent of darkness themselves.

From another perspective, *Heart of Darkness* can be analyzed according to Iser's idea in which the text consists of gaps that need to be filled by the readers. The experience of the text is blended with that of the reader through the process of communication (Bennett 47). So, the result would be a kind of indeterminacies in which the reader is going to fill by using his own "Interpretive Community"; an abstract term which implied historical and social background of the reader himself and which is going to be melt with the text's experience (Cuddon 367). Accordingly, *Heart of Darkness* creates unlimited liberty for the reader to take part in the formation of its meaning. The novel has a lot of puzzles that need to be solved by the readers. For instance, Kurtz arises a kind of suspicion for the reader, because there is a sense of Aporia (a state of being in puzzle) concerning his own identity. He does not appear immediately in the novel only after a series of long scenes. Everyone has specific interpretation and explanation of Kurtz and those interpretations are divergent. They create additional puzzles without suggesting any answers for that aporia. In this case, the reader would try to fill this gap and solve the puzzle. This idea leads gradually to Stanley Fish's thematic evidence.

For Fish, when people read a text, they come across different stages of certainty and uncertainty, because every text has its own ambiguity, gaps, and plan (Tyson 162). In this case, those people would read about the act of reading itself; reading would become the subject of reading. Thus, in reading the scenes that belong to Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, the readers would focus on the evidence or the act of reading to fill the gaps and to figure out the real identity of him.

Through the psychoanalytical analysis of Kurtz, which is one of the reader-response's approaches, one can see Kurtz's state as a consequence of the triumph of his id in its struggling with the superego, despite the attempt of the ego to have the authority over both the id and the superego. In addition, away from the boundaries of his own society, the ideals of Kurtz have been violated. That is, when he is aiming to develop into a god, Kurtz becomes a fiend and a lifelong slave of the interior wilderness that he comes to manage.

Kurtz's final words leave an additional huge gap. This can be seen when Kurtz cries out to Marlow, "[t]he horror![t]he horror!" (Conrad 43), he gives two mysterious meanings; his words either refer to honorable victory concerning the self-knowledge or they suggest a final moan of a corrupted self-concern. In fact, Marlow is confused, because he is unable to comprehend his own behavior in fighting to protect the soul of Kurtz from the act of barbarism. Thus, the reader is usually motivated to fill in these gaps of the novel; the connection between the details and actions of the text are left intentionally for the readers to make.

The last point that would be tackled concerning the application of reader-response theory on *Heart of Darkness* is the elucidation of the symbols. Some of the symbols are depended on the viewpoint of the reader himself, bringing a wide cultural stock to the main text; these symbols might be illustrated according to the interpretive community of the reader. An instance is the two ladies who are found in the external workplace of the company in the city of Brussels. These two women are knitting a black coat, and they are portrayed as "guarding the door of Darkness" and as "uncanny and fateful" (Conrad 24). In this case, they stand for the spinning of fates. They certainly break the life string of each man. So, the reader will depend on the context in order to have such interpretation.

Moreover, there are symbols, according to Iser, that are completely obtainable to the people of limited kind of social knowledge. For instance, the depiction of the series of sandbanks in Thames River observed as the fog lifts throughout the voyage of Marlow to Kurtz:

The whole lot was seen just under the water, exactly as a man's backbone is seen running down the middle of his back under the skin (Conrad 13).

In a symbolic way, Marlow's voyage is a journey into the self. Though this meaning is not stated and cannot be traced easily, but it is realized through the imagery in which the riverbank, which is an expression of nature, is compared to a man's backbone. Obviously, this would lead to the idea of the wilderness of the live that Marlowe aims to convey in these lines above. Thus, such imageries can be regarded as excellent examples for helping the reader to solve the codes of the novel's complexities.

### III. Conclusion

*Heart of Darkness* is a significant literary work which narrates the unspeakable actions and horrors that exist outside the mind of human beings. It depicts the expedition of Marlowe to the African rivers in order to find a man whose name is Kurtz. In fact, the actual voyage of Marlowe is really towards the heart of darkness.

Sufficiently, it has been proved that *Heart of Darkness* can be read from the perspective of reader-response theory with sufficient examples that supported the whole interpretation. It is scrutinized according to the theorizing of Iser, Fish, and Holland. According to them, the meaning is flouting between the reader and the text. What happened here is that *Heart of Darkness's* meaning is shared between the text itself and the readers. There is a kind of balance in the process of interpretation the literary text of the novel.

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