

Degree Project

Bachelor's Thesis

A critique of racism and colonialism in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

A condemnation of European colonialism using symbolism

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Table of contents

Introduction	1
Condemnation of European Colonialism in <i>Heart of Darkness</i>	7
The Use of Symbolism in <i>Heart of Darkness</i>	11
Racism in <i>Heart of Darkness</i>	23
Conclusion	27
Works Cited	28

Introduction

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* was published 1899 and is considered to be one of the great works in English literature. It is a proof that a novella does not have to be lengthy to have literary merit. It is regarded as an attack on imperialism and criticizes immoral treatments of the European colonizers in Africa in the 19th century. Keith Booker states that:

the book deals with issues such as imperialism, capitalism, race, and gender that were very much at the forefront of the turn-of-the century European mind. Conrad's ambivalent treatment of these issues is extremely representative of the way they were treated in any number of European discourses of the time (Booker 217).

Heart of Darkness is quite short, yet captivating, due to the content and the plot of the novella: "Much like Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Heart of Darkness* overwhelms the reader by the power of the story so that one will never feel quite satisfied with their attempts to intellectualize the experience" (Adelman 8). *Heart of Darkness* was written during the time of British imperialism, European colonialism, and excessive exploitation of Africans in the Congo by the Belgians. The British were abusing the Africans in order to extract ivory from the jungle. Throughout the novella, Conrad utters his dislike with, as he calls them in his book, civilized white people exploiting the "savage" black Africans. Conrad uses different literary devices, copious amounts of descriptive language, vivid imagery, and powerful symbolism, the latter of which will be of particular focus in this thesis, in his writing to reveal several messages. The writing style, techniques, structure, and themes in *Heart of Darkness* make this

novella mysterious with a convoluted narrative filled with psychological intricacies. According to Adelman, Conrad's excellence in style is very controversial; some believe that he is a literary genius while others criticize him for being limited, pretentious and vague (Adelman 16). The vagueness is shown through the fact that he leaves it up to the reader to interpret his mysterious enigmas by using different types of symbolism in order to make the reader think and find the deeper meanings. Through the story, characters, and places mentioned in the novella, Conrad reveals the truth of colonialism and its effect on both the whites and blacks.

When the reader reads the story, the plot seems quite uncomplicated. It is presumably a story about Mr. Marlow's expedition on board a steamboat into the African jungle in search of an ivory-trader named Mr. Kurtz. His mission is to find him and bring him back to civilization. On his way to Africa, Marlow faces inefficiency and brutality in the ivory trading company's stations. The native inhabitants of the region have been forced into the company's service, and they suffer a lot from overwork and mistreatment. The cruelty and degradation of the imperial enterprise contrasts dramatically with the impassive and magnificent jungle that surrounds the white man's neighborhoods, making them appear to be tiny islands in the middle of a vast darkness. On their way back to England Mr. Kurtz passes away, uttering his last words "The horror! The horror!" (Conrad 69) in the presence of Marlow who shortly afterwards falls ill and barely survives. As they return to Europe, he goes to see Mr. Kurtz's fiancée who is still mourning and praises him as a paragon of virtue and achievement. She asks Marlow what his last words were, but Marlow cannot bring himself to destroy her illusions with the truth. He tells her that Kurtz's last word was her name.

The novella contains questions about civilization, cultural domination, and human exploitation. It raises questions of prejudice and racism against parts of the world colonized by Europeans in the late 19th century. This has led many postcolonial critics and theorists such as Chinua Achebe, Ian Watt, Hunt Hawkins, Edward W. Said and J. Hiller Millis to respond to the novella with a focus on postcolonial theory and aspects of race. According to Paul Armstrong, there have been different aspects of the novella which have been criticized. He claims that the novella has been considered to be a destructive experience for the reader as it can lead the reader to believe that the novella is anti-colonial and against imperialism. However, he argues that the novella is mainly about an adventure where the ending featuring the woman who idealizes Kurtz's memory acts as a way of signifying just how far the reader has travelled (Armstrong 309). Kurtz's fiancée and her belief in the villain's heroism have also been commented on. Achebe on the other hand, has strongly criticized the novella in his famous critique *An Image of Africa*. He takes a strong stand against Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. He claims that "Conrad was racist and that a novella which so depersonalizes a portion of human race should not be considered a great work of art" (Achebe 176). Achebe also asserts that Conrad's text "ensconces racism and tries intentionally to shroud his racism and pro-colonialism in an adjective-ridden writing style" (Achebe 784). Moreover, he claims that Joseph Conrad has adopted "the role of purveyor of comforting myths" which entails a glorification of Europe, European splendor, and Western standards (Achebe 784). On the other hand, one of the early critics who also brings up the aspect of race is Edward Garnett. He ends his review by stating that Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* offers an "analysis of the deterioration of the white man's morale, when he is let loose from European restraint, and to make trade profits out of the subject races"

(Murfin 99). Conrad responded to this in a letter and wrote “your brave attempt to grapple with the foggishness of *Heart of Darkness*, to explain what I myself tried to shape blindfold, as it were, touched me profoundly” (Murfin 99). This utterance lets the reader understand that the novella is in fact about the immorality of whites in Africa. In addition, Conrad had written to William Blackwood, a Scottish bookseller and publisher, one month before the first part of the novella and said that his idea behind the novella was “the criminality of inefficiency and pure selfishness when tackling the civilizing work in Africa” (Murfin 100).

A historical background of how race and racism was looked upon in 1902 explains why it might be the case that the issue of race was ignored in the early critiques of the novella. The word racism did not exist when Conrad wrote his novella which certainly does not mean that racism itself did not exist. According to Ben Zimmer in his article “The Evolution of *Racism*” in *The Atlantic*, racism and racist are comparatively modern terms:

Racism and *racist* are surprisingly recent additions to the English lexicon. You won’t find those words in the writings of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Beecher Stowe, or Abraham Lincoln. While the Oxford English Dictionary currently dates racism in English to 1903 and racist to 1919, the terms were still rarely used in the early decades of the 20th century. The pioneering civil-rights activist and journalist Ida B. Wells for instance, instead used phrases like race hatred and race prejudice in her memoir, *Crusade for Justice*, which she began writing in 1928 but left unfinished when she died three years later.

(Zimmer 30)

When Conrad wrote his novella, “race-thinking was considered so normal that a word like racism was not needed” (Firchow 234). The first time a word was used with a racist connotation was in 1907. It was the word *racialism* which is defined as the “belief in the superiority of a particular race leading to prejudice and antagonism towards people of other races, esp. those in close proximity who may be felt as a threat to one's cultural and racial integrity or economic well-being” (Firchow 234). The first use of the word *racism* was in 1936, over 10 years after Conrad's death. However, when analysing the symbols used in the book, there is a plentiful number of symbols relating to darkness and light which will be shown later on in this thesis. This thesis will show how Joseph Conrad emphasises the ambiguity between what is good, true, civilized, and humane, and everything that is evil, ambiguous, and uncivilized through the use of symbolism and metaphors related to darkness and light. As mentioned earlier, the word *racism* did not exist at the time the novella was written, however, racism itself did which the analysis of the use of symbolism in the novella will demonstrate. Joseph Conrad showed racism in his novella without using the actual word *racism*.

Heart of Darkness became a set text at different universities in the 1970s. Since that time, questions whether the novella is pro-colonial and racist have been raised. Critics have questioned how Conrad incorporates racist interpretations and insulting characterizations with scenes where Africans suffer under European colonial rule. Critics have also put in question why Conrad did not critique these injustices directly. One critic who focused on this theme is Chinua Achebe. In his *An Image of Africa*, as he claims that Conrad embraced the role of a vendor of comforting myths, he implies a praise of Europe, European grandeur, and Western standards (Achebe 784). Europe is equal to civilization whereas Africa is regarded

as a continent which is savage and not yet developed. Achebe even went so far in his critique that he called Conrad “a bloody racist” (Achebe 788). Even though Achebe’s way of analysing Conrad’s novella supports the idea that it is pro-colonial, other literary critics continued to discuss the theme of racism and the critique of colonialism. Achebe’s critique was answered by several critics who defended the novella against Achebe’s accusations and critique and emphasized its symbolic features. Curtler, and Firchow have, rather persuasively, through long summaries of racist definitions, argued that Conrad’s text cannot be classified as racist or pro-colonial.

A postcolonial critic such as Edward Said has also analysed Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and does not agree with Achebe’s interpretation of the novella. He thinks that Conrad cannot imagine the Africans as living free from colonialism. Brantlinger on the other hand, shares Achebe’s interpretation of the novella and thinks that the novella is full of stereotypes and hidden assumptions that originate from a Victorian racist way of thinking and Eurocentric views (Brantlinger 45).

This thesis will investigate and contextualize whether Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* can be regarded as an anti-colonial and anti-racist text at the time of its publication. Hence, based on Conrad’s position on colonialism and the idea of racism in *Heart of Darkness* and in personal letters, journals, and articles published around the same time as the novella was written, this thesis claims that *Heart of Darkness* should be read as an anti-colonial and anti-imperialistic text. As such, this analysis will show that Conrad’s text transmitted, through the use of symbolism, a critique of colonialism and racism. One central perspective and approach in this essay is the consideration of historical contextualization, and the reason why *Heart*

of Darkness in the time it was published was a strong statement against Belgian imperialism and racism.

Condemnation of European Colonialism in *Heart of Darkness*

In order to outline a comprehensible background to *Heart of Darkness* and its appearance in the literary scene, it is important to study historical intertextuality and the contextual relationships in which the novella was written. The structures of a modern international society we know today were getting formed in the nineteenth century. Laws, legislations, and international institutions started to form a community: “a world community based on individual human rights was on the rise” (Haines 35-37). New international regulations with an intricate network of governing boards, commissions, and administrations arose to implement and supervise these functions, and many of these developments created a climate that worked against oppression, slavery, and vassalage. Slavery ended in Great Britain in the 1820s, and the rights of people to be self-governing were progressively becoming more of a reality and not just empty promises or agreements on paper. Nevertheless, at the same time, international imperialism accompanied with authoritarian ideas and anti-democratic views started to increase in the second half of the nineteenth century. (*The abolition of slavery in Britain*) Also, scientific ideas such as Social Darwinism arose and caused strong resentment towards native populations. As social Darwinist rationalizations of inequality gained popularity in the late 1800s, British scholar Sir Francis Galton (a half-cousin of Darwin) launched a new “science” aimed at improving the human race by ridding society of its “undesirables.” He called it eugenics. Galton proposed to better humankind by propagating the British elite. He argued that social institutions such as welfare and mental asylums allowed inferior humans to survive and reproduce at higher levels

than their superior counterparts in Britain's wealthy class. This led to the creation of various reform groups in Great Britain and elsewhere. The Anti-Slavery Society was initiated in the 1820s and worked in different ways throughout the century. It operated a magazine called *The Anti-Slavery Reporter* and published many reports and articles in the 1890s. This was proof that even though many steps had been taken since the ending of slavery in the 1830s, it was still a universal issue. An example of a typical headline would be "An Unspeakable Horror Committed by Europeans in the Name of Civilization" (Brantlinger "Victorians" 68). In 1837, the British government published a blue book which was an annual assembling of colonial administration and statistical reports about colonial Africa. This was followed by the foundation of *the African Protection Society*. In one of its multiple reports, it states: "...the enormous wrongs inflicted on Aborigines by European colonization were condemned" (Grant 70). The African Society was also established in 1900 and with it came a long series of documentation, loud protests against slavery, disfigurement, denunciations, and murder. Conrad made the following statement in 1903:

It is an extraordinary thing that the conscience of Europe which seventy years ago has put down the slave trade on humanitarian grounds tolerates the Congo State today. It is as if the moral clock had been put back many hours. [. . .] The Belgians are worse than the seven plagues of Egypt [...] The fact remains that in 1903, seventy years or so after the abolition of the slave trade [...] there exists in Africa a Congo State, created by the act of European Powers, where ruthless, systematic cruelty towards the blacks is the basis of administration. (Karl, CLJC 96)

This declaration is an exemplary illustration of Conrad's critical attitude towards Belgian colonial affairs in Africa. It is also significant to take into account his summary of the nineteenth Century and the work of the abolition movement, as well as the atrocious conditions under which the native population had to live. The reason for his concerns was a rising awareness of what was happening in the name of civilization in Africa. As Conrad had his own experience in Africa and had witnessed how badly the natives were treated, he was able to verify the authenticity of documented atrocities through personal experience. These atrocities were so severe that, as many sources cite, "exaggeration is not possible" (Brantlinger "Victorians" 72). Roger Casement's critical report of the conditions in the Congo Free State to the Parliament in the latter part of 1903 was repressed. The Belgians even tried to stop him from presenting his evidence and in 1903 they put pressure on the English government not to make his reports public. As a result, Roger Casement contacted Conrad to ask him for help as he was fearing that the English government would give in. According to Hawkins, Conrad gave him his permission to use his writings in both Parliament and the Congo Reform Association.

Late in 1903 British consul Roger Casement returned to England after his investigation of atrocities in the Congo Free State. He set to work on a report for the Foreign Office, but fearing official inaction, he also decided to start a popular movement for reform. In these circumstances, he appealed to his friend Joseph Conrad, whom he had met in the Congo thirteen years earlier. Conrad's response, contained in five letters among the Casement Papers at the National Library of Orieland, is interesting both for its own sake and for the light it casts

on his fiction about the Congo, especially *Heart of Darkness* (1899)
(Hawkins 65)

Heart of Darkness was recognized as being one of the most powerful impacts in the ceasing of King Leopold's private enterprise-the Congo-free state. (Hawkins 80) Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* critiqued King Leopold II's colonial rule and contributed to the launching of an international protest which exposed and put an end to the genocide committed against the Congolese in the name of "civilization" and progress. The campaign eventually forced King Leopold II to quit the Congo Free State in 1908 and unravelled one of the most heinous crimes in history committed under the pretext of civilization.

The different protest groups cited above should not be considered as isolated phenomena. The debatable questions about dominated nations, slavery and Africa were all problems that were followed by well-known authors and significant newspapers. People from the cultural-and political establishment started to give a voice to cynicism and scepticism. The well-educated citizens of the society knew that the African continent was suffering from a horrific and atrocious slave trade. According to Eastley, *The Times* published about 3000 articles about the Congo Free State between 1890 and 1900. (Eastley 91-97) These were mostly published reports from international travellers, special emissaries sent out from the Foreign Office and missionaries. They all reported on the abuse, mistreatment, and exploitation of the native people. However, nothing of Conrad's content of his story would have surprised a British reader in 1899 as Aaron Eastly states. "...everything is contemporaneously familiar" (Eastley 93). The Congo Free State with King Leopold at its head was known for exploited affairs, slavery and many other atrocious acts of a modern state system.

For some modern critics today, it is right to condemn the Eurocentric attempt to conquer other cultures, but that is not how the reality shaped itself for many significant thinkers of the day. In the second half of the nineteenth century, many political quarters from socialists to conservative counterparts advanced the idea of colonialism. In other words, these native people and landmasses should be “part of a greater common good world foundation, and while teaching them thrift, industry, and Christianity, a civilizing idea would start to grow among them” (Brantlinger, “Victorians” 51). Their long history of slavery should be replaced with religious beliefs and the manufacturing of goods for export. In a letter to William Blackwood 1898, the publisher of *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad says that the story would be a message he wanted to transmit. “The title I am thinking of is The Heart of Darkness...The criminality of inefficiency and pure selfishness when tackling the civilizing work in Africa is a justifiable idea” (Blackburn 37). Analysing the title, the reader can understand it in different ways. One way would be the literal meaning of the phrase which refers to the dark continent of Africa, especially the territory known as the Congo which had not yet been explored as the novella was not yet written. So, Conrad is using “darkness” in a symbolic way to refer to the continent. Another way of understanding the title as symbolic is the many descriptions of wild scenery. Reading about the natives, we get an even stronger impression that we are in the midst of darkness and that, in fact, we are in the very heart of darkness. Also, the title could be interpreted as a symbolic description of the cruelty of the Europeans. Their heart is dark and cruel and therefore they are treating the natives the way they are.

The Use of Symbolism in *Heart of Darkness*

According to Cambridge Dictionary, symbolism is “the practice or art of using an object or a word to represent an abstract idea. An action, person, place, word, or object can all have a symbolic meaning” (Cambridge Dictionary). When an author wants to suggest a certain mood or emotion, he/she can use symbolism to suggest it, rather than just deliberately stating it. In literature, symbolism can take many forms including a figure of speech where an object, person, or situation has another meaning other than its literal meaning, and the actions of a character, word, action, or event that has a deeper meaning in the context of the whole story. Also, symbolism in literature can be subtle or obvious and gives literary work more richness and colour and can make the meaning of the work deeper. Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* is a novella which is embedded with complex layering of interconnected and overlapping symbols. Many of the symbols are quite abstract so the reader needs to make an effort to interpret them. Conrad uses symbolism to develop the main theme of the novella by setting certain symbolic elements in opposition to contrasting elements. In order to achieve this, he uses various metaphors. When Joseph Conrad wrote *Heart of Darkness*, he created a novella in which he constantly uses the images of light and dark and utilizes them to shape a vision, which the reader is then able to use to decode the literal and metaphorical meanings of the novella. The setting, symbols, and the characters each contain light and dark images which create the main theme of the novella. The physical setting of the novella also plays a main role in the journey through *Heart of Darkness*. Mr. Charlie Marlow, Conrad’s main protagonist, describes his journey through the Congo River and his search for the European Kurtz who exploits the natives. The first words that the novella starts with are “The Nellie” (Conrad 1), which is the name of the ship that carries five seamen. Among them, only one is given a name;

that is Marlow. All other men are called by their professional positions; the accountant, who is playing with dominoes which are white and black pieces symbolizing light and darkness and made of ivory, foreshadowing the Inner Station and Kurtz's use of ivory. The lawyer, who is very knowledgeable and full of virtues, the director of the companies who is also the captain, and an unnamed man through whom the story of Marlow is told.

Conrad starts to emphasize the contrast between what is considered to be civilized and uncivilized at the beginning of the novella; after Marlow imagines what it was like when the first Romans explored the area, it leads him to tell his own story about travelling to an uncivilized place while waiting for the turn of the tide on the River Thames. For the most part, he wrote from his own experience when he explored the Congo in 1889. The start of the novella is at a time of the sun setting, between day and night, between light and dark and most of the events of the story take place during foggy nights, which symbolizes darkness and gloom. Fog is a sort of corollary to darkness. The first time Conrad mentions the word "fog" in the novella, he writes: "Here and there a military camp lost in a wilderness, like a needle in a bundle of hay – cold, fog, tempests, disease, exile, and death – death sulking in the air, in the water, in the bush" (Conrad 20). In this example, the word "fog" is used with other words with very negative connotations, words like "tempests," "disease," "exile," and "death" (Conrad 20). By doing this, the word fog begins to take on the dark connotations of the other words, making "fog" itself a word to represent darkness and death. He also highlights the meaning of light: it means bright, knowledge, life, and perfection. Darkness on the other hand, and according to Khalil Hassan Nofal in his publication "Darkness in Conrad's Heart of Darkness:

A Linguistic and Stylistic Analysis”, refers to dark, illiteracy, death, ignorance and inability. (Nofal 452)

At the beginning of the novella, the story takes place on the Thames River in London, where Marlow is talking to his fellow shipmates on *the Nellie*. In the beginning the readers are reminded of England’s marine glory; Marlow recalls the great knights, known and unknown, while the shore of the Thames reminds Marlow that they have also been “one of the dark places of the earth.” (Conrad 3). The contrast between the Thames River and the Congo River is also made evident in the novella. The Thames River is described as calm and peaceful. It is viewed as a city of light that is not mysterious. On the other hand, the Congo River is said to be the winding snake because of its dark appearance hence a place of evil. The difference in these two rivers shows us the difference between disciplined and the uncultivated. The disciplined River is smooth therefore symbolizes a society that has been disciplined by law and order. Whereas the Congo mirrors an uncultivated society and so symbolizes ignorance. The story begins in London and moves into the Congo, after he becomes the steamboat captain. Then, the setting is either on the river, or at the trading posts at which Marlow stops along the way. He is fascinated by the Congo River, for him it is like the shape of a snake which symbolizes evil “And the river was there-fascinating-deadly-like a snake.” (Conrad 10). The use of the image of a snake reinforces the theme of darkness in a moral way. This is because some snakes are known to be poisonous, this provokes an image of the Congo being a dangerous place under attack, as snakes are well known predators and because of this the Congo seems inferior, due to the snake which is a metaphor for the Europeans in this context, taking over the Congo. The quote describing the river “resembling an immense snake uncoiled” portrays the snake as being alert and is

slowly taking over the Congo, uncoiling itself as it makes its way, inferring that the Belgium is the snake taking over the Congo (Conrad 7). Marlow continues and says that “the snake has charmed me” (Conrad 8). This quote has a biblical reference to Adam and Eve, when they were tricked by a snake to commit a sin. This story reiterates the point of the snake being cunning, which implies that the Congo would charm and change anyone that comes into contact with it. The biblical reference foreshadows the idea of the Belgium bringing 'light', which represents civilization, knowledge and religion, to the Congo, at the time King Leopold II introduced Christian religion to the uncivilized people of Congo. As shown above there is a contrast between the two settings (rivers) as one resembles darkness and evil and the other resembles light and goodness. Through this statement, we may say that Conrad refers to Europe as a place with light which is representing civilization while Africa is a place of darkness that symbolises savagery. Both rivers symbolize the civilized and the savagery. London is tamed by civil and moral rules which is why it is calm while the uncultivated Africa is cruel and savage. Also, Africa was, to the Europeans, a place of another type of darkness. It was a place of the unknown, danger, disease, and violence.

This journey on the river reflects the darkness and savagery in the novella. It is described as a completely different place from either London or the trading posts. Marlow notes that “Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings.” (Conrad 42) Marlow compares sailing up that river to going back in time. It is almost as though he is making Africa into a version of Europe's past. Marlow is telling this story on a different river, the English Thames, which, it could be argued makes the Thames into a parallel for the Congo. So, if the Thames is like the Congo,

then England is like Africa, which means that white men are like black men, with a huge difference: white men used to be like black men. At the beginning of the novella, Marlow says "and this also has been one of the dark places of the earth" (Conrad 3). This refers to the time where England was a Roman colony. Marlow begins here his only apparent characterization of imperialism. He puts Rome in the position of the civilized and the native islanders in the position of the savage and what truly distinguishes one from another is not any level of civility but power. In this journey on the river, Marlow moves away from civilization and into the unknown, into something that is still unexploited which is highlighted by vegetation that is so thick they cannot see beyond the river itself. The story also takes place at the coast of the jungle where Marlow is closer to the wilderness, then it moves to the station where Marlow hears about Mr. Kurtz for the first time. During the journey, Marlow narrates his life experience and recounts how he obtained his job at this Belgian company thanks to his aunt. He refers to the company's headquarter as "whited sepulchre" (Conrad 9) which is probably a metaphor for Brussels where the Headquarter is located. A sepulchre implies death and confinement, and indeed Europe is the origin of the colonial enterprises that bring death to white men and to their colonial subjects; it is also governed by a set of demonstrated social principles that both enable cruelty, dehumanization, and evil and prohibit change.

The phrase "Whited Sepulchre" is taken from the biblical Book of Matthew, "for you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of bones of the dead and all kinds of filth" (Matthew 23: 27-28). This biblical phrase refers to a hypocrite or a person who employs a façade of goodness to mask his or her true malignancy. The company, like its headquarters, is a similar "whited sepulchre," proclaiming its duty to bring civilization and light to Africa in

the name of Christian charity, but really violating the land and its people in the name of profit and the lust for power. The official mission the company hides behind is its obligation to civilize and enlighten the natives, but in truth the work along the Congo River is purely profit-driven. The company's methods to attain its profits are savage and dehumanizing; they result only in the death and decay of the white men and the black native. Also, Belgian colonies, particularly the Congo, were notorious for the violence perpetuated against the natives. Georgina Rannard and Eve Webster wrote about those atrocities in their article in BBC News *Leopold II: Belgium 'wakes up' to its bloody colonial past*:

Civilisation was at the core of Leopold II's pitch to European leaders in 1885 when they sliced up and allocated territories in what became known as the Scramble for Africa.

He promised a humanitarian and philanthropic mission that would improve the lives of Africans. In return European leaders, gathered at the Berlin Conference, granted him 2m sq km (770,000 sq miles) to forge a personal colony where he was free to do as he liked. He called it Congo Free State.

It quickly became a brutal, exploitative regime that relied on forced labour to cultivate and trade rubber, ivory and minerals. In one, a man sits on a low platform looking at a dismembered small foot and small hand. They belonged to his five-year-old daughter, who was later killed when her village did not produce sufficient rubber. She was not unique - chopping off the limbs of enslaved Congolese was a routine form of retribution when Leopold II's quotas were not met.

(Rannard & Webster, 2020)

For decades, particularly in the interwar period, many Belgians applauded king Leopold II for ending slavery and bringing civilization to Central Africa, however the truth is that the Congolese population suffered killings, mutilations, kidnappings, cruel beatings and diseases. Unfortunately, the Belgians had turned a blind eye on the atrocities that King Leopold II's colonial regime committed in the area.

When Marlow arrived at the office, the first persons he met were two women knitting black wool. These women, even though they appear briefly, are important in their symbolic meaning as they represent the mythological Fates. Fothergill notes that the two women not only resemble the Sybil in Virgil's *The Aeneid*, who can look into the future and foresee what will happen, they are also similar to the spinners in old Greek mythology. They are associated with fate and are therefore called Fates (Conrad 31). These spinners also appear in Norse mythology as Nornorna. These three female spinners, named Clotho/Urd, Lachesis/Skuld and Atropos/Verdandi have the same function: they control human fate. The sisters spend their time knitting threads of human lives; the first knits the wool, the second measures it, and the third cuts the thread. Marlow refers to them as the guards of the "door of Darkness" meaning hell and destruction as for Conrad the company stands for destruction and using bestial methods in Africa (Conrad 11). Also, the colour of the wool (black) has a great meaning as it may be associated with the natives on whose destruction and exploitation the company is based. The black wool in this context also symbolises the thread of life and foreshadows the rough journey Marlow is about to make as the two women knitting black wool advocate the Fates of Greek mythology; like these goddesses, the company is knitting the destiny of the Africans, represented by the black wool. The company, therefore, plays God with the lives of the Africans, deciding who in the Congo will live or die. According

to Bergenholtz, Conrad had an intricate reason for this allusion, which involves Marlow and his morality. She begins by asking an obvious question: if Conrad/Marlow is supposed to allude to Norse and Greek myth, why does he include only two of the three women in "*Heart of Darkness*"? In her article, Bergenholtz mentions the critic Frederick R. Karl, who has studied this section of the novella more closely. He claims that if Conrad had used the third Fate, Atropos/Verdandi, as well, it would have meant that Marlow was about to die, since she is the one who cuts the thread of life.

With his first step into the grove at the Outer Station, Marlow has a feeling that he has stepped into "the gloomy circle of some Inferno [...] rushing noises filled the mournful stillness of the grove." (Conrad 19). Marlow's horror at the grove suggests that the true evils of this colonial enterprise are dehumanization and death. "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 the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair" (Conrad 19). Marlow exemplifies the natives as unearthly creatures that have been abandoned from society. It has been accepted that they do not deserve to live like regular human beings. They must live in "abandonment and despair" (Conrad 19) because they are criminals. Marlow depicts them as slowly rising out of the earth as if they were horrid creatures that only come out in the darkness because no one can bear to see them in the daytime. In sharp contrast to these starved, deprived, wretched, shabby natives, the company's chief accountant is luxuriously dressed. "I saw a high starched collar, white cuffs, a light alpaca jacket, snowy trousers, clear necktie, and vanished boots" (Conrad 20). He teaches one of the native women to take care of his linen, though she dislikes the work. In effect, he has made a slave of the woman, which indicates

the hypocrisy of the imperialism and the inhumane and brutal treatment of the natives by the whites, the whites who should represent good and civilized manners coming from Europe, the place of light.

Another way Conrad stresses the contrast between what is good, and evil is through another important character in the novella, Mr. Kurtz. He is a tyrant, an embodiment of Europe, and an assault on European values. These contradictory elements make Kurtz fascinating to Marlow and threatening to the company. Kurtz travelled to Africa to complete great acts of “humanizing, improving and instructing” (Conrad 41). However, once he tasted the power he could attain, he abandoned his philanthropic ideals and made himself a god to the natives at the inner station. He is a dangerous man because he embodies the company’s lies about having humanistic intentions in the Congo. He is exporting more ivory than all other stations put together and that is only because he uses absolute force and unsound methods. On the other hand, Kurtz is only doing what the company wants and refuses to hide it. He epitomizes the greed and lust of the Europeans in the Congo.

As Marlow is searching for Kurtz and trying to meet him, he first meets the brick-maker, and accompanies the man back to his quarters. He notices a painting on the wall, of a blindfolded woman with a lighted torch. When he asks about it, the brick-maker reveals that it is Kurtz’s work. On the one hand, this painting may symbolize its creator. Like the blindfolded woman, Kurtz once wanted to bring the light of civilization and progress to the dark continent. (This explains the torch coming out of the darkness.) Throughout artwork, the personification of ‘justice’ is usually seen as a blindfolded woman carrying scales. However, in Kurtz’s painting, the woman is not carrying scales, but instead a torch, surrounded by a black background. Conrad is using the classical image of ‘Lady Justice’ to represent the

West, bringing the light of civilization, represented by the torch, to the dark continent of Africa, where she will enlighten the savages of the continent. At the end of his life, however, Kurtz changes his position, and this is apparent when Marlow reads a handwritten line in one of Kurtz's reports urging, "Exterminate all the brutes!" (Conrad 65) Therefore, according to the painting, Europe puts on a show of bringing 'light', but this light ultimately reveals an evil appearance, which marks the woman's face. Here, Conrad foreshadows what Kurtz will be like when Marlow meets him: a man who once held high ideals about bringing justice and light to the Congo, but who became evil once he arrived there.

Marlow's search for Kurtz is finally over. Kurtz had surrendered to the darkness within, becoming a savage. Further hints of Kurtz' dark nature are shown when Marlow discovers that on the ground of Kurtz' station he had set decapitated human heads onto stakes. A mountain of shiny white ivory horns set in the middle of the grounds. The symbolism of the white ivory and the darkness enveloping everything around represents the civilized Kurtz, who once was a sane ivory trader, surrendering to the darkness and the greed. Additionally, through his contact with Kurtz, Marlow realizes how much evil lies in the heart of human nature. When Marlow first learns of Kurtz's activities in the jungle, he associates Kurtz's moral downfall or madness to his lack of interaction with civilization. Marlow blames the dark, mysterious force of the jungle for Kurtz's actions. At this point in the novella, Marlow regards savagery as a vice having absconded with nature. "Never, never before, did this land, this river, this jungle, the very arch of this blazing sky, appear to me so hopeless and so dark, so impenetrable to human thought, so pitiless to human weakness." (Conrad 72) This quote shows Marlow's realization regarding what was becoming of them.

Nature is described as the relentless force that is in a way getting revenge on the colonizers for their inhumane savagery by releasing its own savagery upon them. Nature is described as “pitiless to human weakness”. In this case the Africans are not the weaker group though they are mistreated by the imperialists. Conrad uses nature to show the colonizers as the weaker group. Finally, he becomes aware that the African jungle is not responsible for the making of brutal and mad Kurtz, but “all Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz.” (Conrad 64) Progressively, Marlow comes to understand that Kurtz’s madness and brutality reflects the evil that resides in the hearts of all men. The temptation of the grove, the dark side of human nature, has such a strong power over Kurtz that he would rather stay in primitive and savage Africa, free from legal boundaries than to return to civilization. Marlow says of Kurtz:

For the wilderness had patted him on the head, and behold, it was like a ball- an ivory ball; it had caressed him, and -lo!-he had withered; it had taken him, loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation (Conrad 62).

The human heads impaled on Kurtz's fence posts bear a grotesque resemblance to the shrunken ivory ball Kurtz's own head has become, vividly implicating him in the savagery he has embraced as exploiter and as God.

Towards the end of the story, Kurtz’ death is the epiphany of symbolism as his death, in my opinion, symbolizes the death of the illusion the Belgian trading company paints of their actions in the Congo. Marlow enters Kurtz’ cabin with a

burning candle, a producer of light, as he is furious about his anticipated death. The light from the candle falls short of Kurtz' eyes as he cries, "the horror! The horror!" (Conrad 101) Marlow soon afterwards blows out the flame and leaves the cabin with Kurtz to die in the darkness. The light from the candle's flame symbolizes the release of the final thread of sanity Kurtz was holding on to. Kurtz had become a barbarian; he had become a savage.

Through the experience of going deep into the Congo River, Marlow not only discovers the ambiguity and obscurity of the evil and brutality of imperialism but also finds the evil side of human nature. The whites go to Africa in the name of civilizing the savage people there. However, once they themselves break away from the constraints of civilization, they often give in to the evil side of human nature. Kurtz's cannibalistic brutality exists in the sunshine. But what is more horrible is the intangible evil inside those civilized pilgrims. The "whited sepulchre", Brussels, which represents the civilized world, is beautiful and splendid only on the outside, but inside it is full of hypocrisy and evil (Conrad 55). The dark grove, on the one hand, suggests the primitiveness and savagery of Africans. On the other, it stands for a human nature whose corruption is shown clearly once it is unbound by the standards of white society. The fog symbolizes the ambiguity in which people who journey into the African jungle are plunged. Through these symbols, Conrad shows the hypocrisy of imperialism, and the evil side of human nature which is brought out when men are less influenced by societal controls.

Racism in *Heart of Darkness*

Heart of Darkness depicts black Africans during the 19th century who suffered from the racist attitudes of imperialist powers, which took their land, their wealth and treated them as slaves. As shown in the previous section, darkness is

everywhere in Joseph Conrad's novella, and it is considered as the most powerful sign of racism and imperialism in Africa in general and Congo in particular. When Marlow went deeper and deeper into the Congo, he started to discover the greed and horror and the abuses and hypocrisy of the imperial system and imperialists who were interested in money, land and power. One of the central issues that arise from *Heart of Darkness* is the colonialist prejudices used to misrepresent the Africans. Though Conrad was not himself responsible for the racist westernised image of Africa, his story maintains the damaging stereotyping of native people. By depicting them as bestialised, barbaric, primitive and uncivilised, he explores issues of race through the lens of an authorial European representation; Conrad's use of myths and metaphors that supported the colonial subjugation of African people on the coloniser's assumption that these people were racially inferior. However, Conrad was writing at a time when the historical representation of Africans had always been a subject to racism. According to Britannica, "a number of 18th-century political and intellectual leaders began publicly to assert that Africans were naturally inferior and that they were indeed best suited for slavery" (Britannica). Also, perhaps Conrad failed to suitably describe Africans because he recognized little of their culture, having primarily spent time with white men during his six months in the African Congo. Additionally, by undermining imperial superiority and giving hellish references to the colonisers, one may contend he is similarly insulting towards the Europeans, and that his exaggerated racism seeks to ridicule Europe's civilising mission and expose the entrenched racist ideals of Victorian imperialists.

Marlow, the central protagonist, and narrator of *Heart of Darkness*, expresses old racist prejudices against the Africans: "They howled and leaped, and

spun, and made horrid faces, but what thrilled you was the thought of their humanity – like yours-the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly.” (Conrad 45). Not only does he deny the Africans a dissimilarity of a name, but he also frees them of normal human behaviour. Marlow devalues them using an insulting and symbolic language, stressing that they imitate animalistic behaviour and have no methods of speech outside of “violent babble” and crude grunts which symbolises their perceived lack of culture, or humanity (Conrad 22). According to Chinua Achebe, these representations call the very humanity of black people into question. When it comes to communication, it is striking that a small number of English syllables are placed into the mouths of one or two Congolese Africans. It is in submitting to the authorial language of the coloniser that Conrad replaces native culture with his own, which he considers superior. It is this theory of an advanced humanity which leads Achebe to accuse Conrad of being “throughgoing racist” for depicting Africa as “the other world”.

The point of my observations should be quite clear by now, namely that Joseph Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist. That this simple truth is glossed over in criticisms of his work is due to the fact that white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely unremarked (Achebe 176).

According to Achebe, Conrad has an obsession with skin colour: he describes a man as being black, having long black legs and long black arms. Achebe mentions a scene in the novella where after Kurtz’ death, the manager's boy is described as putting his “insolent black head in the doorway” (Conrad 69). He further rejects the idea that Conrad is not racist just because he is merely describing and telling what

Marlow thinks and sees. He believes that this idea is ridiculous because there is no alternative reference, and the readers have to take what the characters say as the truth since no one is disputing them. If Conrad wanted to add another layer to the novella he would have done so, Achebe concludes (Achebe 174-177).

Nevertheless, it can be argued that Marlow is a product of a fairly racist era in history. The novella was written during the brutal modern European imperial movement, which was a period of colonial conquest, in which racist discourses remained structured by Empire to legitimize its political ideology of suppression over the Africans. Conrad is writing at a time where it was acceptable to view Africans as different, and by frequently using the words “savage” and “nigger,” he follows the racist sentiments of the day. Consequently, his story which was published in the Blackwood magazine, targets the conservative politics of the second half of the nineteenth century. Also, Conrad mentions in his author’s note that his exaggeration of the savage image had the “purpose of bringing it home to the minds and bosoms of the reader.” (Conrad 10). This admittance of a distorted characteristic account of the natives may explain his savage description of them. He also uses these images to make the setting realistic, emphasising the novella’s grave themes of darkness, and fear of the unknown.

Conrad’s interpretations of the African race also conform to the evolutionary image of Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution. By painting Africans as the prehistoric man, and portraying Marlow’s voyage upriver as “travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world”, Conrad integrates the temporal evolutionary image in *Heart of Darkness*; he suggests that Europeans are at a more superior stage of evolution, since the Africans have not yet emerged from prehistory (Conrad 42).

His repeated animalistic images of the natives put Africans at the low end of the scale: “one of the creatures rose to his hands and knees and went off on all fours towards the river to drink.” (Conrad 44) Connecting with Darwinian ideas, Conrad reduces the Africans into a subspecies between apes and Caucasians through the use of symbolism and metaphors. He is using words such as “creatures” and “went off on all four” which are clearly words referring to animals. The African here is represented as a modern ancestor, an animal. Accordingly, he views the Africans as primitive problems in desperate need of European influence and civilization; an attitude which confirms him as the personification of colonialism. Darwin’s views which had become entrenched in society are used here by Marlow to provide the principal ideological support for imperialism.

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to analyse how and in what way Joseph Conrad’s novella *Heart of Darkness* was a critique of colonialism and racism at the time of its publication using symbolism. As shown, the novella is an effort to shed light on the atrocious treatment of the Africans in Congo by the Europeans at a time when race and racism in their contemporary sense were not yet defined. Conrad tried to defend the Africans and condemn imperialism and the acts of the Europeans in Africa. *Heart of Darkness* is a good example of illustrating and depicting the era of colonialism and the attitude of European colonizers in Africa. Imperialism, colonialism, and racism are core ideas that the novella tackles. It shows how imperialism made the British legalize their bad actions and crimes in Africa. Slavery, and ill-treatment was a very common outcome of their imperialism. They exploited people and their wealth in the name of colonization, as they stated that

their goal is to civilize and educate native Africans. However, they practiced so many cruel activities towards the natives. The thesis has shown how Conrad has used various literary devices, in particular symbolism and metaphors but also by focusing on postcolonial theory and issues of race, to shed light on the atrocious way the natives were treated by the colonials. Conrad also condemned the unusual exploitation of the Congo by King Leopold II. Unlike capital rich imperialism, which could seek long-term development, Leopold's capital-poor imperialism resulted in hasty exploitation of surface resources through forced labour. Conrad's story powerfully demonstrated the special inefficiency and cruelty of such exploitation which makes his novella an anti-colonial one.

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