

## CONRAD'S *HEART OF DARKNESS*: A FOURTH WAY PERSPECTIVE

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### **Abstract :**

*Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness is widely recognized as a psychological and philosophical inquiry into human nature, morality, and the limits of self-awareness. The novel follows Charles Marlow, a steamboat captain tasked with sailing along the Congo River in search of the enigmatic ivory trader Kurtz, whose unrestrained descent into savagery has made him both a legend and a threat to the colonial order. As Marlow ventures deeper into the Congo, he undergoes a psychological transformation, and confronts the brutal reality of imperialism and the fragility of human consciousness. His journey ultimately raises deep questions about self-awareness, free will, and the darkness that resides within human nature.*

*The philosophical dimensions of Conrad's novel can be further illuminated through the perspective of the Fourth Way, a system of self-development propounded by G.I. Gurdjieff and elaborated by P. D. Ouspensky. Unlike traditional religious or spiritual paths, the Fourth Way emphasizes self-knowledge and inner transformation while remaining engaged in everyday life. Ouspensky argues that most human beings exist in a state of "waking sleep," functioning as machines governed by external influences rather than conscious choice. The system outlines the four states of consciousness, the idea of man as a machine, the multiplicity of selves within man, the centres of human functioning, and the various types of man. Applying this framework to Heart of Darkness allows for a deeper understanding of Marlow's existential crisis and Kurtz's tragic downfall.*

**Key Words:** Conrad; Fourth Way; Heart of Darkness; Ouspensky

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### **Joseph Conrad and Heart of Darkness :**

Joseph Conrad, born in 1857 in present day Ukraine (then part of the Russian Empire), was a Polish-British novelist renowned for his exploration of existential themes, moral ambiguity, and the psychological depths of his characters. Before becoming a writer, Conrad spent nearly two decades as a sailor, an experience that greatly influenced his literary work. His time in the Belgian Congo in 1890, where he worked as a steamboat captain for a trading company, provided the inspiration for *Heart of Darkness* (Meyers 64). Although English was not his native language, Conrad mastered it and produced some of the most enduring works of modernist literature like *Lord Jim*, *Nostromo*, and *The Secret Agent*. His writing style is characterized by a deep psychological realism, intricate narrative structures, and a focus on the moral dilemmas faced by human beings in extreme situations.

Originally published in three instalments in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1899, *Heart of Darkness* was later included in the 1902 book *Youth: A Narrative and Two Other Stories*. The novella was partly autobiographical, drawing on Conrad's firsthand experiences in the Congo Free State, which was under the brutal rule of King Leopold II of Belgium. During his time there, Conrad witnessed the horrors of European exploitation, which left a lasting impression on him and informed the novel's critique of imperialism (Hawkins 79). Upon its initial publication, *Heart of Darkness* received mixed reviews. Some contemporary critics praised its evocative prose and its haunting depiction of human depravity. Notably, Ford Madox Ford lauded Conrad's ability to capture the psychological complexities of imperialism, calling it "one of the finest tales of our time" (117). Others criticized its portrayal of Africa and its people, a debate that remains relevant in modern literary discourse. The Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe famously condemned the novel in his 1975 essay *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness*, arguing that Conrad's depiction of Africans reduced them to mere symbols rather than fully realized human beings (10).

Despite its controversial aspects, *Heart of Darkness* has become one of the most studied and analysed works in English literature. Twentieth-century critics, particularly those influenced by psychoanalysis and existential philosophy, have interpreted the novel as an exploration of the human subconscious, the fragility of identity, and the moral corruption that power engenders (Bloom 45). It has also been examined through postcolonial theory, feminist criticism, and deconstructionist perspectives. This makes it a text of enduring complexity and relevance. Through its continued presence in academic discourse and popular culture, *Heart of Darkness* remains a cornerstone of modernist literature and a powerful exploration of the human psyche. The tenets of the Fourth Way offer a convincing framework for analysing the novel.

### **The Fourth Way Philosophy :**

The Fourth Way is a system of spiritual and psychological development introduced by the Armenian-Greek mystic G.I. Gurdjieff in the early 20th century and later elaborated by his disciple P.D. Ouspensky in *In Search of the Miraculous*. Unlike the traditional religious/spiritual paths—such as devotion, meditation, rituals, yogic discipline, and study of scriptures—which require withdrawal from society or exclusive dedication to a singular aspect of human experience, the Fourth Way insists that spiritual development must take place within the conditions of daily life. Gurdjieff and Ouspensky taught that most people exist in a state of "waking sleep," living mechanically and reacting unconsciously to external stimuli. They introduced several key concepts to guide individuals towards higher consciousness. Among these are the four states of consciousness, which include sleep, waking sleep, self-consciousness, and objective consciousness. Most people, they argued, never progress beyond waking sleep and remain trapped in habitual patterns, mistaking conditioned responses for genuine awareness.

Another central idea is that human beings are not unified but rather consist of multiple conflicting selves, each representing diverse desires, impulses, and emotional reactions. These fragmented selves create internal contradictions further preventing individuals from achieving true self-awareness.

These teachings offer a compelling framework for analysing *Heart of Darkness*.

Marlow's psychological fragmentation, his struggle to achieve self-awareness, and his encounter with Kurtz—who represents both the potential for transcendence and the dangers of unchecked power—mirror the challenges described in the Fourth Way. These concepts applied to the novel, provide deeper insight into its exploration of human consciousness, moral corruption, and the quest for self-knowledge.

### **Man as a Machine in *Heart of Darkness* :**

A core principle of the Fourth Way is that human beings are fundamentally mechanical, acting according to ingrained habits and reactions rather than conscious intention. *In Search of the Miraculous* describes this condition as follows:

Man is a machine. All his deeds, actions, words, thoughts, feelings, convictions, opinions, and habits are the result of external influences, external impressions. Out of himself a man cannot produce a single thought, a single action. Everything he says, does, thinks, feels—all this happens. Man cannot discover anything, invent anything. It all happens. (Ouspensky 21)

In *Heart of Darkness*, this mechanistic existence is embodied by the European imperialists, whose rigid adherence to colonial ideology prevents them from questioning their own actions. The Company men—such as the brickmaker, the accountant, and the station manager—operate as cogs in a bureaucratic system that perpetuates exploitation without self-awareness. This unconscious submission to common constructs mirrors the sleep of consciousness, in which individuals function passively, driven by external stimuli rather than inner volition. Conrad captures this condition through the mechanical nature of the colonists' actions, their unquestioning belief in European superiority, and their inability to reflect on the suffering they impose upon others. For instance, the scene describing the grove of dying native labourers paints a harrowing picture of dehumanized routine and mechanized cruelty:

Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees, leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair. ... They were dying slowly—it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now—nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation. (Conrad 59)

Here, the labourers are reduced to shadows, their suffering ignored by the Europeans who continue their work as though they were mere parts of a vast imperial machine. Their fate embodies the inhumanity of a world governed by mechanical existence, where individuals act as cogs in a system devoid of compassion.

Similarly, the Accountant—whom Marlow encounters early in his journey—is described in terms that emphasize the robotic nature of colonial bureaucracy:

I saw a high starched collar, white cuffs, a light alpaca jacket, snowy trousers, a clear silk tie, and varnished boots. No hat. Hair parted, brushed, oiled, under a green-lined parasol held in a big white hand. ... I shook hands with this miracle, and I learned he was the Company's chief accountant; and that all the bookkeeping was done at this station. (Conrad 44)

The Accountant's obsessive concern for maintaining order in his records, despite the

surrounding human suffering, exemplifies the trance-like state of mechanical existence. His meticulous attire and unwavering focus on numbers reflect the Fourth Way notion that people can function with complete efficiency while remaining spiritually asleep—disconnected from their deeper humanity. Ouspensky, in *The Psychology of Man's Possible Evolution*, describes how individuals live in sleep: “All the absurdities and all the contradictions of people, and of human life in general, become explained when we realise that people live in sleep, do everything in sleep, and do not know that they are asleep” (26). Just as the colonists mindlessly follow imperial doctrine without questioning their moral responsibility, in this sense, the mechanical nature of the European colonists in *Heart of Darkness* serves as a literary manifestation of the psychological sleep described by the Fourth Way.

Marlow, in contrast, demonstrates an emerging awareness of this phenomenon. Unlike his fellow Europeans, he questions the motivations behind imperial conquest and begins to recognize its moral vacuity. His journey upriver becomes a metaphor for an inward confrontation with illusion that mirrors the Fourth Way idea that an individual must first perceive their own mechanical nature before any meaningful transformation can occur. However, despite this growing awareness, Marlow remains trapped between sleep and wakefulness, never fully committing to the true self-transformation.

### **Marlow's Fragmented Identity :**

Another fundamental concept of the Fourth Way is that human beings lack a single, unified self. Instead, they are composed of numerous conflicting “I’s” that arise and dissipate based on external stimuli. As Ouspensky explains “Man has no individuality. He has no single, big I. Man is divided into a multiplicity of small I's.” (In Search of the Miraculous 67). Marlow's psychological turmoil throughout the novel exemplifies this fragmentation. He oscillates between different identities: the loyal Company man, the detached observer, the fascinated disciple of Kurtz, and the disillusioned critic of imperialism. These conflicting selves battle for dominance and reflect his internal struggle to reconcile his experiences with his prior worldview. His contradictory feelings about Kurtz, simultaneously admiring and condemning him. “No, I don't like work. I had rather laze about and think of all the fine things that can be done. I don't like work—no man does—but I like what is in the work—the chance to find yourself. Your own reality—for yourself, not for others—what no other man can ever know” (Conrad 74). He is both repelled by and drawn to his work, unable to fully detach from the imperialist machine even as he critiques it. His fragmented self reflects Ouspensky's claim that without conscious effort, individuals remain at the mercy of competing “I's,” without being able to attain true self-mastery.

### **The Four States of Consciousness :**

The Fourth Way identifies four states of consciousness: sleep, waking sleep, self-consciousness, and objective consciousness. Majority of humans spend their life in the first two states of consciousness. Ouspensky asserts:

Both states of consciousness, sleep and the waking state, are equally subjective. Only by beginning to remember himself does a man really awaken. And then all surrounding life acquires for him a different aspect and a different meaning. He sees that it is the life of sleeping people, a life in sleep. All that men say, all that they do, they say and do in



sleep. All this can have no value whatever. Only awakening and what leads to awakening has a value in reality. (In Search of the Miraculous 143)

Marlow's journey can be interpreted as an attempt to move beyond waking sleep, but he never fully achieves self-consciousness. His exposure to the "heart of darkness" grants him unsettling insight into the hypocrisy and brutality of imperialism, yet he remains unable to transcend the illusions of his civilization. His continued detachment, reluctance to actively intervene, and ultimate return to European society suggest that while he perceives the reality of mechanized existence, he lacks the sustained effort necessary to break free from it. His moment of moral clarity—realizing the hollowness of European ideals and the darkness within human nature—is akin to what Gurdjieff describes as an initial shock of awakening. However, Marlow does not act upon this insight; instead, he retreats into silence. This is most evident in his final conversation with Kurtz's fiancée, where he chooses to withhold the truth about Kurtz's dying words: "The last word he pronounced was—your name" (Conrad 136). By preserving the illusion of Kurtz's noble ideals, Marlow fails to break free from the mechanical world. His partial awakening is ultimately insufficient to bring about true transformation.

### **Types of Humans Embodied in the Novel :**

In the Fourth Way philosophy, human beings are classified into seven categories based on their level of consciousness and self-awareness. "In accordance with this, all the inner and all the outer manifestations of man, all that belongs to man, and all that is created by him, is also divided into seven categories" (Ouspensky 72). These classifications, ranging from the most mechanical to the most enlightened, can be applied to the characters in *Heart of Darkness*, illustrating their varying degrees of awareness, self-mastery, and existential struggle. However, according to the Fourth Way, the humanity has been populated by only the first four types of humans, the later three being the product of hard spiritual practices in special spiritual schools.

The lowest category, Man No. 1, is governed by the instinctive centre and exists primarily on the level of basic survival. In Conrad's novel, the enslaved labourers forced to toil under brutal conditions embody this type. Marlow describes them as "black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom" (Conrad 59). Stripped of autonomy, these individuals are reduced to pure survival, vindicating Ouspensky's description of mechanical existence: "This is the man of the physical body, the man with whom the moving and the instinctive functions constantly outweigh the emotional and the thinking functions" (In Search of the Miraculous 71).

Above this level is Man No. 2, who is dominated by the emotional centre and acts based on passion rather than reason. His religion is "the religion of faith, love, adoration, impulse, enthusiasm, which soon becomes transformed into the religion of persecution, oppression, and extermination of 'heretics' and 'heathens'" (Ouspensky 73). There is Kurtz, in his final stages, exemplifies this type. Once a man of high ideals, he succumbs to emotional excess, surrendering to his lust for power and control. His descent into madness is evident in his final written command: "Exterminate all the brutes!" (Conrad 101). Kurtz's unrestrained emotional state drives him to tyranny and, ultimately, to his own self-destruction.

The third type, Man No. 3, is ruled by the intellectual centre but lacks emotional and instinctual balance. The Chief Accountant at the Outer Station represents this category. He is meticulous in his work, appearing unbothered by the suffering around him. "In the steady buzz

of flies the homeward-bound agent was lying finished and insensible; the other, bent over his books, was making correct entries of perfectly correct transactions; and fifty feet below the doorstep I could see the still treetops of the grove of death” (Conrad 61). Intellectual development without emotional intelligence creates a hollow man, incapable of true understanding. Ouspensky describes the hollowness of the person as: “Men number three, for example, have counted how many times each letter of the Arabic alphabet is repeated in the Koran of Mohammed, and upon this have based a whole system of interpretation of the Koran” (In Search of the Miraculous 72-73).

Marlow, in contrast, represents Man No. 4, the balanced man who begins to integrate the different centres of human functioning. Throughout the novel, he struggles with the moral contradictions of imperialism, questioning its legitimacy while acknowledging his complicity. He recognizes that “the conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much” (Conrad 48). Unlike his peers, Marlow is not wholly mechanical, though he remains trapped by his social conditioning.

The higher levels of human consciousness—Man No. 5, Man No. 6, and Man No. 7—are absent from *Heart of Darkness*. No character in the novel achieves true enlightenment. Even Marlow, who comes closest, ultimately fails to transcend cultural illusions, as seen in his decision to lie to Kurtz’s fiancée about his final words. This absence reinforces Conrad’s pessimistic portrayal of humanity, where the journey toward higher consciousness is fraught with obstacles and often remains incomplete.

#### **Kurtz Usurping by Emotional Centre :**

At the beginning of the novel, Kurtz is described as a man of exceptional talent and promise, embodying European ideals of civilization and enlightenment. He is portrayed as an artist, a poet, and a philosopher, capable of inspiring devotion through his words. He is described as “an emissary of pity, and science, and progress, and devil knows what else” (Conrad 71). Kurtz’s ability to manipulate language and ideology suggests that he once operated primarily through the intellectual centre. However, as Kurtz is given unchecked power in the jungle, his emotional centre takes control turning him into a Man No. 2, and leads him to his descent into savagery. As warned by the Fourth Way, “faith, love, adoration, impulse, enthusiasm” of the emotional man can “soon become transformed into the religion of persecution, oppression, and extermination of heretics and heathens.” Accordingly, Kurtz starts indulging in delusions of grandeur, setting himself up as a demigod among the local inhabitants. Marlow’s description of Kurtz’s camp makes this clear:

They would have been even more impressive, those heads on the stakes, if their faces had not been turned to the house. [...] The start back I had given was really nothing but a movement of surprise. I had expected to see a knob of wood there, you know. I returned deliberately to the first I had seen--and there it was, black, dried, sunken, with closed eyelids,--a head that seemed to sleep at the top of that pole, and, with the shrunken dry lips showing a narrow white line of the teeth, was smiling too, smiling continuously at some endless and jocose dream of that eternal slumber. (Conrad 111).

His once-idealistic mission of spreading European values has transformed into a reign of terror, where he imposes his dominance through sheer cruelty rather than rational

governance. This spuriousness of idealistic aspiration is aptly illustrated by the Gurdjieff's statement:

All these theories about universal peace, about peace conferences, and so on, are again simply laziness and hypocrisy. Men do not want to think about themselves, do not want to work on themselves, but think of how to make other people do what they want. If a sufficient number of people who wanted to stop war really did gather together they would first of all begin by making war upon those who disagreed with them. And it is still more certain that they would make war on people who also want to stop wars but in another way. (Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous* 103-04)

### Conclusion :

Viewing *Heart of Darkness* through the perspective of the Fourth Way deepens our understanding of Conrad's novel as more than a critique of imperialism. Marlow's journey reflects the struggle for self-awareness in a world dominated by mechanical men. Kurtz, once a visionary, succumbs to the lower centres of consciousness, while Marlow, despite his insights, remains constrained by societal illusions. Conrad's novel, read through Fourth Way teachings, serves as a cautionary tale about the fragility of human consciousness and the difficulty of true awakening.

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