The Imperial Aspect Of Heart Of Darkness Essay, Research Paper

Joseph Conrad s Heart of Darkness is the tale of Charlie Marlow, a sailor whose journey is through the African Congo in search of ivory; however, the story is told on a boat at the mouth of the Thames River. The protagonist in Heart of Darkness not only tells the story of his journey through the African Congo, but also personifies the European imperial attitude at the time of the novella s release in 1902. Conrad uses Marlow, Kurtz and the listeners aboard the Nellie as advocates of a free and independent world while he uses the villainous manager and the immaculately- dressed, workaholic accountant to represent the majority of Europeans who, at the time, favored overseas expansionism. Imperialism is the central focus of the novella revealed through the protagonist s and antagonists perspectives.

While passing through the Thames with a group of other sailors, Marlow reminisces about how the land was once a place of darkness and uncivilized inhabitants. Beginning his story at dusk and finishing it in full darkness, Marlow speaks of how his dear aunt commissioned him a job aboard the fleet and of how he was sent down as an emissary of light to bring solace and transformation to an otherwise backward nation. His responsibility to the people of the Congo is evident when he sees the condition that the natives are in. In the beginning of the novella Marlow is repulsed by the state of the poor and starving people but after seeing a group of dying African men, Marlow becomes compassionate and searches for food to give to the men who are victims of exploitative labor. This is the point when Marlow s character becomes similar to Kurtz s in that he realizes the harm the traders have done to the natives and begins feeling guilty.

Marlow thinks that conquering the jungle for all its ivory is an arduous task after seeing a battleship fire its guns at the civilians. It was as if the tiny battleship was firing at the vast continent of Africa rather than the people. Conrad uses this metaphor to associate European thinking with imperialism. Unfortunately, Europeans, with the exception of Marlow, Kurtz and perhaps a few others, were primarily concerned with getting land- survival of the civilians was expendable on the continent. In Part II, a group of explorers called the Eldorado Exploring Exposition led by the manager s uncle come to the Congo. Marlow expresses his thoughts on the mission s evil intention by saying that these sordid buccaneers were only after the riches of the continent and not concerned with the natives:

it was reckless without hardihood, greedy without audacity, and cruel without courage; there was not an atom of foresight or of serious intention in the whole batch of them, and they did not seem aware these things are wanted for the work of the world. To tear treasure out of the bowels of the land was their desire, with no more moral purpose at the back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe. Who paid the expenses of the noble enterprise I don t know; but the uncle of our manager was the leader of that lot. (1449)

As Marlow s journey begins from the Center Station and continues up the river towards toward Kurtz s Inner Station, his fascination for Kurtz and his sympathetic attitude towards the people of the Congo increase while the antagonists maintain their stance of raping the land for more ivory.

In Part III when Marlow must rescue Kurtz he feels that it is a personal goal to do it alone because, at that point, the bond between them was so strong that he couldn t bear the burden of personal failure. Unlike Kurtz however, Marlow has the emotional and physical strength to withstand the call of the jungle and Kurtz soon dies.

As mentioned in his analysis of the novella, Edward W. Said says Heart Of Darkness works so effectively because its politics and aesthetics are, so to speak, imperialistic, which in the closing years of the nineteenth century seemed to be at the same time an aesthetic, politic, and even epistemology inevitable and unavoidable. (1503) By this statement Said is confirming that the characters and setting epitomize imperialism and that having been through the quest for expansionism himself, Conrad is simply enveloping the audience in the realism of European thought during this time period as opposed to Achebe s argument which says that Conrad is a blatant racist.

When Conrad wrote Heart of Darkness King Leopold II had control over what was then the Congo Free State. Conrad is said to have exaggerated the conditions in the Congo Free State for the sake of affect, but in reality it was bad enough that it was brought to the attention of the general public. Conrad uses this affect to show the intensity of the European imperialistic attitude and to show the awful torture the people of the Congo suffered because of the white man s desire for more new and exotic land.