Up the River with Adorno: The Natural and Supra-Natural in Heart of Darkness

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The intent of this paper is to discuss Heart of Darkness in terms of a natural history drama with a focus on representations of ecology. Understanding the functions of ecology in Heart of Darkness is at the core of our ability to create a discussion of race and colonialism in Conrad's text. In Heart of Darkness, the distinctions between exploiter and exploited are decided not by race but through a more fundamental ecological division. A reading of Heart of Darkness in the basis of racial divisions can be greatly augmented by a parallel reading of the text in terms of ecological classification. This division subsumes race; what is important is not racial divisions, but whether one is aligned with nature or distinct from nature. This dividing of the world acted as a justification for exploitation, with race acting as an indicator of a position within the natural/evil division. To be aligned with nature is to exist as a natural resource, while separation from the natural world signals a position of authority over the natural, with the ability to manipulate and harvest "natural" resources. My study of Heart of Darkness will be an investigation of 18th Century Enlightenment relationships to nature as manifest in a 19th Century novel. In investigating the variations of the civilized/natural relationship, it is necessary to include a critique of the philosophy that enabled the ideology of appropriation and domination. Utilizing Theodore Adorno's critique of the Enlightenment, I will investigate the use of Enlightenment philosophy as a justification and tool for the practices of colonialism.