

Maria Ramos

Romanus Muoneke

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### Imperialism and Colonialism in *Heart of Darkness*

In Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, we are presented with major themes of both imperialism and colonialism. These concepts are strongly seen all throughout, and by analyzing, we can see how the darkness and savagery exploitation was present in Africa. By diving into Conrad's novel, we can observe how he depicts the corruption of colonialism using different characters to accomplish this.<sup>1</sup> Conrad uses Kurtz to represent the entirety of Europe, showing the abuse of imperialism. The colonial powers are acted upon by Kurtz who is a prime authoritarian capitalist, depicting moral corruption. It is clear that imperialism destroyed Africa's normal way of life.

In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow sets out to Africa to traverse the country. The first impression Marlow receives when he arrives, shocks him. He is stunned to find out the natives are being treated like animals. Marlow notices the dim and gloomy ambience he is surrounded with. He observes how the

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<sup>1</sup> Colonialism in "Heart of Darkness" - Owlcation, [owlcation.com/humanities/Critical-Study-about-the-Colonialism-in-Heart-of-Darkness](https://owlcation.com/humanities/Critical-Study-about-the-Colonialism-in-Heart-of-Darkness). Accessed 16 Oct. 2023.

natives are overworked and even starved. Marlow's first glance of Africa is thus not the most pleasant, as he is exposed to the worst effects of colonialism.

Conrad gives an accurate description of what happens with the misuse of imperialism. Firstly, understanding how imperialism and colonialism relate to one another is important.<sup>2</sup> From imperialism, colonialism transpired.

Imperialism is the strategy of controlling and influencing another country. In this way, colonialism was able to occur in order to bring forth political power. The Europeans used this method to gain power over undeveloped territory. This system soon fails and is taken over by the lustful desires of obtaining power and greed. The indicated motive is seen in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* when the Europeans use the natives as simply tools or objects to satisfy their craving of affluence and wealth.<sup>3</sup>

Conrad's depiction of colonialism shows the degradation of moral excellence and ethical standards caused by the European presence in Africa. By imperialism in Africa, both psychological and physical demeaning was shown by the colonizers. <sup>4</sup>Kurtz, for instance, who is recognized as a man of talent, progresses throughout the novel to physical and mental decay because of his tyranny. He progresses so far into the abyss, that he reaches a state of darkness that consumes him, leading him to death. <sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> *Imperialism in Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" - Ignited Minds Journals*, ignited.in/I/a/232102. Accessed 16 Oct. 2023.

<sup>4</sup> *A STUDY OF COLONIALISM IN JOSEPH CONRAD*.  
<https://ijcrt.org/papers/IJCRT1134960.pdf> Accessed 16 Oct. 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

The main drive for colonialism in *Heart of Darkness*, is the pursuit of the ivory used during the ivory trade. The primary motivation of the Europeans is profit. While they have the idea that they are civilizing the natives, The Europeans, are rather, imposing and implementing their own corrupt ways and ideas to them.<sup>6</sup> They overly obsess over the motive of gaining profit, they become exceedingly consumed with the desire of power, wealth, and control. This greatly led to the bringing forth of cultural diffusion as well as the fading of African heritage.

Both imperialism and colonialism in the novel, reveal the decay of human nature. These major themes carry weight to the *Heart of Darkness*. After the fall, human nature has been progressively corrupting. In the novel, consumerism of wealth is strongly shown as extensive corruption. This extortion manifests how fragile man is, even to the point of self destruction.

The use of savagery by Europeans toward the natives with weapons, caused the natives to fear them. This made it easier for the Europeans to establish dominion and power over them.<sup>7</sup> In order to protect their families, the natives thus submitted to the will of the Europeans. The white men were full of self consumption and egotism. Even within their own enterprise, there was competition. For example, the general manager, in one instance in the novel, is overheard by Marlow, plotting against Kurtz. They are all competing between

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> A STUDY OF COLONIALISM IN JOSEPH CONRAD.

<https://ijcrt.org/papers/IJCRT1134960.pdf> Accessed 16 Oct. 2023.

each other to have the greatest wealth. These egotistic actions and savagery contribute to degradation.

Another major downfall of both colonialism and imperialism, is the lack of accountability. *Heart of Darkness* portrays the Europeans as having no consequences for their wrongdoing. This provides unaccountability in the colonial organization and structure. Allowing for uncontrolled abuse toward the natives exposes the inequity of colonialism. This deficiency of accountability, holds a major prejudice against the African natives.

*Heart of Darkness* encapsulates the concept of racism. By portraying the European white men as superior, Conrad presupposes the idea that the African natives are inferior. They are depicted as being like animals and are bound to work forcefully and starve. This highlights the deeply rooted racism that truly followed European colonialism. *Heart of Darkness* shows and underlines the racial and moral stance that undermined the colonial venture.

Marlow witnessed first hand the dehumanization of African natives. These natives were strongly objectified and viewed as merely material rather than people with a freewill nature. Conrad shows that through colonization and imperialism, the individuality of the natives disappeared. Throughout the narrative in *Heart of Darkness*, they are rarely brought up, and when they are, they appear faceless. In other words, without an identity. The natives are thus detached from their own humanity. Making them appear as inferior and simply as objects, make the white men appear as the superior in the progress of colonialism.

Hypocrisy is an essential part of imperialism. The European men in the *Heart of Darkness*, rather than educate and improve the lives of the natives, did not exploit their resources.<sup>8</sup> They were indifferent to the sufferings of others, and thus, were able to control and destroy the African community and mold them to become their slaves. This was the brutal oppression found in Africa with its never ending suffering.<sup>9</sup>

All in all, Conrad provides a dominant critique on both imperialism and colonialism in the narrative *Heart of Darkness*.<sup>10</sup> He shows the decay of human nature and man's frailty by conveying the abuse the Europeans bore over the natives. These major themes provide a satisfactory instance of how the use of a good thing can turn into an immoral act of injustice and tyranny. Conrad does a great job of depicting and exposing the reality and truth of the colonial era. It reminds us of the ongoing struggles of decolonization and the culture diffusion present in today's world. *Heart of Darkness* reverberates with readers and remains a classic work of literature that continually sparks thought.

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<sup>8</sup> *Imperialism in Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness"* - Ignited Minds Journals, ignited.in/I/a/232102. Accessed 16 Oct. 2023.

<sup>9</sup> Idid.

<sup>10</sup> *A STUDY OF COLONIALISM IN JOSEPH CONRAD*. <https://ijcrt.org/papers/IJCRT1134960.pdf> Accessed 16 Oct. 2023.