Applying Theory to Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*

Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* is among the most studied, debated, contested, and theorized works of Western literature. While some critics feel it offers a scathing attack on colonialist ideology, others feel the novel celebrates and defends colonization and racism. The novel, however, can be approached, quite readily, from virtually all theoretical approaches. A number of theorists have studied the novel through the perspective of post-colonial theory and have contended, often in response to or in conversation with other post-colonial theorists, that it critiques, celebrates, and even reconciles Europe’s colonialization activities throughout Africa in the 19th century. A Marxist reading of the novel might point to the ways in which the story depicts the violence and cultural repression which surrounds capitalistic enterprises. A psychoanalytic reading of the novel might focus on the complicated psyches of Mr. Kurtz or Marlow and explore their unique psychological motivations and the ways in which their encounters with and within the Congo shift their psychological perspectives. A feminist theorist would explore the three female characters in the play: Marlow’s aunt, Kurtz’s native lover, and Kurtz’s fiancée back in Europe. Such a feminist reading would point to the lack of power and authority given to women in the text, which reflects the position of women in 19th century European society and their lack of involvement in the decidedly patriarchal action of colonialization. A new historicist theorist might consider how the novel both critiques and celebrates imperialism and, also, how it functions as something of a counter-historical account that documents that horrors and ravages of European imperialism in the Congo. A new historicist might also consider how the novel’s storyline was reworked into the 1979 Vietnam War set film *Apocalypse Now* and how the story of Marlow’s search for and ultimate encounter with Kurtz can be applied to different historical contexts. A queer theory reading of the novel would consider the complicated relationship—which seems akin, in some respects, to a romance—that exists between Marlow and Kurtz and suggest that Marlowe’s desire to find Kurtz—and his telling the story to his shipmates some time later—indicates a strong desire for homosocial bonding and relation on Marlow’s part. These, however, are just a sampling of the various critical and theoretical approaches that can be imposed upon *Heart of Darkness*. Along with *Hamlet*, *Heart of Darkness* is among the most theorized—and theoretically contested—texts in Western literary studies.