Heart Of Darkness: Characters' Analysis

Heart of Darkness is a literary masterpiece composed by Joseph Conrad that embodied the essence of light contrasting with darkness. When one is separated from their home and culture, the darkness of their heart can often lead to displays of greed, madness, distortion, and evil. This allegory and the archetypal journey were faced by two men named Marlow and Kurtz that complete multiple excursions that parallel those to be a hero but, they face various barriers within the Congo River to ultimately show how they are able to resist the darkness within themselves. It is clear that both Marlow and Kurtz are the protagonists of the novella; however, when placed in such foreign land only one seems to lose their moral and noble attributes almost entirely.

In Heart of Darkness, the readers are introduced to Marlow, a sailor who travels all the way up the Congo River to meet Kurtz, an idealistic man of great abilities. But as he continues to travel further into these lands he experiences the widespread inefficiency and brutality in the company’s stations. The natives have been forced to work and suffer terribly from the treatment of the company’s agents. Despite this Marlow ultimately does nothing to improve the situation. Yet, Marlow serves as the protagonist or the more prominent hero of Heart of Darkness. This is due to the fact that Marlow has a gift of expression and has a strong constitution. After witnessing such terrible acts, he had no intention of joining this evil, this invasion or this exploitation of the land and the people. Marlow was able to focus on what he needed to do and did not let his own disgust with the situation idle him. He becomes the hero of the novella because he was able to retain such a positive attitude throughout the journey for the sake of his own sanity. By being able to keep this connection with his civilized self so strong he was able to not be consumed by the darkness that the Congo withheld.

Based on the definition of a hero, Kurtz is the ideal portrayal of one based on his effect over others, but due to his savage-like actions, he does not possess the inner attributes of a hero. Kurtz has allowed himself to be consumed by the darkness of the Congo and it led him to be a barbaric leader who forces the system of colonialism upon the natives of the land. Kurtz was the other protagonist or in other words the anti-hero, which was shown through his change of character while being in the Congo. Joseph Conrad’s use of imagery in the novella really shaped how Kurtz's character was slowly diminishing as time passed when he began showing savage like actions against the natives and soon it reveals how he had focused on attaining power, but at that cost losing his moral values and self-identity. Kurtz’s development into an inhumane brute, affirms his evil nature fueled by his greed for power. To further prove this Marlow states in the novella:

...You should have heard him say, 'My ivory.' Oh, yes, I heard him. 'My Intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my -- ' everything belonged to him. It made me hold my breath in expectation of hearing the wilderness burst into a prodigious peal of laughter that would shake the fixed stars in their places. Everything belonged to him - but that was a trifle. The thing was to know what he belonged to, how many powers of darkness claimed him for their own. That was the reflection that made you creepy all over. It was impossible — it was not good for one either - trying to imagine. He had taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land - I mean literally.

Kurtz is lost in a world to which normal standards do not apply. Kurtz’s lust towards power and control over land and ivory ultimately expands the desire and expansion of darkness in the heart to those who once had good intentions.

Thus, it can be concluded that Marlow is the ethical hero of the novella. Marlow is the hero of the novella not due to his status as the protagonist of the book but because of the profundity of his character and just how viable he is at conveying Conrad’s messages. His believable flaws and personality allow Marlow to connect personally with the readers and through his speculations that provoke self-reexamination. Marlow was the one who was able to escape the Congo river and although he does succumb to the darkness of it, he does not let it take full control of him as Kurtz had. Kurtz was a good man but even the most “great” of men are attracted to power. When it comes to Kurtz, he turned out to be narrow-minded and kept his focus solely on wealth and power and failed to recognize just how animalistic he had become. Kurtz doesn't appear to exhibit the qualities that allowed Marlow to prevail in the end. Indeed, Kurtz had grand insight, numerous great ideas, and initially very good intentions. However, he lacks the integrity to keep his brilliant mind from being invaded by the heart of darkness.