

In Heart of Darkness Joseph Conrad often uses vague, "muted" descriptions, leaving a melange of possible meanings in the reader's lap. One exception to this trend is Conrad's symbolic use of ivory. Within the frame of the story, his references to ivory can obviously be seen as a representation of the white man's greed. Towards the end of the book ivory comes to symbolize the oozing evil that drips from the heart of darkness.

It isn't long before Conrad makes a commentary on the greed of the whites. By the thirty-seventh page via Marlow associates them with a "false religion." He says that the men at the Central Station are, "like a lot of faithless pilgrims bewitched inside a rotten fence. Pilgrims are usually people who travel to a holy place, so why the choice of words? Conrad further explains in the following lines when he says, "The word 'ivory' rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed. You would think they were praying to it." In their rapacity the "pilgrims" have placed ivory as their God, a realization that has greater meaning towards the end of the book.

The significance of ivory begins to move away from avarice and takes on a purely evil connotation as Marlow approaches those hearts of darkness: the Inner Station and Kurtz. Kurtz's relationship with ivory seems to have been reiterated by every company member through the course of the story. Of course Kurtz "harvested" more ivory than all the other stations combined, and therefore it almost seems appropriate that Conrad would use extensive ivory imagery in describing Kurtz. Earlier, during his digression on Kurtz, Marlow says, "The wilderness had patted him on the head, and, behold, it was like a ball-an ivory ball". By the time that Kurtz is carried out on a stretcher the evil has so overtaken him that, "I could see the cage of his ribs all astir, the bones of his arms waving. It was as though an animated image of death carved out of old ivory had been shaking its hand with menaces at a motionless crowd of men made of dark and glittering bronze". The evil has now grown to encompass his entire body, and soul. Kurtz's lust for ivory is recounted by the Russian. Once he threatened to shoot the Russian, who was squirreling a small quantity of ivory-"because he could do so, and had a fancy for it, and there was nothing on earth to prevent him from killing whom he jolly well pleased." The almost god-like power that Kurtz wields is unchecked, save for disease.

In Heart of Darkness ivory plays a dual role in significance. On one hand it is representative of evil and greed, and on the other, it is representative of the measures taken to acquire it in the first place (i.e. mistreatment of blacks). Conrad's use of ivory in order to symbolize darkness is also in keeping with his occasional reversal of the colors normally associated with good and evil, white and black. Ivory as a material is one of the purest and whitest found in nature, while Kurtz's soul is purely black.

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