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

“A Compare and Contrast Essay on Apocalypse Now and Heart of Darkness”

Francis Coppola’s Apocalypse Now was inspired by Joseph Conrad’s novel Heart of Darkness that informs the film throughout. A comparison and contrast can be made between the two. Both have the same themes but entirely different settings. Heart of Darkness takes place on the Congo River in the Heart of Africa while Apocalypse Now is set in Vietnam. The stock characters in both have the same general personalities but have different names. Of course, Kurtz is Kurtz, Willard parallels Marlow, and the American photojournalist corresponds to the Russian Harlequin. Willard is a lieutenant for the US Army and Marlow is a captain of a steamboat of an ivory company. The first images of Willard and Marlow differ to some degree. The movie begins with Willard lying in an apartment room lost from reality with the song ‘The End’ playing by The Doors. He is haunted by his earlier deeds and he is getting very drunk. Willard smashes the mirror while fighting himself and cuts his hand. He collapses on the bed weeping. Marlow is portrayed as a wanderer of the sea. The narrator described him to somewhat of a hero. Their mission is to find Kurtz and take him down at all costs. In both stories Kurtz is a psychotic rebel, worshipped as a god, who threatens the stability of his original unit, but in one it is an ivory trading company and in the other it is the US Army. Kurtz, who had begun his assignment a man of great idealism and the highest morals, had become strangely savage. Tribes of natives worship the man who lives in a hut surrounded by fence posts topped with recently acquired human skulls. Kurtz has undergone a total breakdown of the physical, psychological, and spiritual. Along the trip into the wilderness, Willard and Marlow discover their true selves through contact with savage natives. As Marlow ventures further up the Congo, he feels like he is traveling back through time. He sees the unsettled wilderness and can feel the darkness of its solitude. The movie ends quite differently than the novel. The movie ends with a spectacular scene. During a native tribe’s ritual sacrifice ceremony of a water buffalo, The Doors’ The End playing on the background, Willard finally kills Kurtz with a machete. Willard exits to find the natives begin to worship him. This exhibits the fisher king legend where man kills the king and becomes the king himself. But Willard doesn’t want any of this. Willard drops the machete and walks away. The movie ends when Willard and Lance leave the camp in the boat. In the novel Kurtz dies of an illness, which is quite different than the film. The novel ends with Marlow returning the United States, keeping a promise he made to Kurtz before he died, where he speaks to Kurtz’s intended and tells her a lie. He tells her that his last words were her name.

Both stories are about a man’s journey into his self, and the discoveries to be made there. They are also about Man confronting his fears of failure, insanity, death, and cultural contamination. In Heart of Darkness there is an outside narrator telling the story that he heard Marlow tell. Conrad uses Marlow’s imagery and objective observation to establish a criticism of “civilized” society. The very opening paragraphs create a dark image of London, the center of civilization during Conrad’s time. The comparison between the pilgrims and the cannibals on Marlow’s ship yields another example of the savagery of civilization. Marlow also exhibits a resolution of frankness and truth. Throughout the novel he emphasizes his contempt for shallow, materialistic men, and his value on honesty. This brings up a theme of hypocrisy or insincerity in the story. Another theme is hegemony. Whenever fundamentally different cultures meet, there is often a fear of contamination and loss of self that leads us to discover more about our true selves, often causing perceived madness by those who have yet to discover. Evil often breaks out during times of isolation from our culture, and whenever one culture confronts another. The use of a political, military, or economic domination of one country over another, ivory trading, is imperialism. This is another theme of the story. The title of the novel, “Heart of Darkness”, has several meanings. Perhaps it means how we refer to the Middle Ages, when science and knowledge was suppressed as the “Dark Ages”. According to Christianity, in the beginning of time all was dark and God created light. This can have two meanings: Kurtz is worshiped as if he is a god. Perhaps he created light for his tribe. Or according to “Heart of Darkness” before the Romans came, England was dark. In the same way, Africa was considered to be in the ‘dark stages’. Yet, when it is looked into deeper, the usual pattern is reverse and “darkness means truth, whiteness means falsehood”. This reversal tells a political truth about races in the Congo, a psychological truth about Marlow and any number of moral truths such as the use of ivory trading which is dark and dirty. It also can represent the “heart of Africa”.

The ties between Joseph Conrad’s book, Heart of Darkness and Francis Coppola’s movie, Apocalypse Now are unmistakable. Apocalypse Now’s accuracy in following the story line of the Heart of Darkness is amazing even though the settings of each story are from completely different time periods. From the Congo in Africa to the Nung River in Vietnam, Joseph Conrad’s ideals are not lost. In both the book and the movie, the ideas of good and evil, whiteness and darkness, and racism are apparent. Both examine the good and evil in humans. In my opinion, the compared themes in Heart of Darkness and Apocalypse Now is that they are both on a quest for Kurtz, which turns into an obsession or fascination of him. I also see them as a journey between the polar opposites of a western, civilized, army command center, and the jungle of Kurtz’s camp. I found the novel to be boring and slow paced, while the movie was action packed and seemed to be a great success. Apocalypse Now is similar to Heart of Darkness in the ground-laying outline but mainly differs in many aspects. Both have excellent insight into the madness of men, the insanity of the situations, and the emotional changes imminent as a result of a traumatic journey. Although the two stories are similar in several aspects, their contrasting approaches achieved two different meanings and conclusions. Both successfully portray the inherent darkness evident in men’s souls that Conrad strove to reveal.

Bibliography

none used