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Heart of Darkness as a Critique of Colonialism.

In the late 19th century during the time of the Berlin Conference, European colonial powers such as the Belgium empire ruled by Leopold II were aggressively expanding in Africa in order to exploit its vast resources such as Ivory and rubber, employing brutal and absolutely deplorable methods. In 1890, during the time of Leopold II, Joseph Conrad (1857-1924), a Polish-British sailor and writer, took on a job opportunity as a pilot on a Belgian merchant steamer where he was directed by his supervisors to work at the Congo River in Africa to recover a seriously ill trader, Goerges Antoine Klein. As a result, Conrad went straight into Leopold II's privately owned Congo Free State, where he directly witnessed the inhuman conditions imposed by slave labor and the ruthless search for ivory. This experience damaged Conrad mentally, physically, and invoked moral rage within him, pushing him to write *Heart of Darkness* in 1899, a novel that reflects Conrad's experience to expose, and criticize the ideologies, motives, and depravity that goes within colonialism(Norton 14-15).

It seems that in *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad has made his critique of colonialism by explaining the outline for how colonialism operates especially on the moral level, and by conveying the true nature of colonialism, invoking the moral rage he felt within the readers as well. Through storytelling, he explains how such operations are driven by those with

power(Leopold II) through a surge of sinful desires(money, and capital). The true nature of these operations are then hidden, and masked with a false good narrative to the public (saying they are there to civilize and evangelize), allowing such operations to live, and gain support. Through this hiddenness, the operation successfully sucks others into it(Marlow, and the others), once they are in it, they lose their humanity, and experience extreme moral decay, allowing their evil desires to surge(Kurtz, and Manager). Through this surge of evil desires, the pilgrim's values have become become addicted to that which will fulfill their evil desires (ivory, rubber, and power), as a result, they form a large evil march, brutally trampling, and corrupting innocent humans that have been dehumanized (the natives) as if it were being led by the devil. No respect to divine order. For respect to any human. No drive for virtue. Just drive for sinful desires like ants reacting to sugar.

In the beginning of part one, we see how the narrative of "exploration", and "civilizing" is used to mask the brutal realities of colonialism, and to lure people in. Initially, it presents Marlow's journey up the Congo River as an exciting and noble endeavor, fueling enthusiasm and the belief in a heroic mission to civilize the natives. Here the narrator recounts older explorations describing them as voyages that served a sacred, higher purpose as if the Congo colonization is like that as well. "They had all gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire." (Conrad 3) Marlow also expresses how exploration motivated him to work for The Company: "But there was in it[a blank spot] one river especially, a mighty big river, that you could see on the map, resembling a large snake uncoiled... The snake had charmed me." (Conrad 6). Here his Aunt reveals that she is unaware of the true motive: "She talked about 'weaning those ignorant million from their horrid ways, 'till, upon my word, she made me quite uncomfortable. I ventured to hint that the Company was run for profit". His aunt even quotes Luke 10.7 saying " You forget, dear

Charlie, that the labourer is worthy of his hire” (Conrad 9), encouraging Marlow to convert the Natives to Christianity as if that's what they're there to do. The practice of giving the false narrative of civilizing is blatantly revealed in Leopold II’s “Letter to *the Times* of London in 1906 where he wrote: “He assures me[Lieutenant-General Baron Wahis] that the natives are not unhappy in the Congo, and that their condition is improving, especially in that part of the territory which is exploited by the Government...”(Leopold, article 31). Leopold also wrote: “We have brought them into contact with civilization; we are beginning to educate them, we have preserved them from the abuse of alcohol, we have vaccinated them, we are making super human efforts to overcome the sleeping sickness, and we are creating numerous and rapid ways of communication (Leopold, article 33). Now let's take a look at what Leopold’s actual plans are in his letter to Colonial Missionaries in 1883. “ Dear Reverends, Fathers and Dear Compatriots: The task that is given to fulfill is very delicate and requires much tact. You will certainly go to evangelize, but your evangelization must inspire above all Belgium interests... evangelize the ni***** so that they stay forever in submission to the white colonialists, so they never revolt against the restraints they are undergoing.” (Letter from King Leopold II of Belgium to Colonial Missionaries). If the true narrative of Leopold II was revealed to the public much sooner, the operation would have died quicker, and would not have received support similar to how his Aunt did.

The second aspect of colonialism found all throughout *Heart of Darkness* revolves around how it corrupts the pilgrims involved which then pushes them to commit evil either or to work blindly for someone higher. This theme is subtly introduced in where Marlow receives detailed characterization, the other characters are defined solely by their professions, foreshadowing the corrupting effect of colonialism. This corruption is exemplified by most if not

all the characters, and even those that are not working for Belgium suggesting that this corruption is an overall issue with colonialism. One prominent example in part 1 is the French colonists who have descended into madness due to their involvement in colonial conflicts as shown in this quote: “we came upon a man-of-war anchored off the east...it appears the French had one of their wars going on thereabouts... in the empty immensity of earth, sky, and water, there she was incomprehensible, firing into a continent... there was a touch of insanity”. (Conrad 11) . The Company's chief accountant, too, exhibits a lack of sympathy for humans and unreasonable animosity toward the natives, indicative of the corrupting influence of colonialism, and blind aim to evil desires. This accountant reveals this effect through his statement, “The groans of the sick person distract my attention... When one has got to make correct entries, one comes to hate those savages[the natives] – hate them to death.”(Conrad 15) The chief accountant also warns Marlow about the unreliability of their messengers, further illustrating the pervasive corruption within the Company. As Marlow goes deeper into the Congo towards the central station, he witnesses more of this. He notes how ivory has become idolized by the pilgrims as if it were a drug and says: “They[the pilgrims] wandered here and there with their absurd long staves in their hands, like a lot of faithless pilgrims bewitched inside a rotten fence. The word ‘ivory’ rang in the air, was whispered, was signed. You would think they were praying to it. A taint of imbecile rapacity blew through it all, like a whiff from some corpse.”(Conrad 18). Since ivory has become the main goal of the pilgrims, Kurtz, since he is the one who has the most ivory, is also idolized. Here Marlow describes the Russian trader, the one with the most devotion to Kurtz: “They ‘adored him,’ he said. The tone of these words was so extraordinary that I looked at him searchingly. It was curious to see his[the Russian] mingled eagerness and reluctance to speak to Kurtz... He[Kurtz] declared he would shoot me unless I gave him the

ivory and then cleared out of the country”(Conrad 45) This is slightly similar to how catholics look up to saints for guidance so that they can be more virtuous for God. But in *Heart of Darkness*, due to corruption, the pilgrims misdirect their aim to material gain, and as a result adore Kurtz. It is also revealed that Kurtz even threatened to shoot the Russian, and that he has become a corrupt authority. “there was nothing on earth to prevent him killing whom he jolly well pleased” (Conrad 45). The pilgrims have become like animals. No longer seeking transcendent things but instead seeking material gain, and power. The character that represents the corruption at the Congo the best is Kurtz. Kurtz was the most involved in the ivory process and as a result became the most corrupt. His final words were “The horror! The horror!” (Conrad 59) showing the moment he realized how deranged and corrupt he has become. After Kurtz's death, Marlow speaks with the people that knew Kurtz before he started working for The Company. Kurtz's future wife, the Intended tells Marlow, “And his example,” she whispered to herself. ‘Men looked up to him -- his goodness shone in every act. This portrayal of Kurtz is completely different to how he is in the Congo and further shows how corrupting colonialism is. Marlow sees how the Intended has a false view of Kurtz which only portrays his old self that has been so ingrained in her. The Intended then asks Marlow what his final words were and Marlow lies, telling her that it was her name because Marlow knows that the truth would be impossible for her to bear. “I pulled myself together and spoke slowly. The last word he pronounced was - your name.” (Conrad 61). Although Kurtz final words are devastating, and convey huge suffering, at the same time he says that frees him from his own corruption. He shows humility, and regret in realizing his grave mistakes unlike the other pilgrims who are probably still corrupted.

We have now seen some of the causes of the corruption within the Congo, and seen how Conrad reveals it. Now we can look at the third and most important aspect of colonialism is the dehumanizing and brutal mistreatment of the natives due to racism and the Pilgrim's desire for power. In the beginning of part one, Marlow explains the racist aspects that fuel the mistreatment of natives within colonialism. Marlow says: "The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves..."(Conrad 21-16). This conveys that colonists see those who they are colonizing as inferior, and irrational use the differences in appearances to try to justify the mistreatment. Marlow then describes moments where he saw them being mistreated. "I could see every rib, the joints of their limbs were connected together with a chain... They passed me within six inches without a glance, with that complete, deathlike indifference of unhappy savages." Marlow also describes them here: " They were dying slowly -- it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now -- nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom."(Conrad 28-19 minus 16). The phrase "they were not criminals" indicates that Marlow had a false expectation on the natives. He, like his Aunt, believes that the natives were savage criminals but as he is exploring the Congo, Marlow reveals that this is far from the truth. They are called "black shadows" to depict the pain they've endured during at the Congo. Although Marlow does show sympathy to the natives he still behaves racist, and disrespectfully towards them. This shows that the dehumanization of the natives is and has been almost ingrained in the brains of the pilgrims which has been before the colonization process. It is very likely that Marlow (maybe even Conrad) and the other characters were raised this way since childhood. It therefore must be a societal issue that everyone including non-pilgrims(not the natives) have been conditioned to follow. Here Marlow shows

sympathy to one of the natives. Conveying that his attitude towards them has changed significantly after seeing how they really are: “ I found nothing else to do but to offer him one of my good Swede’s ship’s biscuits I had in my pocket.” In this aspect of *Heart of Darkness* we see how Marlow stands out from the other characters, as he is able to see the true nature of the Congo.

In conclusion, Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" serves as a powerful critique of colonialism, shedding light on the moral complexities that underlie colonialism operations. Through the novel, Conrad vividly illustrates how those in positions of power, exemplified by Leopold II, are driven by insatiable desires, primarily for wealth and capital. These operations are often masked with a facade of benevolence, such as claims of civilizing and evangelizing, allowing them to garner support and continue unchecked. Conrad reveals how individuals drawn into these operations, like Kurtzs and the others, gradually lose their humanity and succumb to moral decay, mirroring the descent into darkness embodied by characters like Kurtz and the Manager. The pursuit of sinful desires, such as ivory, rubber, and power, becomes an addiction, leading to the ruthless exploitation and corruption of dehumanized natives, as if guided by a malevolent force. *Heart of Darkness* ultimately challenges readers to confront the dark realities of colonialism and the moral decay it can foster.

Work cited

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