Comparison And Contrast Apocalypse Now And Heart Of Darkness Essay, Research Paper

Comparison and Contrast: Heart of Darkness and Apocalypse Now

In Heart of Darkness, Joseph Conrad s diction and choice of detail work to create an image of the Russian as absurd and surreal, showing the reader one possible effect (other than the creation of a Kurtz) of the combination of the power of darkness and Western culture. Francis Ford Coppola, through his scripting and costuming for the American photojournalist in Apocalypse Now, makes a similar statement. Thus, the scenes in which the protagonist meets the Russian/American are very similar as they both work towards the same purpose with similar effect.

The first word that Marlow uses to describe the Russian is cheerful. This establishes him as out of place from the outset, as it comes on the heels of the attack on the boat. When told of the attack, the Russian replies that it s all right. Clearly, it is not all right ; the helmsman, mediocre as he may have been, is dead. Upon closer inspection, Marlow says that he looks like a harlequin a jester. The Russian is covered with an absurd set of patches, a sharp contrast to the darkness that is consistently attributed to the Congo and the jungle surrounding it. A few lines later, he is described as look[ing] extremely gay and wonderfully neat, due to the color and level of detail given to the patches. The only other person in the novel who gives attention to his clothing is the chief accountant, who is arguably as out of place as the Russian (the accountant, also, was described as looking like a hairdresser s dummy. ) The level of absurd self-contradiction continues through the details that Conrad employs about the Russian s facial expressions. Smiles and frowns chasing each other like sunshine and shadow; obviously, there is nothing serious or even realistic about the Russian. He is boyish and later Marlow doubts that he even existed.

In comparison, the American in Apocalypse Now is just as absurd. His mood, in general, is the same manic worship of Kurtz as the Russian maintains. The first noticeable detail about him in the movie is the many cameras he wears; certainly, these are of little use in the jungle. His profession is of dubious use in general; obviously, living in the village gives him little exposure to American GIs and thus little opportunity to photograph them, and even if he could take photographs he probably has no means to develop the pictures or to send them to be published. Clearly, an American photojournalist this deep into the Southeast Asian jungles is as out of place as a Russian in Central Africa would be. The dialogue that the American takes part in often parallels the Russian’s dialogue. The Russian warns Marlow of a snag upon entering the Inner Station; the American warns Willard of mines. Both state the fundamental belief of their existence: Kurtz is not judged as an ordinary man is judged. Clearly, the American, like the Russian, has become a slave to the power of Kurtz (Marlow describes this as Kurtz having taken a high seat among the devils of the land; Chef is more blunt in calling it fucking pagan idolatry. ) The final absurdity of the American is that he does not see the fundamental insanity of Kurtz s erratic behavior. When he describes Kurtz s unpredictability upon being greeted, the American sees only greatness in what is clearly madness. In effect, the American s absurdity, both in character and dislocation parallels the Russian s. The fact that one is Russian and the other American reinforces the power of the image, as it shows that men from two radically different cultures (though still belonging to the same world order: civilization) are subject to the fundamental darkness of the wilderness in the same way.

As Conrad uses diction and choice of detail to characterize the Russian, so does Coppola use the dialogue and costuming to similarly characterize the American. Both, in the end, create an absurd, out-of-place character who been conquered by Kurtz. In effect, they show that not every Western man becomes a great devil when exposed to the darkness; some only become little imps.