The Symbol Of The Wilderness In Heart Of Darkness Essay, Research Paper

The Symbol of the Wilderness in Heart of Darkness The wilderness is a very significant symbol in Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness. It is not only the backdrop against which the action of the story takes place, but also a character of the story in and of itself. The vastness and savagery of the wilderness contrast with the pettiness and foolishness of the pilgrims, and the wilderness also shows the greed and brutality that lie under the noblest of ideals. The wilderness is not a person as such, but rather an ominous, brooding, and omnipotent force that continually watches the “fantastic invasion” of the white man. The activities of the white people are viewed throughout the book as insane and pointless. They spend their existence grubbing for ivory or plotting against each other for position and status within their own environment. Their whole society seems to have an air of unreality about it. It is as if they are building their whole lives on nothing more substantial than a morning mist, easily blown away by the merest puff of wind. Marlow comments: “The word ‘ivory’ rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed. You would think they were praying to it . . . I’ve never seen anything so unreal in my life” (37). In contrast, the wilderness appears solid, immovable, and ominously threatening. During Marlow’s stay at the Central Station, he describes the surrounding wilderness as a “rioting invasion of soundless life, a rolling wave of plants, piled up, crested, ready to . . . sweep every little man of us out of his little existence” (49). It is difficult to say, however, what the intentions of the wilderness actually are. We see the wilderness entirely through Marlow’s eyes, and it is always somewhat of an enigma. It is “an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention” (56). The wilderness is not just an impersonal force that is unconcerned with anything else but itself. It is, rather, a mirror in which one can see clearly the darkness hidden in one’s heart. The force of the wilderness is only malevolent towards pretense. The natives, who are too simple to have false motives and pretenses, live perfectly at peace with it. In fact, in many places in the story their voices can be considered the voices of the wilderness. Specifically, when they are crying out in grief th rough the impenetrable fog, their voices seem to be coming from the wilderness itself. (”. . . to me it seemed as though the mist itself had screamed . . .”) (66) The natives reflect the savage but very real quality of the wilderness. Consider Marlow’s description of the natives in the canoes on the coast: “. . . they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, and intense energy of movement, that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast. They wanted no excuse for being there” (21). The environment of the jungle, in contrast with the European society from which the white men have come, imposes no restraints upon the behavior of an individual. It is a harsh environment that tests one’s ability to hold onto sanity without the structure of society. The people who are successful in fighting the wilderness are those who create their own structured environments. As long as they keep themselves busy with surface activities, they cannot hear the whisperings of the wilderness, and the darkness in their hearts remains buried. For example, the chief accountant of the government station preserved himself by maintaining an impeccable appearance. Marlow says of him, “. . . in the great demoralization of the land he kept up his appearance. That’s backbone. His starched collars and got-up shirt-fronts were achievements of character” (28). Marlow himself must also face the truth that the wilderness reveals to him. He sees the wild dancing and chanting of the natives, and though he says at first that the spectacle is utterly incomprehensible to him, upon reflection he admits that he feels a remote kinship to the “passionate uproar.” Marlow says, “[The earth] was unearthly, and the men were-No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it-this suspicion of their not being inhuman” (59). But, like the chief accountant’s clothes, Marlow’s work piloting and repairing the steamboat distracts him from such thoughts.

On the whole, the white men are successful in fighting the influence of the wilderness. They are either too greedy and stupid to realize that they are under attack, such as the pilgrims who are hunting for ivory, or they have managed to insulate themselves through work, such as the accountant. There is, however, one notable exception. Kurtz, the fabulously successful chief of the Inner Station who has come from Europe to civilize the natives, succumbs to the savagery of the wilderness. He gives up his high aspirations, and the wilderness brings out the darkness and brutality in his heart. All the principles and aspirations of European society are stripped from him, and the abominable passions and greed of his true nature are revealed. He collects a following of loyal natives who worship him as an idol, and they raid surrounding villages and collect huge amounts of ivory. The chiefs must use ceremonies so horrible in approaching Kurtz that Marlow cannot bear to have them described. Marlow says, “. . . such details would be more intolerable than those heads drying on the stakes under Mr. Kurtz’s windows. . . . I seemed at one bound to have been transported into some lightless region of subtle horrors . . .” (98) The full significance of the wilderness can be seen only through Kurtz, because it is he who most succumbs to its powers. Through the influence of the wilderness, basic human nature is revealed in him. Consider the following comment by Marlow about the power of the wilderness over Kurtz: . . . the wilderness . . . seemed to draw him to its pitiless breast by the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts, by the memory of gratified and monstrous passions . . . this alone had beguiled his unlawful soul beyond the bounds of permitted aspir ations. (112) The degradation of Kurtz has implications for more than just himself. It is a commentary on all of humanity. At his death, he sees the true state of mankind. His gaze is “piercing enough to penetrate all the hearts that beat in the darkness” (119). His final statement of “The horror! The horror!” is his judgment on all of life. The wilderness brings Kurtz to the point where he has a full awareness of himself, and from there he makes his pronouncement about all mankind. Thus, in the story the wilderness is more than a backdrop for the plot. It is a relentless force that continually beckons the characters to shed the restraints of civilization and to gratify the abominable desires of their hearts. The wilderness destroys man’s pretensions and shows him the truth about himself.