Heart of Darkness Archetypal Criticism

Links

• [Dr. Kristi Siegel’s Introduction to Modern Literary Theory (scroll down)](http://www.kristisiegel.com/theory.htm)

•[Michael Delahoyde Archetypal Criticism](http://public.wsu.edu/~delahoyd/archetypal.crit.html)

•[Wikipedia Archetypal Criticism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archetypal_literary_criticism)

In criticism archetype signifies narrative designs, character types, or images, which are said to be identifiable in a wide variety of works of literature, as well as myths, dreams, and even ritualized modes of social behavior. The archetypal similarities within these diverse phenomena are held to reflect a set of universal, primitive, and elemental patterns, whose effective embodiment in a literary work evokes a profound response from the reader. The death-rebirth theme is often said to be the archetype of archetypes. Other archetypal themes include the heroic journey and the search for a father figure. Archetypal images include the opposition of heaven and hell, the river as a sign of life and movement, and mountains or other high places as sources of enlightenment. Characters can be archetypal as well; some examples are the rebel-hero, the scapegoat, the earth goddess, and the femme fatale.

Example from Full Essay

You are aware, I am sure, that the images of Heart of Darkness are not randomly placed, but are, to a great extent, arranged in patterns of opposition.

There are, for example, things that are dark and things that are light. There are also things that are black and things that are white. Moreover, many of the things that are light or white (the candle held by the Intended in Kurtz’s painting of her or fading light on her forehead as Marlow talks to her) are surrounded by darkness, and many of the things that seem at first glance to belong to the dark or black side of things manage to partake of light and whiteness (Kurtz’s jungle bride is described as glittering and flashing, and Marlow often notices the white eyes or teeth of the black natives—or a bit of white cloth around a black man’s neck). Similarly, although Europe at the time was generally thought of as the place of light, or enlightenment, and Africa was generally thought of as the place of darkness, Marlow insists that England, too, was once one of the dark places on the earth, and that the African landscape, like Kurtz’s African bride, is often described in images of glittering light. And, along the same lines, don’t forget that the book begins at sunset in the bright Thames and moves into a night so dark that the men on the Nellie can’t see each other.

Along with opposed images such as these, is a more complicated opposition between things that are inside or within and things that are outside—things that are at the heart or center, and things that are at the periphery. We travel from the Outer Station to the Inner Station toward the heart of darkness and then outward again, presumably back toward civilization, just as we travel inward from the outside narrator to Marlow to Kurtz and then outward again until we are left with the image of that outside narrator seeing the whole world as belonging somehow to the realm of darkness. And let us not forget that the unnamed narrator tells us right away that the significance of Marlow’s tales is not, as is typically the case with sailors, inside, like a kernal in a nut, but outside, like a haze around the moon.

--From “Heart of Darkness: A Lawrence University Freshmen Studies Lecture” by Mark Dintenfass

Questions to answer in your Congo Diary:

1. Apply the pattern of the archetypal journey, a grail (grail-less?) quest, to Marlow’s journey to the Heart of Darkness. Pay attention to the descriptions of each stage of Marlow’s journey.

2. What archetypal imagery, particularly color, my signify in this novel.

3. How does an examination of Marlow as archetypal hero enhance our understanding of the novel? Can Marlow be analyzed productively as any other symbolic archetypal figure?

4. What other archetypal characters can you find in the novel? Consider the lack of named characters. What effect does this have?

5. What archetypal symbols does Conrad employ and do the archetypal meanings contribute to an understanding of the meaning of the book?

6. Consider how this novel might connect to mythic archetypes of rituals and/or sacrifice.

7. What do you think are the strengths of this approach? The weaknesses?