

Black and White: Dance Deconstructed

By Jay Meadows, English 483

For my multimedia project, I have chosen to choreograph and perform a dance. The dance is an interpretation of the events of the novella *Heart of Darkness* and includes the characters of Kurtz and the African mistress, both portrayed by myself. There are innumerable ways through which one could interpret this novella, but I think a dance piece is a perfect fit for me for two reasons. First, as a dancer, I am able to express the emotions and feeling I have while exploring a song, or in this case a novella, with my body. Dancing is also one of the most effortless forms of media of communication for me. Second, the novella to me is like a dance. The novella is one long narration by Marlow, as told through the eyes of an unnamed narrator. A dance is itself a narration, and the way that Marlow describes the interactions of Kurtz with the African continent, its people, and the mistress, is exactly what I see a dance to be: evocative, mysterious, and, above all, informative in some way.

While creating the dance, I looked at the novel through the lens of deconstruction theory as defined by Jacques Derrida. The binary of African and European, black and white, is prominent throughout the novella and Derrida's theory of deconstruction shows how the power struggle between Africans and Europeans can be explained by the dissolution of this binary. Through the medium of dance, I prove that Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is an analysis of the binary of black and white and that through the lens of deconstruction, readers are able to see the power dynamic at play in the novel.

The song that I have chosen to use for my dance is Ezio Bosso's "The Sky Seen from

the Moon." The song lends itself to the story I want to tell in that the composer breaks the song up into sections through the use of long sections of rest between verses. Each of these verses is a different part of the dance. I also chose this song because when I listen to it I feel a sense of mystery and exploration, which is exactly the tone of Conrad's novella. As the song begins, the listener hears only one string instrument and after two verses, two string instruments play together. This to me is perfect because the sections show Kurtz exploring, his observation of the Africans, and then his interactions with the African people, particularly the African mistress. The end of the song completely flips the idea of exploration on its head, and as it fades out, listeners are given the chance to understand a sense of struggle and power shifting. This is exactly what happens between Kurtz and the



African people.

I have chosen to utilize the characters of Kurtz and the African mistress for a few simple reasons. First, Kurtz and the African mistress are the most prominent examples of Europeans and Africans in the novel. Kurtz is also the only European character of importance within the novel whom the reader sees after his interactions with the African people. The African mistress is important because she exemplifies the power of the African people. Conrad writes of her, "She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress" (60). No other African character within the novel is described with nearly as much detail as she is and she also has an

obvious relationship with Kurtz. The two are easily an example of the deconstruction of binaries, which is the final reason I have chosen to use these characters.

Derrida's theory of deconstruction has many important qualities. Of the most important of these is that of binaries. The binary most readily seen in *Heart of Darkness* is that of black and white as portrayed through characters of European and African heritage. Traditionally, because of European imperialism, the binary of black and white shows that white dominates black. Conrad deconstructs this commonly seen binary in the novella and shows that black can and often does dominate black and that both Europeans and Africans are affected by the interaction between the races and the deconstruction of this binary. Kurtz goes to the Congo in search of ivory, but when he arrives in Africa, he is enveloped in the culture there and this immersion corrupts his European power. The last thing that Conrad writes about Kurtz while he is alive shows the destruction that Africa has brought to this man, "He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision – he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath: 'The horror! The horror!'" (69). Kurtz then dies. This is only after he has been living and interacting with the Africans in the Congo.

Imperialism's goal is for the mother country to go in and control the people there. In this novella, the opposite happens, thus breaking down the traditional binary. At the end of the novel, the African mistress is left alive and saddened by the passing of her lover Kurtz, and Kurtz is seemingly killed by the vision of the Congo and the atrocities he was forced to enact there as well as the culture he was immersed in.



Where the white traditionally dominates and outlives the black, the white dies and the black is left saddened and changed by the white.

In the dance, I show the above binary in a very simple way. When I am wearing all white, I represent the character of Kurtz. I then don black clothes to represent the African mistress. The third part of the dance shows me in a white top and black pants. This shows the white dominating the black, but I end this movement of the dance by completing a shoulder stand which turns me upside down and puts the black on top of the white, showing the inversion of the binary. I end the dance in all black to show the complete breakdown of the binary and the death of Kurtz.

This dance piece is a simplified look at the effects which the binary of black and white have upon the characters of *Heart of Darkness*. My dance ends with Kurtz dying and the African mistress alive and well, seen by the disappearance of the white clothes by the end. This is my demonstration of the fact that within the novella, Conrad breaks down the traditional white over black binary. The dance is a means through which a different form of communication, literally body language, can communicate quite easily the complexities of binaries, imperialism, and deconstruction. This novella and this dance are a cleverly created insight into the theory of deconstruction put forward by Jacques Derrida.

Works Cited

- Bosso, Ezio. *The Sky Seen from the Moon*. 2013. MP3.
Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. 4th ed. New York: W.W. Norton, 2006. Print.