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On Metaphor in “Heart of Darkness”

In this paper, I will expand upon my interpretation of Charles Marlow’s comparison to the Buddha. Specifically, I am arguing that Marlow is likened to the Buddha because he can be shown discovering the Four Noble Truths during his expedition in the Congos. In addition to discussing this specific interpretation, I will also analyze this interpretation from a philosophical standpoint, discussing which account of metaphor I believe this interpretation to come from according to the standard encyclopedia of philosophy, as well as the tenor and vehicle of this metaphor, as well as discussing the thought process that led me to this interpretation.

Before we discuss the interpretation of the metaphor itself, I would like to briefly discuss the tenor/vehicle of this metaphor, as well as how I came to this realization. The tenor is the subject of a metaphor, which in this case would be Marlow, as he is the one being compared to the Buddha. The vehicle of this metaphor would then be Buddha himself. As for how I came across this meaning, I decided to analyze this metaphor, as well as the events Marlow goes through in a more literal fashion, taking a look at everything he has gone through in the story, and try to relate it to various things the Buddha himself has done or said. Through looking through the story of the Buddha and the story of Charles Marlow, I was able to come to the interpretation that Charles Marlow is, in a way, literally like the Buddha due to undergoing events similar to Buddha discovering the four noble truths. Both men share a generally similar background in life, that being of wealth, both find groups of people in terrible conditions (Buddha the untouchables and Marlow the natives), and both eventually find a way to live a peaceful life, the main difference being that Buddha suffered with these people whereas Marlow suffered with these people. Buddha’s account was based on experience whereas Marlows was based on observation.

Given my more literal interpretation of this metaphor, I think that brute force accounts fit my interpretation of this metaphor best. This is because brute force accounts take a little bit more of a literal meaning, the Standard Encyclopedia of Philosophy can be quoted as saying “no words go missing and neither words nor speakers are induced to mean anything out of the ordinary.”, as well as because of the “framing effect” (Richard Moran, 1989). Viewers are made to view the subject of the metaphor in a new way, this is done by placing the first subject close to a second, and what makes something metaphorical is that this framing effect is induced.

The first noble truth is the truth of suffering and of its existence in all of our lives. Marlow witnesses the suffering of others first hand during his trip to the Congos. When he first arrives, Marlow is going around the established camp, attempting to gather his bearings, when he witnesses the condition of the natives by the hands of the pilgrims. Upon witnessing a chain-gang of natives, his following remarks include “I could see every rib, the joints of their limbs were like knots in a rope; each had an iron collar on his neck, and all were connected together with a chain whose bights swung between them” (Conrad). Later on, Marlow encounters a group of natives seemingly left to starve to death, describing them as “nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation” (Conrad). These vivid descriptions of the condition of the natives shows that Charles Marlow has indeed realized the truth that suffering is a part of this world.

The second noble truth is the cause of suffering, which the Buddha taught is desire, specifically through greed, ignorance, and hatred, otherwise known as the three roots of evil. All three of these characteristics are clearly seen in the pilgrims, who are the ones causing the suffering of the natives. The Pilgrims have an intense desire for Ivory, a product worth a lot of money. This desire seems to be crossing into the realm of obsession, as Marlow says “The word 'ivory' rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed. You would think they were praying to it.” (Conrad). The pilgrims show a great deal of ignorance regarding their jobs. Two particular examples can be seen in the brickmaker and the general manager. The brickmaker is shown to not be making bricks, supposedly waiting for some sort of special material. The general manager is described as having “no genius for organizing, for initiative, or for order even” (Conrad), with the only possible explanation for his position being that he happened to outlive everyone else. In these two examples, we can see that the staff carrying out this expedition are for the most part, ignorant of the duties of their job. The last of the roots of evil, being hatred, is the easiest to pin down. All of the pilgrims have very clearly shown hatred towards the natives via the harsh treatment and enslavement of them. In addition, the system itself is set up to perpetuate hate. The natives come to despise the colonists for inhumane treatment, and because of this, the colonists grow to hate the natives to an even greater extent, perpetuating the cycle of hate and allowing it to grow. The presence of these three evils leads one to believe that this would be how Marlow would come to the realization of the second truth.

The third noble truth is that there is an end to suffering. Charles Marlow continued on with his life after his experiences in the Congos. Despite the horrible tragedies and the truths of suffering he discovered, he continued to lead a presumably enjoyable and fulfilling life. How would a man who has come to the truths of suffering be capable of leading a happy life if they did not see and end to the suffering? My answer is that you can’t. Charles Marlow realizes that this suffering does in fact end in some way and through some fashion, and as such continues to live his life practicing the fourth noble truth highlighted below.

The final noble truth is the path that leads to the end of suffering. The Buddha reveals that the path to end suffering is through wisdom and living ethically. In our world, this is usually accomplished by following the Eightfold path, which is never touched upon at all in the story. However, this does not mean that Marlow is a man without wisdom. Marlow is shown to be a well traveled and lived man, showing an air of skepticism towards everything he comes across. Most notably being the British empire. While his fellow peers refer to exploreres for the empire as “Knight-Errants” of the sea, Marlow refers to the exploration as “robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale” (Conrad). We see in this quotation that Marlow rejects the traditional ideas of most British citizens at the time, showing that he is not one to blindly follow what information he is given, but rather, is someone who seeks out the truth for himself.

Given this information, I believe that the true reason that Marlow is likened to the Buddha is that Marlow himself goes through several realizations that point to him experiencing events similar to that of the four noble truths of Buddhism.

Work CIted

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