



# *English Studies in Latin America*

**Shedding Light through the Fog: Ignorance, Truth, and the Imagery of Light and Darkness in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.**

**Author:** Susana Langarica

**Source:** *White Rabbit: English Studies in Latin America*, No. 7 (July 2014)

**ISSN:** 0719-0921

**Published by:** Facultad de Letras, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile

---

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.

Your use of this work indicates your acceptance of these terms.





## Shedding Light through the Fog: Ignorance, Truth, and the Imagery of Light and Darkness in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

Susana Langarica<sup>1</sup>

This paper analyzes the use of light and darkness in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as a criticism toward the imperialist discourse of the British Empire. More specifically, it emphasizes the parallel that Conrad subtly makes between the truth about colonization and the light which breaks into the darkness of ignorance. This darkness, on the other hand, is seen as mirroring the blindness of Victorian society regarding the horrors that colonization causes in the so called Dark Continent. Thus, the idea hinted through Conrad's crafty images is that true darkness is not that of the skin, but that of the violence and abuses of colonizes, and the ignorance which allows them. Knowledge of the truth, on the other hand, sheds light through the obscurity of the empty imperialist discourse which most believed and only few has courage to refute.

KEYWORDS: Joseph Conrad, light, darkness, ignorance, truth, imperialism, colonization, Victorians, British Empire, imagery.

---

<sup>1</sup> Susana Langarica, BA in English Literature and Linguistics, recently graduated from Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. I am mostly interested in how literary works reflect their sociocultural context and the authors' ideas. My field of work is translation and in the future I plan to get an MA in translation.

From the outset, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is a novel in which the imagery of light and darkness plays quite an important role. The ideas conveyed through these concepts, however, are not at all one-dimensional or straightforward, which is clear when looking at the many interpretations that light and darkness give place to within the narrative itself. It is no wonder then that literary critics such as Achebe and Wilson Harris have differed so widely in their readings of these concepts but are nevertheless able to support their ideas with significant strength. While Achebe highlights the author's apparent use of darkness as a metaphor of Africa's primitive "mindless frenzy" (2)—and, consequently, accuses him of depicting the colonizers as the bearers of civilizing light—, Harris interprets light in Conrad's work as parodying the imperialist idea of "moral light" (88). The possibility and plausibility of such divergent interpretations of the imagery of light and darkness in Conrad's novel stresses the richness and ambiguity presented by these concepts throughout.

However, there is a particularly interesting reading of light and darkness which scholars seem to have left unexplored—one that is well supported not only by the language and references in the novel, but also by its sociocultural context and the Conrad's own words. In the Preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, Conrad states that his task is, "by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see" (4). And, as a close reading of *Heart of Darkness* shows, the author cleverly illustrates this exposure of the truth—specifically about colonization—through the image of light. Conversely, the idea of darkness as presented in Conrad's novel is closely related with the deception of imperialist discourse, which was accepted and believed by most Victorian readers at the time. Thus, as many passages in Marlow's narration suggest, light and darkness illustrate the awareness Conrad attempts to prompt through his writings, as well as the imperialist ignorance of English society at this period.

Before analyzing how the imagery of light and darkness expresses Conrad's view of imperialist deception and colonialism, it is important to understand the relevance of this perspective. And to do so, we must consider the sociocultural context in which this work was produced: that of Victorian imperialism. One of the prominent characteristics of this historical period—which becomes highly relevant when analyzing Conrad's writings—is the Victorian view of colonization as a right and godly duty of the English, to whom they thought the world was given by God to conquer. As Luke Owen Pike states, this twisted self-conception of English society during mid-nineteenth century was perhaps rooted in the fact that there were “few educated Englishmen living who have not in their infancy been taught that the English nation is a nation of almost pure Teutonic blood” (PAGE). In other words, they claimed to be direct descendants of an ancient race and, thus, to be naturally superior than the supposed impure or hybrid races (15). In fact, in *The Races of Men*, Robert Knox developed a theory which justifies the colonization of darker races on supposedly scientific grounds, stating that “what happens to the dark races of men around the world in their racial destiny” (Brantlinger 22).

This view, however, was not exclusive to the sciences—it was reproduced in literature as well. Prominent writers, such as Samuel T. Coleridge actually believed and openly argued that “Colonization is not only a manifest expedient for, but an imperative duty on, Great Britain. God seems to hold out his finger to us over the sea” (Brantlinger 25). Consequently, as Laurence Kitzan explains, “By the end of Victoria's reign the fiction writers had to a large extent taken over the image of the Empire and had succeeded in creating an emotionally driven concept of empire...The writers of imperial fiction helped to provide the glamour” (1). In other words, not only scientific and political Victorian discourses were contributing to create an idealistic view of the colonizing enterprise, but this deception was also creeping into the Victorian worldview from the arts. Thus, Victorian readers with no other access to the reality of colonization were provided with an idealized

“fantastic invasion” which fitted perfectly into their self-attributed superiority and, moreover, reinforced it (*Heart of Darkness* 51).

However, there were also some writers who, in response to the imperialistic fallacy, attempted to unveil the cruel and unglamorous truth of colonization, and Conrad was one of them. Personally affected by the atrocities of Russian imperialism and disillusioned by the English empire after witnessing its methods and consequences first-hand, Conrad set out to open the eyes of Victorian readers to the truth of colonization. In both “An Outpost of Progress” and *Heart of Darkness*, the author presents his readers with a reality quite different from the one depicted in dominant imperial discourse. Conrad satirizes English colonizers “whose existence is only rendered possible through the high organization of civilized crowds,” by stressing their insignificance and incapacity to fulfill their supposed moral duty (“Outpost of Progress” 5). He even suggests that, instead of bringing civilization and Christianity into the Dark Continent, these English-idolized-heroes only manage to either appropriate the native “pagan” traditions, or become sick, mad, and die—or, in Kurtz’s case, both.

In addition to attacking the Victorian worldview and demystifying English colonization, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* exposes strong criticism towards the obscurity of imperial discourse itself. As Marlow’s experience exemplifies, the reality of colonization was quite different from the myth presented to the English readers in imperialist discourse, and it was only through disillusionment that the veil could be pulled off and the darkness of ignorance lit. Marlow himself explains that his initial interest in the Dark Continent was fueled by an enchanted view of “the glories of exploration” and his curiosity of the “many blank places on earth” he saw on English maps (35). Ironically, Marlow is surprised when he realizes that, after having been employed by the trading Company and appointed to a journey into Africa, he had been represented...as an exceptional and gifted creature...I was going to take charge of a two-penny-half-penny river-steamboat with a penny

whistle attached! It appeared, however, I was also one of the Workers, with a capital...an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle. There had been a lot of such rot let loose in print and talk just about that time... (40).

It is precisely in this context that the imagery of light and darkness provides Conrad with an ingenious way to introduce his criticism towards the deception caused by imperial writing and to illustrate his attempt to remove it. Darkness often appears as the equivalent of ignorance, while light appears as both the awareness of reality and the opposite of the former deception. On the one hand, the darkness of ignorance is referred to at the outset of Marlow's journey into Africa, when "the uniform sombreness of the coast, seemed to keep me away from the truth of things, within the toil of a mournful and senseless delusion" (41). And as he starts to see the truth about colonizers in one of the trading stations, the protagonist admits that "the silent wilderness...struck me as something great and invincible, like evil or truth, waiting patiently for the passing away of this fantastic invasion" (51). Here, since the wilderness—representing truth—is contrasted with the "cleared speck" in which the station was built, it evokes darkness and impenetrability, again pointing to Marlow's initial ignorance regarding the truth of colonization (51).

The image of light, on the other hand, is more frequently exploited as an illustration of knowledge, momentary and ephemeral. The counterpart to the coast's somberness, for example, is described by Marlow as the "momentary contact with reality" in which "you could see from afar the white of their [black fellows'] eyeballs glistening" (41). And in his first encounters with this formerly hidden reality, Marlow says to "foresee that in the blinding sunshine of that land I would become acquainted with a flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly," i.e. that the truth of colonialism would be finally revealed to him through experience (44). Marlow's astonishment at the folly and ambition of the Company men (to whom the sunshine revealed "strolling aimlessly about...like a lot of faithless pilgrims bewitched inside a rotten fence") also

suggests the symbolic meaning of light (50). Later, a plainer criticism of the falsehood of imperial discourse and a clearer use of light as a metaphor of truth and reality is seen when Marlow reads Kurtz's report for the "International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs." In it, he finds "a kind of note at the foot of the last page...at the end of that moving appeal to every altruistic sentiment it blazed at you, luminous and terrifying, like a flash of lightning in a serene sky: 'Exterminate all the brutes!'" (78).

But perhaps the most representative example of the symbolism of light and darkness in Conrad's novel is that of the fog Marlow's crew encounters in their final journey towards meeting Kurtz. This significant episode is in itself a crafty image of the unveiling that the author expects to elicit in readers' minds—the moment when the darkness of ignorance dissipates into the light of truth. This analysis becomes all the more relevant in Conrad's, "An Outpost of Progress." In both works, the fog appears right before the crude reality of colonization reveals itself to the characters. While in "An Outpost of Progress" this reality is represented by Kayerts' and Carlier's decadence and self-destruction, in *Heart of Darkness* the dispersion of the fog is a symbolic approach to the truth of African natives, their colonizers, and the colonizing enterprise.

According to Said, however, "Kayerts' confusion is given concrete embodiment in a thick fog that descends, perhaps intended to represent the sinister shadow of truth he cannot tolerate" (143). From an opposing perspective, John G. Peters argues that "the fog in fact uncovers—rather than obscures—issues concerning western civilization and western worldview" which leads to "a view of the world in disorder and lacking any solid foundation...[and] removes the veneer of civilization that his [English] listeners traditionally use to construct order for their existence" (38). Although their views seem contradictory, both authors seem to agree that the emergence of the fog is, in one way or another, closely related to ignorance and truth. While for Said it represents a comforting deception hiding the intolerable truth for Kurtz, for Peters, the fog is a device that

triggers Marlow's depiction of the truth about the Empire as a deceitful façade. With this in mind, another possible approach to the image of fog which partly reconciles the views proposed by Said and Peters becomes relevant. When analyzing the fog within the analogy of light and darkness as truth and ignorance, the fog seems to represent the moment of disclosure when Marlow and the Managing Director finally see the reality of colonization, hence, both deception and reality.

The fog Marlow's crew encounters is a significant image where the darkness of ignorance and the light of truth merge and contrast. As Marlow narrates, the presence of the fog blinds him and his crew from the reality of African life that surrounds them; because of the thick fog, "more blinding than the night," they are unable to see "the towering multitude of trees, of the immense matted jungle," and are responsible for the "complaining clamour, modulated in savage discords," which apparently initiated a native attack against the ship (112). As some glimpses of reality come through the obscurity to the ears of the explorers, their lack of knowledge about what happens around them only creates agitated confusion. The cries of the natives leave the white men "stiffened in a variety of silly attitudes...darting scared glances", since the natives' offensive did not come for some time and there was no real hint of its coming, seems to have been caused by nothing more than their fearful ignorance (112). During a moment of silence when the uncertainty seems the most distressing, one of the men encapsulates his terror at the complete blindness to the Africans' intentions by asking "Good God! What is the meaning—?" (112).

As Marlow describes this ignorant commotion, he makes a digression that clearly points towards the function of the fog as a metaphor of darkness or confusion giving way to light. In the midst of the fog, the Captain notices a quite enlightening contrast between the white and the black men's faces that confirms a truth he had hinted before: the possibility of the whites being less capable and humane than the natives. Although all "were as much strangers to that part of the river [...]. The whites, of course greatly discomposed, had besides a curious look of being painfully



shocked by such an outrageous row. The others had an alert, naturally interested expression; but their faces were essentially quiet” (113). This seems to reinforce Marlow’s previous bewilderment at what he renders “one of those human secrets that baffle probability,” i.e. the natives’ extraordinary restraint (114). Knowing they have been starving for some time and aware of their cannibalistic culture, the narrator is astonished by the black men’s self-control and asks himself, “Why in the name of all the gnawing devils of hunger they didn’t go for us—they were thirty to five—and have a good tuck-in for once” (114). Such amazement could be rooted nowhere else than in the imperialist ideology mentioned by Pike, according to which the English were considered a superior race and, thus, more civilized than the blacks.

In opposition to his blind assumptions, a contradicting reality shines in front of Marlow’s eyes, breaking through the obscurity of an ignorant belief; “Restraint!...there was the fact facing me—the fact dazzling, to be seen...a mystery greater—when I thought of it—than the curious, inexplicable note of desperate grief in this savage clamour that had swept by us on the river-bank, behind the blind whiteness of the fog” (115). Just as the truth about the Africans’ nature and character reveals itself to the narrator, the fog finally gives way to light, where he found Africa’s landscape and native “naked breasts, arms, legs, glaring eyes...human limbs in movement, glistening, of bronze colour” (118). Moreover, this episode precedes Marlow’s realization of the truth about Kurtz as well. After facing the attack by the natives and seeing a brave black man from his crew die, the English Captain questions his motivations to explore and realizes the hollowness of his beliefs. At that moment, the imperialist discourse of colonization, embodied in Kurtz, finally appears to Marlow as very little more than a voice. And I heard—him [Kurtz]—it—this voice—other voices—all of them were so little more than voices—and the memory of that time itself lingers around me, impalpable, like a dying vibration of one immense jabber, silly, atrocious, sordid, savage, or simply mean, without any kind of sense... (122)

Thus, the vanishing of the fog—the obscurity of confusing misconceptions—gives place to the light of truth in both a metaphorical and literal sense. On the one hand, the ignorance about the humanity of African natives rooted in Marlow’s mind slowly dissipates as he realizes their impressive courage in the midst of the fog. On the other hand, the confusion the fog causes and what the crew sees after it passes is a prelude to the narrator’s final encounter with the truth; as the fog lifts and light appears, Kurtz’s reality becomes more and more evident to Marlow, who starts to realize how deceived he has been. Through the image of the fog, the imagery of light and darkness again illustrates Victorians’ ignorance regarding British Colonization—which is reproduced and reinforced by imperialist discourse—and the awareness of truth that the author aims to bring forth in his readers.

Hinted as such by a number of allusions throughout Conrad’s novel and masterly concatenated in the episode of the fog, the images of light and darkness demonstrate that it is actually imperialist ideology and discourse which taints the so called Dark Continent. It is the false premise of English superiority which justifies colonization as a God given duty to civilize the supposed savages and impose Victorian values and traditions upon them. It is imperialist discourse which glamorizes the colonizing enterprise and its actors, making the darkness of ignorance all the more harmful. Novels such as Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, however, seem to have provided a hint of hope, as they opened the eyes of Victorian readers to a different reality than the one presented to them through imperialist discourse. By strongly criticizing the Empire’s bias worldview and depicting the crudeness of colonization in a more accurate way, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* reveals itself as a skillful attempt to remove the obscurity hindering the readers’ sight, and make them see the glistening reality.

Works Cited

- Achebe, Chinua. "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness". *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays, 1965-1987*. London: Heinemann, 1988. 1-13. Print.
- Brantlinger, Patrick. *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830–1914*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1988. Print.
- Conrad, Joseph. "An Outpost of Progress". 1896.
- . *Heart of Darkness*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1995. Print.
- . *The Nigger of The "Narcissus" A Tale Of The Forecastle*. Hamburg: Tredition Classics, 2012. Print.
- Harris, Wilson. "The Frontier on Which 'Heart of Darkness' Stands". *Research in African Literatures* 12, 1 (1981): 86-93. Print.
- Kitzan, Laurence. *Victorian Writers and the Image of Empire: The Rose-Colored Vision*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001. Print.
- Peters, John G. "The Opaque and the Clear: The White Fog Incident in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'". *Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Infobase Publishing, 2008. Print.
- Pike, Luke Owen. *The English and their origin: A Prologue to Authentic English History*. London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1866. Print.
- Said, Edward W. *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008. Print.