Heart Of Darkness: Contrast Of Darkness And Light

In Heart of Darkness, a novel written by Joseph Conrad, the characters are forced into a web of darkness and evil as they enter the Congo. However, the Congo itself is not the true evil, but the darkness instead lies within the hearts of mankind. Conrad uses this theme of light and darkness to contrast the civilized European world with the uncivilized African world in Heart of Darkness.

In Heart of Darkness, Conrad uses light and dark to symbolize good and evil. 'It is whiteness that is truly sinister and evil, for it symbolizes the immoral scramble for loot by the unscrupulous and unfeeling Belgian traders in ivory and human flesh; the whiteness of ivory is also contrasted with the blackness of the natives whose lives must be destroyed for its sake' (Gillon 25). In other words, there is a perversion of light and dark and what they represent. The characteristic of ivory is its colour of white, but rather thaen being associated with purity and all that it is good, it represents greed and the demise of the characters due to the trade in ivory. This is perhaps epitomized with the black slave boy who has white pears placed around his neck. As well as the obvious difference between the white and black, we can perhaps see how the boy is trapped beneath and within white greed.

Marlow's use of a modern city is the first example of what he considers civilized and more importantly, uncivilized. Marlow begins by speaking of the occupants of the boat. He explains that the owner of the boat is an accountant and a lawyer. This gives the idea of what might be considered civilized. He talks about the lights that are reflected in the water. This also creates the idea that he considers himself and the passengers of the boat to be civilized. The fact that these lights, which represent good, emanate from a great civilization. However, he ponders the thought that 'this also has been one of the dark places of the earth'(Conrad 29). By this he explains he means that the Romans, who were considered to be civilized, once came to conquer the wild, untamed Isles nineteen hundred years ago. These contrasts work within the reality of what is considered civilized and uncivilized. The light representing civilization or the civilized side of the world and the dark representing the uncivilized side of the world. Throughout the book, there are several references to these two contrasts, black and white have the unusual connotations of evil and good.

Throughout the remainder of the story there are many more examples of how the blacks, the uncivilized savages contrast with the whites, the civilized Europeans. Many of them become evident in the struggle Marlow faces in trying to reach Kurtz. Marlow speaks of the 'wild yelling, hand clapping, feet stomping, bodies swaying, eyes rolling, and beating drums' in his voyage to reach Kurtz. He also discusses a conversation he overhears while on the deck of his boat 'one evening.' The two men he overhears talk about the dark images of death, he says the native had a 'short flipper' arm that 'took in the forest, the creek, the mud, and the river-seemed to beckon with a dishonoring flourish before the sunlit face of the land,' he goes on to say that it 'lurked with death and hidden evil, to the profound darkness of the heart.' This statement reinforces the idea of dark being uncivilized, yet at the same time, the darkness associated with the natives is challenged as not being evil, the appearance of evil is in opposition to the actual evil (in the white colonialists). Marlow overhears how the savages harbor these great misfortunes to the white men. This passage also reflects the idea of a civilized and uncivilized

people. The heart of darkness is referring to the natives and their home, the Congo.

In Heart of Darkness, there is a real contrast between what is light and what is dark. These contrasts work within a reality of civilized and uncivilized. Clearly, the title Heart of Darkness is a direct reference to the contrast of darkness and light in the characters of Kurtz and Marlow, the overall mood of the story, and the various settings throughout.