

The Connection between the Dream Dimension and the Hero's Journey in Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness"

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Studij: Dvopredmetni sveučilišni preddiplomski studij engleskoga jezika i
književnosti i hrvatskog jezika i književnosti

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Povezanost dimenzije sna i teorije o junačkom putovanju u

***Srcu tame* Josepha Conrada**

Završni rad

Mentor: doc. dr. sc. Ljubica Matek

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Abstract

The goal of this paper will be to determine in what manner the archetype of the hero's journey, as explained by Joseph Campbell, intertwines with the dream dimension and how much influence the environments and literary tropes that are characteristic for dreams in literature have on Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Additionally, through the analysis of these elements, the paper will also touch upon some of the basic themes connected to the whole of Conrad's opus, such as his overall pessimistic world-view, the decay of morality in characters who are separated from civilization, and, as a conclusion, present the results of the protagonist's adventures while drawing parallels to the rest of Conrad's works.

Key Terms: *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad, Joseph Campbell, heroic journey, dream dimension.

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Introduction

Beci Carver, in her book *Granular Modernism*, presents a type of modernist heir to the period and style of naturalism, which she conveniently calls “granular modernism”. The virtues of such a literary movement are present in over-abundant and meaningless particulars, an absence of design, and futile specificity. It is characterized by techniques of irrelevance, plotlessness, miscellaneousness, convolution, and confusion (Carver 2). By examining works from the entirety of the Modernist period it is clearly visible that some of these elements were actually integrated into the fundamentals of Modernism. What was so special about granular modernists was that they turned “a failure to define modernity into a technique of art” (Carver 2). Carver continues by naming Conrad “the first Granular Modernist” (Carver 30) and brings attention to his prose which moves forward without a specific idea of what it will achieve by doing so, even go so far as saying that the point of some of his works was to offer nothing at all and perform a kind of futility (Carver 30-35).

At present, the works of Joseph Conrad, Samuel Beckett, and T. S. Eliot are regarded as literary masterpieces, with Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* having a profound impact on the development of African literature, in rebuttal to it. The work itself revolves around a sailor by the name of Marlow, who retells his journey into the heart of Africa down the river Congo, to a group of acquaintances. While it revolves around themes present in the rest of Conrad’s opus, like universal pessimism, the vulnerability of morals in chaotic situations, and the destruction of virtues such as dignity or honour, *Heart of Darkness* can be interpreted as a unique, dream-like description of the hero’s journey, presented in Joseph Campbell’s book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, with the “granular modernist” characteristics of plotlessness and confusion constantly being present and pervading the story. Through analysing Marlow’s journey, it will be possible to depict in what way the story follows the archetype imagined by Campbell, and how much the literary tropes connected to dreams pervade Marlow’s description of reality.

1. Joseph Campbell's definition of "The Hero's Journey"

Joseph Campbell was an American mythologist and a professor of English literature who in his book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, presented the theory that nearly all of the important myths from around the world share a fundamental structure, which he called the *monomyth*, and from which he derived the model of the journey of the archetypal hero. In a quote from the introduction to his book, he summarized the monomyth as follows: "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man" (Campbell 23). At its core, the myth, or the story, consists of 17 different stages. Not all of the monomyths contain all 17 of the stages explicitly, nor do the stages have to appear in a certain order. The stages can be bundled into three major "acts" that are called *Departure*, *Initiation* and *Return*.

In the first act, the hero leads a normal lifestyle in the ordinary world and receives a call to go on an adventure. Being initially reluctant, the hero accepts the call after being helped by a mentor figure (Campbell 45-83). The second act begins with the hero's crossing of the threshold, his leaving the ordinary world and stepping into the unknown or "special world" where he faces various tasks or trials, either by himself or with the assistance of helpers. Eventually, the hero reaches the "innermost cave" or the central crisis of his adventure, where he must face and overcome the main obstacle or enemy, which leads to his apotheosis (divinization) and the revelation of his reward. The hero must return to the ordinary world with his reward. He may be pursued by the guardians or denizens of the special world, or even be reluctant to return, and so find himself in a position where he needs to be rescued or forced to return by outside intervention (Campbell 89-179). In the final act, the hero must once again cross the threshold between the special and the ordinary world, returning to the ordinary world with the treasure he gained, which he may now use as he sees fit (usually for the benefit of his fellow man). The hero himself is transformed by the journey and gains wisdom, spiritual knowledge and power over both worlds (Campbell 179-227).

In his *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad presents the reader with a unique interpretation of the hero's journey through his hero-spectator Marlowe, for whom the journey to Africa presents the journey into the special world (the crossing of the ocean between Europe and Africa presenting the crossing of the threshold) in which he will have to overcome various obstacles. Conrad's characteristically pessimistic world-view and the focus on psychology and the dark parts of human nature shifts the emphasis in narration present in the traditional monomyth from the outside (physical), to the inside (psychological). While Marlowe's journey follows the archetypal hero's journey, his eventual reward (the revelation that he reaches from his interaction with Kurtz) is extremely different from the one present in the monomyth tradition.

2. Dreams in Literature

One can hardly speak about the representation and presence of dreams in different parts of life or culture without starting from the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud. It must be emphasized that Freud's entire body of academic work is connected with phenomena that some would say cannot be scientifically researched, mainly because they are connected to something that even today remains fairly unexplored - the human brain, thought process and the unconscious actions of people, so the statement that his theories are "anything but theoretical" (Freud 3) is remarkably accurate. Before Freud, there were two tendencies in the viewing of dreams: dreams were either seen as extreme states of psychical activity, or they were initiated exclusively by stimuli proceeding from the senses or the body (Freud 7). Freud's definition of dreams walks a line between the two tendencies, explaining that dreams are instigated by daily occurrences and thoughts of everyday life; they are a sort of substitution for the emotional and intellectual trains of thought and they completely satisfy wishes excited during the day which remain unrealized (Freud 8-12).

Freud continues by saying that among the psychical stuff of dreams, reminiscences of impressions, not infrequently of early childhood are found quite often (Freud 18). This statement, connected with the one about unrealized wishes can be used as one of the points of interpretation of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, or more specifically - its protagonist Marlow. As a child he had a passion for maps, which were fairly unexplored at the time and he had a wish of sailing the world and uncovering those "blank" or "dark" spaces (Conrad 9-10). As an adult and a sailor he seized an opportunity to sail to a place which was unexplored until fairly recently and it reminded him of his dreams as a child. This journey, would prove to be far from a dream, and much closer to a nightmare, where the jungle is the metaphoric image of the "dark space on the map" by being literally dark and uninviting, even chaotic. "That a psychic process developing anxiety may still be a wish-fulfillment has long ceased to impress us as a contradiction" (Freud 49), so Marlow's journey can be interpreted as a venture into the dream-world, where the content consists of "scenes,

scattered fragments of visual images, conversations, and even bits of unchanged thoughts” (Freud 19).

When used in literature, dreams closely follow this psychological foundation explained previously. Stories about dreams that appear in the context of fictional literary texts can be differentiated from each other because they either comment, or symbolically emphasise what happened in the real world of a given text, or they function as a kind of “anti-text” that confutes the primary text and presents itself as the real one. It is possible to say that there are two degrees of fictionality, one where the text about the dream represents a kind of exponential fictionality, and the other where it is possible to speak about a “real” dream (Lachmann 15).

Dreams, no matter if they are dreamt in the real world or created in a literary sense, are inevitably connected to the problem of interpretation, or what a dream really means. According to multiple accounts, the real and the fictional dream are barely different from each other. Classical analyses of literary texts are akin to the psychoanalytical interpretation of dreams, while psychoanalysts (including Freud) analyse literary dreams similarly to real ones (Lachmann 16). A dream created in literature is capable of disorganizing the assumptions connected to a dream that has been dreamt, especially when an author uses psychoanalytical insights while creating it. Furthermore, the literary dream is often constructed in a way as to seemingly follow the model of a “real” dream, particularly in cases where the author wishes to create an illusion of authenticity.

The interpretation of dreams, whether real or fictional, helps in determining the “degree of reality” a dream holds. James Sully, an English psychologist, wrote the article “The Dream as a Revelation” which contains the central terms for analysing a dream text. He speaks about a kind of nightly fantasy, which he calls *fancy*, as a functioning organ whose chaotic nonsense not only possesses meaning, but also mediates between new knowledge, like the deciphering of an old message. Sully refers to the mechanism that hides the workings of fantasy as the *palimpsest*. The focal point of the mechanism are *letters* that contain secrets, together with a rational meaning. Basically, Sully believes that underneath the surface of a dream and its characters lies the true message of the dream. The basic method of interpreting the signs of a dream is by converting an unknown or obscure text, into a known, familiar one (Sully 354-365).

The world of the dream is often presented as a world of wonder, horror, the gruesome, and the unthinkable. The characteristics of such a world often help the author by allowing him more freedom in writing (excessive hyperbole, cluttering of the stylistic decorum that is limited for a “wakeful” text, and so on). The term “dreamtime”, coined by Hans Peter Duerr in his book titled *Traumzeit: Über die Grenzen zwischen Wildnis und Zivilisation*, can also be used in the analysis of dream texts. It can be described as a time-out, a time of carnival that is governed by laws different than “normal” ones, or a time in which a utopia reversed from reality is realized (Lachmann 19).

All of this allows for a creation of a second world within the dream, a world that is foreign to reality and can be imposed as an “anti-world” that clashes with the depicted real world. The numerous deviations from reality bring the dream within a (Romantic and post-Romantic) fantastic text to the degree of manic imagery, hallucinations, even clairvoyance and the like. The result of that is seen in the dream interpreter (the narrator or the protagonist) who finds himself within the dream and responds to his surroundings with insecurity and indecisiveness (Lachmann 20).

3. Joseph Conrad

Born in 1857 as Josef Teodor Konrad Nalecz Korzeniowski, the child of Polish gentry in Russian occupied Polish Ukraine, Conrad certainly had a difficult childhood. His father was a romantic nationalist who fought against the Tsarist domination, and when he was sent into exile, he took his son with him. Growing up, he wandered in Europe - he moved to France, went to sea, engaged in arms trafficking, fought a duel, spent a fortune, and even attempted suicide. To avoid conscription in the Russian army, he joined the British merchant navy and sailed to South America, the Congo, and around the entire British Empire (Bradbury 89-90). He acquired British citizenship and learned English as his third language, which would (together with his experiences) give his works a touch of the exotic and unknown. Most of his tales revolve around Caucasian protagonists, who find themselves in foreign, exotic lands, inhabited by “barbaric” natives.

Although he had written some works before 1898, that was the year in which he published his (from today's perspective, awkwardly titled) *Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, a work of “unmistakable modernity, the beginning of his major fiction” (Bradbury 90). It was the first of many tales in which he would present an unreliable and doubled world, set on merchant vessels where the protagonists are torn between the wilderness around them and the darkness that can be found deep within the human persona. His other works include *Lord Jim* (1900), *Nostramo* (1904), *Chance* (1913), *Victory* (1915), *The Shadow Line* (1917), and so on. His *Heart of Darkness* (1899), a novel about imperialism, is a powerful allegory of light falling into darkness, shown through the descent through the heart of Africa into human horror and the black places of the soul (Bradbury 92). Most of his works are connected to his scepticism and melancholy, visible in the lethal fates of most of his protagonists: James Wait (*The Nigger of the Narcissus*) dies and is buried at sea, Almayer (*Almayer's Folly*) abandoned by his daughter, takes to opium and dies, Mr. Kurtz (*Heart of Darkness*) expires, uttering horrific words, and so forth. He was keenly aware of the tragedy present in all parts of the world and wished to make his readers more aware of the events and conditions of life around the world, but the gloominess and pessimism that he conveyed garnered him the joking title of a “tragedian” (Bradbury 92-96).

Conrad died in 1924, and is regarded today as one of the greatest novelists to have written in the English language. His narrative style and heroes who do not quite conform to the norm (who are more anti-heroic) have influenced many authors who came after him.

4. *Heart of Darkness*

Heart of Darkness is a novel about the experiences of a sailor by the name of Marlow, who retells the story of his journey to Africa to some of his acquaintances. The story is actually based on a real event; Joseph Conrad sailed down the Congo river on his trip to Africa in 1890. Marlow's "travelogue" slowly transforms into the story of the search for a crazed ivory trader named Kurtz, who became a sort of legend for amassing incredible amounts of ivory, and imposed himself as a god to the natives. When Marlow arrives at Kurtz's station, he realizes that Kurtz has gone insane and tries to take him back into civilization. During the journey back Kurtz dies and Marlow returns to Europe where he goes and visits Kurtz's fiancé. During his conversation with her, he realizes that she is also infatuated with a kind of myth connected to the greatness and glory of Kurtz.

The work takes its narrator-protagonist on a journey into a place of darkness that raises profound existential questions about the protagonists' values and identity. It climaxes with the discovery of a white person who has chosen to live in a "wild place" on terms that involve a close engagement with African culture, and who dies at least partly as a result of what could be called the white man's aberration. Additionally, this person offers the protagonist powerful moral insights as a result of their experiences, insights that are fundamentally nihilistic and pessimistic (Retief 226).

4. 1. The overlapping of dreams and reality

Heart of Darkness, seen by many as one of the most important works of literature, is a powerful novel filled with elements of symbolist fiction, complex and difficult-to-understand insights into the human psyche and the world as it really is. As the story unfolds, the events that at first seem realistic transform into the dream-like, the hallucinatory and the grotesque; factual description slides into a phantasmagorical inner landscape of shifting and indefinable meanings; all throughout the real is submerged in the atmosphere and modes of a dream, which stresses the basic irrationality and absurdity of what is being presented (Sepčić 129). The myriad of shifting perspectives masterfully blends into a unity, projecting Conrad's profound insights into the structure of being, whose foundations are chaos and death.

From the very beginning, Conrad's description emphasises the irrationality of everything that is happening. The European attempt of colonization is characterized by an absence of rational purpose, planning, and control. As a consequence, it appears ludicrous and senseless. The culmination of such a description is the grotesque image of "a man-of-war firing into a continent" (Conrad 20). The disproportions and senselessness of everything that is happening, merges with the psychology of the protagonist, making him question whether he is witnessing real events, or dreaming.

4. 2. The psychological level

Marlow's consciousness is dominated by a sense of the dissolution of reality. The description of his journey to Africa projects an image of a rational man on slanting surfaces trying to keep his moral and spiritual balance which results in the questioning of reality, a topic that will resound throughout the novel (Sepčić 132).

Objects and things that can be characterized as products of rational intelligence and symbols of European technological advancement do not have the same function in the jungle as they do in a socially structured reality. It is not difficult to understand why Marlow is insecure and scared:

Marlow's moral vertigo stems from the fact that this rational man suddenly puts to himself the question whether what he has been taking for reality up to that time is only the world of appearances while this nightmarish world of irrationally scattered objects is reality itself, everything else being a flimsy super-structure erected by European civilization. (Sepčić 133)

Throughout the entire journey Conrad stresses Marlow's attempts to distinguish between the real and the unreal. As the story progresses, his understanding of those two categories becomes inverted, potentially driving him to madness, but also "according insights denied to normality" (Sepčić 133).

Marlow's perspective is what structures the world of the novel for the reader. It is not the facts that matter, but how he sees and interprets them. His subjectivity and emotional response to things suffuses everything with a sense of anxiety. The ludicrous things around him simply aid in the shattering of the normal world and the restructuring in a completely new and incomprehensible look.

4. 3. The dream atmosphere

From his visit to the Brussels headquarters of the firm that employs him and runs the ivory trade around the Congo, an "authentic atmosphere of a troublesome dream is induced. The visit takes place in a strange scene of desolation as if the great city has been suddenly and inexplicably depopulated" (Sepčić 134). The story of the journey to Africa transforms from a realistic landscape to a dream landscape the deeper into the continent he goes.

The world of *Heart of Darkness* can be called a surreal world of a dream specifically because of Marlow's description of it. It is basically (as mentioned before) the "time of carnival": the characters that Marlow meets are marionettes who most of the time have no idea what is going on around them, they are simply a part of it; the surrounding jungle is the polar opposite of the European cities and towns, allowing the "primal" to awaken within the people, deepening the surreal and oppressive atmosphere. The Congo seems wild, incongruous, nonsensical, but it possesses a unique coherence and deeply hidden meaning.

By following Marlow's journey step by step, reproducing the bewilderment, anguish, and piecing together of chaotic fragments, the reader is invited to sympathise with the protagonist. Marlow tries to rationalise the abrupt changes of scenery, the sudden emergence of things and people, and the isolated scenes, connected by the unifying oppressive atmosphere, but is unable to do so, and even when he succeeds (his explanation to what happened when he returned Kurtz to the boat) is not as satisfactory as he believed and leaves him with more questions than answers.

Conrad suggests a characteristic emotional tonality as the foundation of Marlow's experience. It is made up of anxiety, fear, terror, and a sense of being enmeshed in a situation beyond control. A prime example that showcases his emotional and mental state can be found in the aforementioned scene of his arrival in Brussels. The city itself reminds him of a "whited sepulchre" (Conrad 13) and the two women he meets within the headquarters radiate unease and evoke an "ominous atmosphere" (Conrad 14). Their solemn knitting and ceremonious behaviour toward arrivals (such as himself) resemble the mythological Weavers of Fate, which is further emphasized by his statement "AVE! Old knitter of black wool. MORITURI TE SALUTANT" (Conrad 15). This exclamation combined with the bearing of the two figures and their foreknowledge of doom, allows the establishment of a nightmarish atmosphere, which will be present throughout the subsequent events. Marlow's return to the city at the end of the novel can be seen as the return of the hero from the world of the supernatural, giving the novel the cyclical structure of the *monomyth*. The ending "in the sepulchral city" (Conrad 119) reinforces the pessimistic and the funereal that pervades the novel.

The further the novel progresses, the stronger these feelings of anxiety and fear become within Marlow. This in turn has an impact on his observation of the world: through his description of the trip along the coast it is clearly visible that he is more and more starting to slip into the world of dreams. He says that "every day the coast looked the same, as if we had not moved" (Conrad 19) and that his sense of isolation from the others, the idleness and sombreness of the coast "seemed to keep me away from the truth of things, within the toil of a mournful and senseless delusion" (Conrad 19). Further on, a similar passage is described through his journey down the Congo: "Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. The air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish. There

was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine” (Conrad 54). The entirety of the trip to Kurtz’s station is an “unrestful and noisy dream” (Conrad 54) where the “stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace”, but rather “it was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention” (Conrad 55). In this description a sort of connection is established between the dream/nightmare atmosphere of the novel up to that point and the events in the narrative start to shift more towards symbolic metaphors of existential questions and angsts. Besides its hypnotic effect, the passage conveys a deeper message, talking about the primal matter that stands in opposition to mankind, threatening to envelop everything and absorb all forms of individuality into itself: “The undifferentiated matrix of being calls for a return of all individuated forms of existence into itself, levelling man with animals and plants, bent on reabsorbing them all into the primal chaos as the ultimate foundation of being” (Sepčić 141).

At one point, Marlow slips into a delusion in which he questions, or rather “hopes” that he looks more appetizing to his cannibalistic shipmates than the rest of the pilgrims on board: “...I positively hoped, that my aspect was not so - what shall I say? - so - unappetizing: a touch of fantastic vanity that fitted well with the dream-sensation that pervaded all my days at the time” (Conrad 68). He has become dull and de-sensitized from being balanced between dreams and reality, constantly slipping from one to the other, even starting to become unable to differentiate between the two that his logic is starting to become corrupted, slipping more and more into the fantastical surreality of dreams.

The image of Marlow’s ship, being unable to move in a dense fog presents the culmination of Marlow’s anxiety and existential “crisis”. What seems to be a description of the physical adventure, can be interpreted as a journey inward, toward an individual’s consciousness. Being surrounded by the white fog, in complete silence, Marlow realizes that a person is alone in the endless void that surrounds it. However, he immediately shatters the illusion and relinquishes the thought by sounding the steam whistle and dispersing the dream. This seemingly irrelevant act is partially also connected to the incoherent universe of the dream: it presents the human need to act, to counter the anxiety, by giving him something that he has control over.

4. 4. Kurtz as the final point of the journey

The dream-like is concentrated in the journey to the heart of the jungle and Kurtz's station itself, but also in the scenes around Kurtz's death. At the start, Marlow begins to identify himself within Kurtz only in his imagination. Kurtz is still just a name, a formless shade of whom he hears from others and initially does not show much interest in him. As Kurtz's name is repeated over and over, Marlow becomes curious and starts forming a mental image of him, however, Kurtz still remains a flitting shadow in his consciousness (Sepčić 146).

At the same time, Conrad creates the powerful image of the jungle, one which contains Kurtz, and of whom he is a human extension. Kurtz himself can be viewed as a particularly "demonic" character, whose very presence radiates an overwhelming influence, awaking interest and leaving a lasting impression (Solar, *Mit o avangardi* 104). Faced with such a "powerful" figure, Marlow unconsciously starts to identify himself with Kurtz, and this is where the climax of the novel happens:

In Marlow's quest for the matrix of being, the inner division of the self has begun. On this level Kurtz is no more than a shadow lying on the dark waters of the primal chaos, an *alter ego* present in the archetypal quest. Marlow is a hero exploring the structure of being. In his relation to Kurtz, he loses all sense of proportion, all sense of measure. Kurtz starts psychologically assimilating Marlow. The quest becomes a matter of life and death. (Sepčić 147)

During his nightly encounter with Kurtz, after he escapes from the ship, the distance between the two of them is both literally and metaphorically removed. The scene turns into a symbolic ritual that reveals the reality of the jungle. He finally sees the answers to all the questions that he had been asking himself. The realization that everything possesses a tendency to return to this primal, wild, chaotic nature grants him the knowledge to understand reality as it truly is: "I was strangely cocksure of everything that night. I actually left the track and ran in a semicircle (I verily believe chuckling to myself) so as to get in front of that stir, of that motion I had seen - if indeed I had seen anything" (Conrad 109).

Marlow's final insight is that both Kurtz and the jungle can be subsumed under primal chaos as ultimate reality. That is the source of being, those chaotic, formless energies. He cannot remain calm after such a "revelation": up to that point he was

acquainted with only the “sham world of the whites ...grotesque puppets ...performers in the ghostly European circus” (Sepčić 150). Opposite them, Kurtz has reached a degree of self-awareness that is frightening and his dying cry “The horror! The horror!” (Conrad 116) solidifies his insight into chaos being the foundation of being.

4. 5. The results of the hero’s journey

As a result of his encounter with Kurtz, Marlow is cast closer than ever before to the chaotic forces of creation. However, unlike Kurtz, he turns away from this chaos and continues to dredge on through life. He does not consider himself to be an arrogantly ambitious man, but it can be implied, from his actions and statements, that he is stubborn in his intent: “However, as you see, I did not go to join Kurtz there and then. I did not. I remained to dream the nightmare out to the end...” (Conrad 117). This dedication and simplicity (not in the way of simple-mindedness, but rather straightforwardness) allows him to see the bigger picture:

I have wrestled with death. It is the most unexciting contest you can imagine. It takes place in an impalpable greyness, with nothing underfoot, with nothing around, without spectators, without clamour, without glory, without the great desire of victory, without the great fear of defeat, in a sickly atmosphere of tepid scepticism, without much belief in your own right, and still less in that of your adversary. If such is the form of ultimate wisdom, then life is a greater riddle than some of us think it to be. (Conrad 117-118)

With that, the hero of the novel has overcome the obstacles that Campbell considers the basic elements of the archetypal hero’s journey - he has uncovered the secrets of the universe. The novel follows the structure of this ancient mythical archetype: the hero has crossed the sea (on his journey to Africa), which represents his leaving behind of the world as he knows it. He enters a new, miraculous world of the African jungle which is full of obstacles, where he faces many dangers. After overcoming the challenges, he faces the final one - falling into darkness like Kurtz, relinquishing civilization and morality, and if he is successful in conquering it (which he is, but it

leaves him deeply disturbed), he reaches the goal of his journey, where he is rewarded.

Still, Conrad's novel stands in conflict with such a structural pattern: following the modern spirit, Conrad partially inverted the myth. Kurtz, whose soul has disintegrated into the primal chaos, represents the "mystical Goddess" who reveals the ultimate mystery. At the destination of his journey, Conrad's hero gains the knowledge that the formless energies constitute the foundation of being. Contrary to the pattern of the ancient myth, the hero's knowledge does not bring about a renewal of life, but rather stays locked within him. The final opposition, between life and death is observed from a different point of view - death is not his great mystery, but a grey nothingness which follows life; whereas life is far more complicated than people perceive it to be (Sepčić 151).

Conclusion

The basic topic of nearly every one of Conrad's works is the vulnerability of ethics in a person thrown into a vortex of extreme situations. Many theorists¹ have noted that the Romantic and exotic landscape of his stories and novels functions as a symbolic echo of the destructive elements that are present, but are often unrecognisable, within the nature of humans themselves. The virtues constituted as the basis of human existence: honour, solidarity, loyalty, and honesty are torn asunder in his works and undergo a torturous re-examination and internal conflict that threatens to destroy the integrity of his protagonists. The result of such a conflict is very often the moral defeat of the protagonist, which leaves him with no choice other than committing suicide.

In *Heart of Darkness*, the pessimism pervading his other works is present as well.

Through Marlow's journey, which we can symbolically observe as the journey of ancient heroes, through a landscape and scenery identifiable with the landscape usually found in dreams, Conrad has presented a modernised version of the archetypal hero's journey at whose end the protagonist finds knowledge that complicates his life: in every man there is an impenetrable darkness and a devouring chaos that are the true image of reality; everything around us are illusions and lies that we tell ourselves and believe in them because we are part of civilization.

¹ Like Viktor Borisov, in his 1997 book *Joseph Conrad v Rossii*, or Ruth M. Stauffer in *Joseph Conrad: His Romantic Realism* (1922).

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