

## An Ecocritical Study of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

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### Abstract

This paper examines *Heart of Darkness* (1899) by Joseph Conrad through the lens of ecocriticism—a critical approach that explores the relationship between literature and the environment. Though Conrad's work, *Heart of Darkness* is traditionally studied from its postcolonial and psychological dimensions, we cannot overlook its fertile ground for environmental criticism. Set in the Congo during the height of European imperialism, the narrative juxtaposes the natural world with colonial exploitation. This study argues that Conrad presents nature not as a passive backdrop, but as an active, even resistant force. Through the symbolic and thematic representation of the African wilderness, *Heart of Darkness* critiques the destructive anthropocentrism and environmental degradation characteristic of imperial enterprises.

### Introduction

Ecocriticism has emerged as a vital mode of literary analysis that emphasizes the interconnectedness of literature, culture, and the environment. It interrogates how texts depict nature, represent ecological crises, and frame human-nature relationships. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* has often been read for its psychological complexity and colonial critique. However, the novella also engages deeply with the natural environment. The dense, thick jungle of the Congo is not merely a setting but a character in its own —mysterious, menacing, and morally ambiguous. By reading *Heart of Darkness* ecocritically, we can better understand how imperialism distorts not only human relations but also the world of nature.

### Objectives:

The objectives of this paper is to

- Analyse Conrad's work *Heart of Darkness* as a eco-critical novella.
- Show the relationship of human being with Nature.

### Methodology :

The paper is based on analytical method. Both primary and secondary data are used in this paper. Primary data includes the textbook *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad. The secondary data are collected from essays and articles published in various books and journals. Ecocriticism is the main weapon which is used to attain the objectives.

## Discussion :

### Plot Overview :

*Heart of Darkness* is a novella that follows Charles Marlow, a sailor and storyteller, as he recounts his journey up the Congo River in Africa to find the mysterious ivory trader Mr. Kurtz. Marlow travels to Africa, where he witnesses the brutal exploitation of African land and people under the guise of imperialism. As he ventures deeper into the jungle, he becomes increasingly disturbed by the **moral decay and madness** of the colonizers. Eventually, Marlow reaches Kurtz's station and finds him seriously ill and mentally unstable. Kurtz, once a promising idealist, has become a **tyrannical figure**, worshipped by locals and consumed by power and greed. Before dying, Kurtz utters his famous last words: "*The horror! The horror!*" Marlow returns to Europe, disillusioned by what he has seen, and struggles to convey the truth about imperialism and human nature.

## Ecocritical Framework

Ecocriticism, as defined by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, is "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment." It moves beyond anthropocentric readings to consider how literature represents non-human elements, including plants, animals, rivers, and forests. Central concerns of Ecocriticism include: representations of wilderness, nature vs. civilization dichotomies, environmental degradation and exploitation, the agency of the non-human etc. Applying this ecocritical lens to *Heart of Darkness* the paper will try to show the environmental exploitation under imperialism and its portrayal of nature as a resistant force against colonial domination.

## The Wilderness as a Character

One of the most striking aspects of *Heart of Darkness* is the way Conrad instills the African landscape with life and agency. The jungle is described in mystical, often threatening terms: "*The wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion.*" ( *Heart of Darkness*, 53 ) The wilderness here is not passive; it exerts influence, exacts revenge, and transforms individuals. This personification suggests about environmental consciousness—an acknowledgment that nature is not inert but active, even moral in its resistance to imperial intrusions. By this quote, the jungle is portrayed as sentient and vengeful, almost like a character. It metaphorically punishes Kurtz, who tried to dominate and exploit it, aligning with eco-critical themes of nature's retribution against ecological violators.

## Imperialism and Environmental Exploitation

The novella depicts the brutal effects of European imperialism, not only on indigenous people but also on the land itself. The ivory trade, the primary economic activity of the colonizers, is inherently destructive: "*There is a touch of death in lies and not a particle of what you call truth in them. It is the strangest thing how the forest can make a man forget the horrors of ivory... Ivory has a soul... it calls to us.*" ( *Heart of Darkness*, 10 ) Ivory, derived from the death of elephants, symbolizes the lifeblood of imperial profit. Ivory, a symbol of colonial wealth, comes at the cost of both ecological destruction **and** human

suffering. The obsession with ivory exposes how natural resources are commodified, reflecting capitalist exploitation of nature.

The plundering of natural resources for European gain reflects an ecologically unsustainable model of economic expansion—one that destroys both human and non-human life. Furthermore, Conrad's descriptions of the colonial machinery emphasize its invasive and alien presence in the jungle: "A haze rested on the low shores that ran out to sea in vanishing flatness." (*Heart of Darkness*, 1) The fog and haze signify not only psychological confusion but also the environmental disruption caused by foreign intervention. Machinery lies rusting in the jungle, useless and decaying—symbolizes both technological arrogance and ecological failure.

### Nature as Resistance

Nature in *Heart of Darkness* is portrayed as an entity that resists conquest. Marlow describes the jungle as something unknowable and undefeated: "The conquest of the earth... is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much." (*Heart of Darkness*, 3) The line challenges the imperial narrative of progress and mastery. The impenetrable wilderness serves as a metaphor for what cannot be understood, commodified, or controlled. Unlike the imperial agents, who become morally corrupted, nature remains mysterious and untouched by European rationality. In this way, the jungle becomes a symbol of resistance—not just to empire, but to the entire Enlightenment project of human supremacy over nature.

### The Anthropocene and Conrad's Insight

Although *Heart of Darkness* was published prior to the formal concept of the Anthropocene, Conrad's portrayal of environmental degradation and human arrogance aligns with its key themes. The novella suggests that imperialism is not merely a social or political injustice but an ecological one. The death, exploitation, and madness in the Congo can be seen as early symptoms of a global ecological crisis rooted in colonial extraction and environmental domination.

### Conclusion

An ecocritical reading of *Heart of Darkness* reveals a layered and prescient engagement with environmental concerns. Conrad's depiction of the African wilderness, far from being a neutral backdrop, is a dynamic and morally charged presence. The novella critiques imperialism not only for its human costs but for its environmental consequences. In this light, *Heart of Darkness* emerges as an early and powerful indictment of ecological imperialism—one that anticipates the ethical and environmental dilemmas of the modern world. By recovering this dimension of Conrad's work, ecocriticism expands our understanding of both the novella and the environmental legacy of empire.

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