

# Heart of Darkness

## Autobiographical Elements in Heart of Darkness

### A Critic's View

Heart of Darkness is the most famous of Joseph Conrad's personal novel: a pilgrim's progress for pessimistic and psychological age. After having finished the main draft of the novel, Conrad had remarked "Before the Congo, I was just a mere animal." The living nightmare of 1890 seems to have affected Conrad quite as importantly as Andre Gide's Congo experience 36 years later. The autobiographical basis of the narrative is well known and its introspective bias obvious. This is Conrad's longest journey into self. But it would do well to remember that Heart of Darkness is also a sensitive vivid travelogue and a comment on "the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration". (Albert Gerard)

**Heart of Darkness** is based upon Conrad's own experiences in life. This novel is a record of Conrad's own experiences in the course of his visit to the Congo in 1890.

As a boy, Conrad dreamed of travel and adventure. He was only nine years old when, looking at a map of Africa of the time, he said to himself:

**"When I grow up, I shall go there."**

In **Heart of Darkness**, the fictitious character, Marlow also tells his friends on the deck of a steamboat that, in his boyhood, he had been greatly attracted by the African country known as the Congo, and that the river Congo flowing through that country had exercised a particular fascination upon him.

In order to go to the Congo, Conrad had to take the help of an aunt who was by vocation a writer of novels. Through her influence, Conrad obtained a job with a trading company as the captain of a steamboat which was to take an exploring expedition led by Alexandre Delcommune to a place called Katanga in the Congo. Conrad felt very pleased with the prospect of being able to visit the region of his boyhood dreams. However, Conrad's pleasure was greatly shattered by a quarrel which he had with Alexandre Delcommune's brother who was functioning as a manager under the same trading company at a trading station on the way. In **Heart of Darkness**, Alexandre Delcommune's brother becomes the manager of the Central Station. Marlow makes very unfavourable comments on the manager of the Central Station because Conrad had formed an adverse view of Alexandre Delcommune's brother with whom Conrad had quarreled. Marlow also gets job of captain on a steamboat through her aunt's influence.

Conrad's main duty, after getting job on a steamship, was to bring one of the Company's agents whose health had been failing. The name of this agent was Klein. He subsequently died aboard Conrad's steamship by which he was being brought. It was this agent, by the name of Klein, who is transformed into Mr. Kurtz in **Heart of Darkness**.

Conrad had many unpleasant experiences in the course of his visit to Congo, which he recorded in a diary to which he gave the name of the Congo Diary. Marlow also records the disastrous effects of the climate of the Congo upon the white traders and agents who were sent by the Belgian Companies to this region.

Furthermore, Marlow experiences the same sense of enlightenment and the same process of maturing through disillusion and defeat which Conrad himself underwent during his travels in the Congo.

It has therefore to be recognized that **Heart of Darkness** is, to a large extent, an autobiographical book because, in most of the essentials, Marlow's experiences and feelings are very much the same as Conrad's own had been. There is a lot of resemblance between Conrad's Congo Diary and the contents of the novel **Heart of Darkness** to justify such an assumption.

Conrad's experiences in the Congo have been described by a critic as exasperating, frustrating, and humiliating; and Marlow's experiences in his contact with most of the white men in the Congo are of the same kind. Marlow undergoes an extreme personal crisis; and this crisis is very much the same through which Conrad himself underwent in the Congo.

In conclusion, we may add that Marlow's outlook upon life of his philosophy of life is very much the same as Conrad's own was. Marlow appears as a pessimist in the novel; and Conrad himself was a pessimist too. Marlow recognizes the existence of certain virtues in human beings just as Conrad himself did. But, on the whole, Conrad had formed certain depressing ideas about life in general, and Marlow too expresses similar ideas about life. Marlow's reaction to most people, whom he meets in the course of his travels, is unfavorable and disappointing; and so were Conrad's own reactions to the people whom he met in the course of his voyage. Marlow is more or less a lonely, isolated figure despite the presence before him of four of his associates to whom he tells his story; and Conrad was a lonely figure too.

Thus both in externals and in terms of the inward mental life, Marlow meet the same fate which Conrad had met.

### **As a Postcolonial Novel**

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is one of the most discussed and controversial texts in postcolonial study. It shows the nature and effect of European colonialism in Africa. At the same time, it attacks the colonizers as well, though Conrad cannot escape the attack of some post colonial critics like Chinua Achebe for his "dehumanizing" the Africans.

Almost all the characters in Marlow's tale take part in the colonialist enterprise for selfish purposes. The narrator expresses that the target of the colonial expedition in different times has been Congo, the heart of darkness which has been the mission for many Europeans

*"bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire"*

Here the symbols *"the sword"* and *"the torch"* refer to brutal forces colonial enterprise and to the negation of the native culture by the so called light of civilization.

Marlow's aunt is pleased with herself for helping to send Marlow to Africa as one of the 'workers' and as an 'emissary of light' bearing the task of 'weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways'.

In fact, the Europeans have set themselves in Congo the saviour and light bringer, but ironically they are doing nothing beneficial for the natives other than suppressing, oppressing and degrading them.

In *Heart of Darkness*, the colonial agent is Mr. Kurtz. When he first came he was "a first-class agent", "a very remarkable person", but within very short time after his coming to Congo, instead of turning his station into 'a centre... for humanizing, improving, instructing' (p.48), Kurtz, the central figure, has given in to the 'fascination of the abomination' (p.21), as indicated by the human heads on the poles around his house. "Evidently the appetite for more ivory", as Kurtz' Russian friend observes, has spoiled Kurtz. Indeed, lust for power and wealth corrupts humanity to a great extent and reduces into savagery.

Conrad is in the novella critical of the effects of colonialism. Marlow gathers firsthand experience of the cold truth of colonization: physically wasted workers operating in deplorable conditions, backstabbing co-workers jockeying for the most profit and recognition, and a colonized people literally being shackled. It's as if the company is a steamroller plowing through the jungle, flattening anything and anyone that happens to be in the way, all, of course, in the name of profit. On his journey, Marlow, Conrad's alter ego, meets "a white man in an unbuttoned uniform, camping on the path with an armed escort". The white man claims that he is working for the "improvement" of this region. Marlow ironically says that he could not understand the meaning of "improvement" until he sees

*"the body of a middle-aged negro, with a bullet-hole in the forehead".*

At the very first of the novella, Marlow, while on a boat anchored in the Thames river outside London, expresses his realization:

*"And this also...has been one of the dark places of the earth."*

And this observation, leads him to recollect and tell his journey to Congo which was thought to be the heart of darkness but later he realized the reversal.

Kurtz is the embodiment of the whole Europe. Marlow explores his identity:  
*His mother was half-English, his father was half-French. All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz.*

Moreover, The International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs commissions Kurtz to write a report.

Therefore, when we see that Kurtz presides over the natives' midnight dances which always end with 'unspeakable rites', it seems that Europe itself has begun to occupy a high place among the devils of the land for its taking pleasure in human sacrifice, in the shedding of the blood of human beings, in sexual orgies, in sexual perversions, and in similar other monstrous passions.

Therefore, Kurtz's last cry 'horror! horror!' can be his recoil from European brutality in Africa and thus, a judgment on failure of white civilization. Thus, we find deadness and illusory greatness of Western civilization in this novella.

In spite of showing such presentation of colonialism, Conrad cannot get rid of the post colonial criticism. Chinua Achebe's controversial article "An Image of Africa" on *Heart of Darkness* expresses the allegation that in Western psychology there is a desire and indeed a need *"to set Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest."* Achebe also entitles Conrad as *"a bloody racist"* who tries to show his *"civilized"* culture against the *'darkness'* of a *"primitive"* Africa and thus de-humanizes Africans.

For this reason, Marlow can express his disgust at his journey into the savage beauty of the jungle, a primeval world, full of peril and lush  
*"Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world."*

Achebe's criticism of *Heart of Darkness* raised such a storm in the thinking of postcolonial study that one of the English professors wrote to Achebe,  
*"After hearing you the other night I now realize that I had never really read Heart of Darkness although I have taught it for years."* (Achebe, x)

## Colonialism and Postcolonialism

Colonialism and post colonialism are two widely used terms in literary criticism. Colonialism is actually a historical fact which refers to establishment of colonies by European empires especially by the British. And, post-colonialism refers to the experience and reaction of the colonized after the departure of the colonizers from the colonies.

Colonialism is about the dominance of a strong nation over another weaker one.

**Wikipedia** writes,

*"Colonialism is the extension of a nation's sovereignty over territory beyond its borders by the establishment of either settler or exploitation colonies in which indigenous populations are directly ruled, displaced, or exterminated."*

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy states,

*"Colonialism is a practice of domination, which involves the subjugation of one people to another."*

However, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish colonialism from imperialism. Colonialism usually involves the transfer of population to a new territory, holding political allegiance to the country of origin. While, in imperialism, one country exercises power over another, whether through settlement, sovereignty, or indirect mechanisms of control.

The term colonialism may also maintain an ideology or a set of beliefs and assumptions used to legitimize or promote this system in defense of the colonizers:

- the colonized are savages and dangerous threat to themselves and to the civilized world if left alone;
- their culture is not standard and needs to be polished by the colonizers;
- it is God's given duty of the colonizer to bring the stray colonized people to the right path.

On the basis of these assumptions, the white Europeans ventured adventurously into the so-called underdeveloped countries in Africa and Asia and dominated a lot of geographical spaces there; imposed their will at large on them and eroded the natives' cultures and languages.



But under colonizer's ideologies was oppression as a basic ingredient of colonialism. As a result, the colonized revolted and gradually gained independence.

In the meantime, there emerged some evident results and effects of colonialism:

1. The total or partial erosion of the colonized culture
2. The mediation of the identity and subjectivity of the colonized
3. Protest against the colonizer
4. The categorization of the world into ranks, such as first world, second world, the West etc.
5. The emergence of different forms of fundamentalism
6. The emergence of bourgeoisie classes in the colonies
7. The emergence of societies with a lot of contradictions and split loyalties.

Now we will look into post-colonialism.

Generally speaking, as a literary theory (or critical approach), post colonialism deals with literature produced in countries that once were colonies of other countries, especially of the European colonial powers Britain, France, and Spain; in some contexts, it includes countries still in colonial arrangements.

**Margaret Kohn**(2008) writes,

*"Post-colonialism is used to describe the political and theoretical struggles of societies that experienced the transition from political dependence to sovereignty."*

**Bill Ashcroft**(2002:02) states that

*"we use the term 'post-colonial', however, to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day".*

**Jeremy Hawthorn** (2003:269) argues that it is used

*"to refer to literature emanating from or dealing with the peoples and CULTURES of lands which have emerged from colonial rule(normally, but not always, relatively recently)".*

It also deals with literature written in colonial countries and by their citizens that has colonised people as its subject matter.

However, Hawthorn (Ibid) further states, post colonialism *"can also be used to imply a body of theory or an attitude towards that which is studied"*.

**M. H. Abrams**(2004:236) regards post colonialism as

*"the critical analysis of the history, culture, literature, and modes of discourse that are specific to the former colonies of England, Spain, France, and other European imperial powers."*

In order to make the critical analysis, the post colonial writers select the language of the very colonizers. In **Critic's** words, *"the empire writes back to the centre"*. That is, the empire or the colonies respond to the center or colonizer's oppression and authority with the language, education and culture by which the colonizer has practised his authority and oppression over the colonies. The empire has become now the Caliban of *The Tempest* who curses Prospero who represent the centre in his own language:

*" You taught me language; and my profit on't*

*Is, I know how to curse: the red plague rid you*

*For learning me your language!"*

*(The Tempest, Act 1, Scene 2)*

However post-colonial literatures have developed through several stages— ‘*Adopt*’, ‘*Adapt*’ and ‘*Adept*’. In the first phase, the post colonial literatures adopt the universal validity of the colonial literature as it stands in its form. The second phase adapts the European form to the subject matter of the colonies, thus assuming partial rights of intervention in the genre. In the final phase there is a declaration of cultural independence without reference to European norms. Thus post colonialism stresses on the ‘cross-cultural’ interactions. [2]

The pioneers of Post-colonialism like Edward Said, Franz Fanon, Homi Bhabha among others, concerned themselves with the social and cultural effect of colonization and exposed to both the colonizer and ex-colonized the falsity or validity of their assumptions. Edward Said's 1978 *Orientalism* has been described as a seminal work in the field in which Said has been able to undermine the ideological assumption of value-free knowledge and show that “*knowing the Orient*” is part of the project of dominating it.

While defending its position against colonialism and imperialism, post-colonialism in literature and the arts assumes the following:

- a) Cultural relativism: the colonialists’ defilement of culture is socially, morally and politically incorrect.
- b) The absurdity of colonial language and discourses.
- c) Ambivalence towards authority which leads the native to question all forms of authority.
- d) Colonial alienation. Colonialism leads to the alienation of the native in his own land.

Now we can analyse some of the texts from colonial and postcolonial perspectives. Our selected texts are: *Passage to India*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Round the World in Eighty Days*.

- Ø Defilement of the culture of the other and the supremacy of the culture of the settler: In *Passage to India*, and in *Round the world in 80 Days*, the colonialists chuckle at the Indian cultural habits of intimacy, privacy, hospitality; and outlaws other cultural practices like burning alive a wife with her dead husband.
- Ø Colonial alienation: Friday, in *Robinson Crusoe*, is no longer at home with himself after his encounter with Robinson Crusoe losing his own identity and self. This loss, confusion and alienation as negative effect of colonialism on the individual also goes for Dr Aziz and his cohorts in *Passage to India*.
- Ø Exploitation and misuse of power: In *Robinson Crusoe*, Crusoe enslaves Friday; teaches him English for his own cause; makes fun of his newly acquired English; imposes a new religion on him without giving him any choice; even sells Friday.

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## Heart of Darkness: Symbolism

The complexity with profundity of most of the modern writers leads them to fill their writings with greater significance than we find on the surface. Symbolism means a deeper meaning in what has been written than meets the eye. **“Heart of Darkness”** is replete with symbols. Every person and everything means more than what we find on a superficial view. The novel is based on the facts of history as well as on the facts of Conrad's own life; but Conrad has tried to convey the evasive and elusive truth underlying both the historical facts and his personal experiences.

Almost every character in **“Heart of Darkness”** has some symbolic significance. The central figure **Mr. Kurtz**, *firstly*, symbolizes the **greed and the commercial and corrupt mentality** of the western countries. *Secondly*, he symbolizes the white man's **love for power**.

**Power corrupts man and absolute power corrupts absolutely.**

*Thirdly, the change*, which comes over him during his stay among the savages, symbolizes the **influence of barbarism** upon a civilized man. It also symbolizes the irresistible influences of barbarism upon a civilized man cut off from civilized society.

**Where there is no check on a man, the worst of him may come out.**

*Finally*, Mr. Kurtz symbolizes the **repentant sinner**. Mr. Kurtz's desire to collect the maximum quantity of ivory conveys the exploitation of the backward people of Congo by the white colonizers.

**Marlow** too has a symbolic role in the novel. *Firstly*, he symbolizes the **spirit of adventure** and a **love of knowledge**. *Secondly*, he symbolizes the **thoughtful observer of human life** and the **thoughtful student of human nature**. He also symbolizes a **philosophical approach to human life** by constantly meditating upon what he observes. To some extent, he too symbolizes the **influence of savagery** because his own primitive instincts have been awakened when he heard a lot about Mr. Kurtz's way of life and then by his close personal contact with that man.

The **subsidiary characters** too possess symbolic significance. There is the **manager** of the Central Station. It is wrong to say that he symbolizes inefficiency. If he had been inefficient, he would not have been able to continue at his post. He symbolizes **spiritual emptiness**. If he is unable to inspire respect or love or fear, it is because he is **spiritually barren** and has **no originality** and **no solid ideas** in his head, though he can do his manager's work like a machine.

The **brick-maker** acts as a **“papier-mâché Mephistopheles”** and symbolizes **cunning and trickery**. There are numerous **white agents or traders** loitering around the Central Station because they are idle. These men are described by Marlow as **faithful pilgrims”**.

The **cannibal crew** on Marlow's steamer really symbolizes **efficiency** because they do not shirk work. More than efficiency, they symbolize self-restraint because they do not try to satisfy their hunger by killing and eating white men's flesh.



The *knitting women* in the beginning of the story symbolize the Fates who determine the future of every human being on the earth. These knitting women symbolize the danger which lies in store for Marlow.

**In the outer room the two women knitted black wool, feverishly.**

The majestic-looking *native woman*, who appears on the riverbank when Mr. Kurtz is being taken away, symbolizes a woman's strong devotion and steadfast loyalty to her lord and lover.

Mr. *Kurtz's fiancée* also symbolizes loyalty but her loyalty is that of an innocent, inexperienced woman who is deluded by false appearances and does not know the ways of the world. The fiancée symbolizes the hold of an illusion upon a woman's mind.

The *Russian* symbolizes inquisitiveness or the desire to learn. But he also symbolizes loyalty and fidelity, the two virtues which Marlow also symbolizes.

Many sights seen by Marlow also possess symbolic significance. The *French warship* firing aimlessly into the forest, and the *rock* being blasted with gun powder but without any purpose symbolize the sense of futility and an aimless endeavor. *Ivory* symbolizes the white men's greed.

Then there is the sight of one *over-worked and starved native labourers* dying slowly of disease and starvation. The condition of these men symbolizes the sufferings of the natives who do not receive any sympathy from the white colonizers.

**They were dying slowly ... They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now, - nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation.**

The *chain-gang* with half a dozen native men chained to one another, and each wearing an iron collar round his neck, symbolize the white man's sway over the ignorant backward people without any concern for their welfare.

**"... 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, rhythmically clinking.**

The description of the *natural scenery* also serves a symbolic purpose. The scenery is wild and awe-inspiring. The silence of the woods and the abundance of trees symbolizes mystery and horror. Marlow has given us many pictures of the thick, dense, matted forests.

**And the river was there – fascinating – deadly – like a snake.**

The *city of Brussels* symbolizes the inner corruption and degeneracy of white man's civilization. Brussels seems to Marlow to be the white sepulcher – something outwardly pleasant and holy but inwardly rotten.

Finally, Marlow's whole *journey* into the Congo has symbolic significance besides its literal



meaning. It may be regarded as a journey into subconscious mind of Marlow in particular and of mankind in general. **“Heart of Darkness”** is the story of a journey involving spiritual change in the voyager. Symbolically, Marlow’s journey into the Congo is an arduous physical activity or adventure. The literal meaning of ‘*heart of darkness*’ is the inmost region of Congo; but symbolically this phrase means the inmost region of man’s mind or soul. As Marlow stands for Conrad, the novel becomes a kind of Conrad’s exploration of his own mind during his visit to the Congo in 1890.

**In the business of exploration, both exploiter and exploited are corrupted.**

In short, the imperial exploitation of the Congo has effectively been conveyed through a symbolic description of numerous scenes and situations.

### **Heart of Darkness: Theme of Isolation**

“Heart of Darkness” has a multiplicity of themes interwoven closely and produces a unified pattern. The theme of isolation and its consequences constitute a theme in this book, though a minor one. Marlow and Mr. Kurtz illustrate this theme, dominate the novel and have symbolic roles. Both these men stand for much more than the individuals which they certainly are.

Marlow strikes us from the very start as a lonely figure. Although he is a member of a small group of people sitting on the deck of the steamer called the “Nellie”. He is, at the very outset, differentiated from the others. He sits cross-legged in the pose of a Buddha preaching in European clothes without a lotus-flower. Then he begins his story, and nowhere in his narration does he appear to be feeling perfectly at home among other people. He seems to have the temperament of a man who would like to stay away from others, though he would certainly like to observe others and to mediate upon his observations.

When Marlow goes to Brussels for an interview, he depicts himself as an alien who has stepped into an unpleasant environment. The city of Brussels makes him think of a “whited sepulcher”. This feeling clearly shows that he has nothing in common with the people of this European city, though he is himself a European. Then he finds something ominous in the atmosphere of the office of the Company. The two knitting-women strike him as mysterious and sinister beings.

***In the outer room the two women knitted black wool, feverishly.***

Even the doctor tells him that he is the first Englishman to have come under his observation. Marlow says:

***The old doctor felt my pulse, evidently thinking of something else the while. "Good, good for there," he mumbled, and then with a certain eagerness asked me whether I would let him measure my head.***

There seems to be a distance even between Marlow and his aunt who has got him the job. She is enthusiastic and cordial enough, but Marlow has his reservations. He thinks that she is a most unrealistic woman. She is under the impression that the white men go into the

backward regions to confer benefits upon the savages. But, in Marlow's opinion, this view of the white men is entirely wrong.

When voyaging upon the sea in order to get to the Congo Marlow found himself to be perfectly idle and isolated from all the others on board the steamer because he had no point of contact with them. The sound of the sea-waves was the only source of comfort to him because these sounds seemed to be like "the speech of a brother". He finds a kinship with the sea-waves but no kinship with the human beings on board the steamer.

Marlow's sense of loneliness increase when he sees certain sights in the Congo. These sights convey to him the futility of the white man's exertions and activities in the Congo, and miseries of the black natives. His realization by him of white man's cruelty creates a kind of barrier between him and the white men living in Congo. When he has to deal with the individual white men, his isolation is further emphasized. He finds absolutely no point of contact with the manager of the Central Station, with the manager's uncle, and with the brick-maker. The manager is a man who inspires no fear, no love, no respect and there is "nothing within this man". The manager's uncle is an intriguer and plotter as the manager himself. The brick-maker is described by Marlow as a "papier-mâché Mephistopheles" and a devil who is hollow within. The only man, whom Marlow can respect, is the chief accountant who keeps his account-books in apple-pie order and is always seen dressed neatly and nicely; but perhaps Marlow is speaking here ironically. Actually none of the white men seems to have any merit in him. Marlow does discover some good points in the natives but none in the white men. The cannibal crew of his steamer shows an admirable self-restraint and are hard-working but the white agents seem to be useless fellows and to them he gives the nickname of the "faithless pilgrims". It is only when Marlow meets Mr. Kurtz that some sort of contact is established between him and the chief of the Inner Station of the Company.

The effect of isolation upon Marlow is profound. He is by nature somewhat unsociable. He is a kind of philosopher who meditates upon whatever he sees. Isolation further heightens his meditative faculty. Finding no point of contact with others, Marlow becomes more of a thinker, and more of a philosopher-cum-psychologist and studies the character and habits of Mr. Kurtz; and it is because of his isolation that he falls a victim to the influence of Mr. Kurtz whom he has himself described as a devil. This isolation can have grave consequences.

Mr. Kurtz is another isolated figure. He has become an absolutely solitary man after his prolonged stay in the Congo. He is not solitary in the sense that he does not mix with other. In fact, he has begun to identify himself with the savages and has become a sharer in their activities and in their interests. He participates in their "unspeakable rites" and he gratifies, without any restraint, his various lusts and his monstrous passions.

***The wilderness has caressed him, loved him, embraced him, entered his blood, consumed his flesh and has taken complete possession of his soul.***

In the case of Mr. Kurtz, it is isolation which proves the man's undoing. Being cut off from all civilized society at the Inner Station of the Company, Mr. Kurtz begins slowly to fall under the influence of the savage till he becomes one of them. Gradually he acquires great power and begins to be regarded as a god by them. Thus now he has to keep himself at a distance even from them. He "presides" over their midnight dances which end with "unspeakable rites".

But he is a solitary figure in the context of his western education and European upbringing. Even among the savages, he stands far above them. The savages regard him as a man-god. Mr. Kurtz is indeed a deity for the savages, and therefore he is a solitary figure even among them. Perhaps

## **Heart of Darkness: Theme of Evil**

### **Evil of imperialism**

During the late 19th Century, the African Congo was a place of sorrow, pain, and misery for the natives. Under the imperial rule of European nations, the native Africans were enslaved and forced to work. Millions of Africans died during this time, especially in the Congo. Joseph Conrad went to the Congo, intending to bring the light of civilization to the people of the Congo, but instead he witnessed first-hand the destruction of European imperialism. His book *Heart of Darkness* is his portrayal of this destruction, which is embodied in the character Mr. Kurtz and the Company he works for. Conrad displayed the evil of imperialism in the form of destruction and persecution done to the natives. He also depicts the evil in the shape of uncivilized and primitive culture of Africans having strange superstitious beliefs and inhuman practices. Evil therefore is one of the major themes of the novel.

Evil has a tangible reality in **“Heart of Darkness”** and it dominates the novel manifesting itself in several ways. At the very outset Marlow refers to the ancient Roman conquest of Britain who used only brute force. They grabbed what they could get. It was just **“robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale”**. Marlow then says that the conquest of any territory by any nation means the taking that territory away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than the conquerors. This talk by Marlow pertains to the evil of conquest, and to the brutality and the slaughter which any military conquest necessitates.

There is a hint of evil in Marlow’s reference to the city of Brussels as a **“whited sepulcher”**. The phrase **“whited sepulcher”** means a place which is outwardly pleasant and righteous but which is inwardly corrupt and evil. The evil character of this city is emphasized when Marlow points out that the Belgian conquerors were running an over-sea empire in the Congo and making no end of coin by trade. Then there is a hint of evil in Marlow’s description of the two women knitting black wool.

#### **In the outer room the two women knitted black wool, feverishly.**

These knitting-women remind us of the mythological Fates constantly busy in spinning the yarn of human destiny. They seemed to him to be guarding the door of darkness and knitting black wool as of to make a shroud. When Marlow is about to set out on his voyage, he feels that, instead of going to the centre of a continent, he is going to the centre of the earth. Such a remark also hints at the evil which exists in this universe.

Marlow’s descriptions of the natural scenery which he witnesses in the course of his voyage have a strong suggestion of evil in them. Indeed, the wilderness and the thick forest seem to be the abode of evil. Marlow sees a huge jungle, so dark-green as to be almost black. The sun is fierce



and the land seems to glisten and drop with steam. He speaks of the empty stream, the great silence, and the impenetrable forest in which the air is warm, thick, heavy and sluggish. There is no joy in the brilliance of the sunshine here.

**And the river was there – fascinating – deadly – like a snake.**

Marlow's steamer penetrates deeper and deeper into the **"heart of darkness"** and the very earth seems unearthly. Marlow's narration heightens our sense of evil which is lurking in the forest behind the millions and millions of trees.

The other sights also suggest the existence of evil. At one point, Marlow sees a warship anchored off the coast and firing its guns without having any target in view. The firing seems to be absolutely aimless and futile. He sees several trading posts where **"the merry dance of death and trade"** goes on **"in a still and earthy atmosphere"** resembling that of an over-heated tomb. He sees a lot of people, mostly black and naked.

**A lot of people, mostly black and naked, moved about like ants.**

At one place, a rock is being blasted with gunpowder even though this it does not stand in the way of the railway line which is to be laid. Then he sees the horrible sight of a chain-gang. Men in this chain-gang are criminals who have been sentenced to hard labour.

**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, rhythmically clinking.**

Marlow remarks that he had previously seen the devil of violence, the devil of greed, and the devil of hot desire. He was seeing the **"devil of rapacious and pitiless folly"**.

The white men, whom Marlow encounters in Congo, by no means provide any relief to Marlow. These men, cowardly civilized, are actually degenerate fellows. There is no goodness in them at all. The manager of the Central Station is a wicked fellow who can inspire neither fear, nor love, nor respect but only uneasiness. Marlow says that there was **"nothing within"** this man. The white agents are seen loitering about idly, talking maliciously and scheming against one another. The brick-maker is the manager's spy who keeps a watch upon the other white men at the Central Station. Marlow describes this man as a **"papier-mâché Mephistopheles"** meaning that his man is a veritable devil, but a follow kind of devil. The white men, who have come to civilize the natives, are only exploiters having no regard for the welfare of the savages.

Evil is the keynote of the latter portion of the novel in which Marlow records his impressions of Mr. Kurtz. He has been told that Mr. Kurtz is a **"remarkable man"** who is expected to rise at a very high position because he has been collecting more ivory than all the other agents taken together. Ivory had become a passion and an obsession with Mr. Kurtz which shows the man's extreme greed. He has begun to identify himself with the native savages. He presides over their midnight dances which always end with **"unspeakable rites"**. This means that he has begun to take pleasure in the shedding of the blood of human beings, in sexual orgies, in sexual



perversions and in similar other practices. In short, Mr. Kurtz has become evil incarnate. Even when Mr. Kurtz is being taken to Europe for medical treatment, he slips away from the ship into the jungle. When Mr. Kurtz is dying, he utters the words:

**“The horror! The horror!”**

The portrayal of Mr. Kurtz is perhaps even more important in this novel for this portrayal of a civilized man is meant to convey Conrad's own ideas about evil. Conrad believes that there is much evil in the savages. He does not believe in the existence of the **“noble savage”**. The barbarian customs of the savages are certainly horrifying to him. Because of his prolonged stay with the savages Mr. Kurtz become a devil. Conrad says that the western man should beware of falling a prey to the barbarism of the savages whom he conquers. Conrad depicts the savages in a favourable light too, but it is fully alive to the obnoxious customs of the savages and warns the western white men against the menace of those customs. Conrad's other message is that the white man should civilize the savages instead of exploiting them to fulfill his own greed.

## **Major Themes in Heart of Darkness**

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is set primarily in Africa and the narrator is of European descent, so of course there is the element of race in this story. Marlow does not seem to be any more or less racist than anyone else, which indicates a prevailing attitude of racism rather than a particular prejudice by one or two people. While the whites consistently refer to the black natives with pejorative and ugly names, they do not speak out of anger or derision. In fact, Marlow says he feels a thrum of connection to these wild, dancing, gesticulating people. Instead, there is a sense that the whites see the blacks merely as undeveloped humans--nothing to scorn but also nothing to particularly admire or appreciate. This is best demonstrated by Marlow's willingness to give a dying black man a biscuit and then casually dismissing the death of his black helmsman as a savage who was no more account than a grain of sand in a black Sahara.

Though he misses the man's function on his ship, he does not mourn for the man because he is black and therefore not worth mourning. Ironically, of course, so many of the black natives are more moral and honest people, despite their savage ways, than the white, Imperialist encroachers. The issue of race, value, and human worth is one theme in this story.

Another important theme in this short novel is madness. There is something about this mysterious, hot, and thrumming continent which is enough to create disorder in the minds of Marlow and his men. As early as chapter one, Marlow feels this:

The idleness of a passenger, my isolation amongst all these men with whom I had no point of contact, the oily and languid sea, the uniform somberness of the coast, seemed to keep me away from the truth of things, within the toil of a mournful and senseless delusion.

When prolonged isolation is added to this, we get Kurtz, who has literally gone insane after years in the African jungle. His dying words reveal his delusional sense of ownership of things which cannot be owned:

"You should have heard him say, 'My ivory.' Oh, yes, I heard him. 'My Intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my—' everything belonged to him."

Whether it is the effect of the jungle or his unchecked greed and power, he dies believing he, like God, possesses everything he sees. That is insanity.

A final theme among many others (such as corruption, deception, communication, and violence) is the quest for truth. Marlow is searching for something important and true and worthy of emulation; to find it, he must endure trials and testing just as anyone on a quest must do. He is looking for something morally perfect and righteous, not the "flabby rapacious folly" of the others who have imposed their imperial will on the natives.

Of course the object of his quest is Kurtz, but what he eventually discovers is that Kurtz is more evil, greedy, and cruel than anyone else Marlow has met or even heard about. This revelation is devastating, for he realizes that the core, the heart, of everything "lead[s] into the heart of an immense darkness." What he thought was true was a lie, and now he must even lie to the Intended to keep her from knowing the one inescapable truth about Kurtz. Truth does not exist for him now.

This is a short work, but it is full of lessons to be learned and realizations to be made. Most of them center on who Kurtz is (or has become) and how Marlow reacts to this place and this man.

## **Colonialism and beyond Things Fall Apart and Heart of Darkness**

One of the most well known post-colonial writers is Chinua Achebe. He was born in Ogidi in eastern Nigeria on November 16, 1930, to Isaiah Okafor Achebe and Janet Achebe. Even though his parents were devout evangelical Protestants, they still managed to instill in him many values of their traditional Igbo culture. "He attended mission schools, but remained emotionally close to many of his relatives who were not Christians. These early negotiations of cultural duality would later enable him to develop a necessary distance from the competing and conflicting forces that shaped his sense of self and formed his worldview" (Parekh 19)- a distance that he now affirms as a prerequisite to see the totality of life "steadily and fully" (Morning Yet on Creation Day, 68).

In 1944 Achebe enrolled in the Government College in Umuahia and four years later, he entered the London-affiliated University College at Ibadan. He graduated from Ibadan in 1953 and published his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, 1958. It was published reluctantly, because Heinemann editors were uncertain if the West would purchase a novel by an African. But the novel was a stunning success and remains Achebe's most widely read work. Achebe has also published four other novels as well as essays, short fiction, and poetry. He has become one of Africa's most outspoken intellectuals.

Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* is the search for values in a world that is constantly beset by change. It depicts three cycles. In the first cycle Achebe depicts Ibo tribal life before the coming

of the British near the end of the nineteenth century. This makes way for the beginning of the twentieth century and the Europeanization of Africa with all of its implied consequences for the issues, challenges, and future of a post-colonial Africa.

Okonkwo, the protagonist of *Things Fall Apart*, is the most opposed to change; he desperately tries to hold onto the traditional values and practices of his Ibo society. He does so in the midst of an alien European invasion which ultimately results in the disintegration of this traditional African society.

Before writing *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe had become disturbed by the works of European writers which portrayed Africans as noble savages. "These European writers believed that colonialism was an agent of enlightenment to primitive peoples without a valid value system or civilization of their own" (Taylor 28). "Africa was pictured as the dark continent, inhabited by childlike, superstitious, and fearful people only too ready to welcome, and indeed worship the white man" (Taylor 28).

Achebe was particularly disturbed by Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. He felt that Conrad painted an inaccurate and demeaning picture of the African people. "You could see from afar the white of their eyeballs glistening. They shouted, sang; their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks" (Conrad 17). "The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us- who could tell?" (Conrad 37), and finally "the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly" (Conrad 38).

It is precisely these kinds of images that feed the whole myth of White superiority. A myth which has lived for centuries; it has quite the enduring quality. I am always amazed at the way in which race, class, and politics are used to marginalize people of color worldwide. It is amazing to me that the term minority is still being used in the twenty-first century. The word itself is a misnomer. People of color are not minorities. In fact, people of color represent the majority of the world's population. It is precisely the continuing effect of Euro centrism, hegemony, and cultural bias which feeds the construction of the so-called minority.

Furthermore, it is a well established fact, for anyone who cares to know that human life originated in Africa. This has been documented by qualified archaeologists and paleontologists for some time now. Ironically, if Europeans search their family trees back far enough, it will lead to Africa. The oldest civilizations known to man are out of Africa.

It is no wonder that Achebe defends Africa so fervently against what he perceives as Conrad's inaccurate racist assault on Africa. In, *An Image of Africa*, Achebe points out Conrad's portrayal of Africans as basically speechless "rudimentary souls" (255) of Africa. Achebe identifies the

two occasions when "Conrad confers speech on the savages" (255). "Give 'em! to us." "To you, eh?" I asked; "what would you do with them?" "Eat 'im!" he said curtly....

(Heart of Darkness). The first occasion refers to cannibalism, while the other occasion was the announcement of Mr. Kurtz's death. Clearly, both of these instances of speech serve Conrad's subverted vision of the Africans. The question for Achebe is "whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art. My answer is no. No, it cannot" (An Image of Africa 257).

In spite of Achebe's fairly thorough condemnation of Conrad's motives in Heart of Darkness, the novel itself still remains a testimony to nineteenth century thought. Clearly, the book was written during a portion of the nineteenth century which was the period of colonialism, while Achebe and Things Fall Apart is representative of a post-colonial Africa.

During colonialism, the notion of Victorian virtue remained a component of English and European thought and culture. This Victorian trinity involved the notion of work, duty, and restraint. "Conrad wants both, to endorse the standard Victorian moral positives, and to express his forebodings that the dominant intellectual directions of the nineteenth century were preparing for disaster for the twentieth" (Watt 77). This conflict between the nineteenth and twentieth century is expressed by Conrad through his characterization of Marlow and Kurtz, and the tension or philosophical difference of the two. Conrad once said, "what makes men tragic, is not that they are victims of nature, it is that they are conscious of it..." (Watt 78).

I see Marlow's experience up the river, of the dark continent's Congo, as one which is indicative of an evolutionary process, a progression. While, I view Kurtz's response to this environment in opposite terms- Kurtz experienced a digression. The wilderness unleashed the beast within Kurtz which lay just underneath his prestigious Victorian facade of economic expansion in the name of progress. Kurtz purports to stand for the civilizing of the so called savages through economic progress and of course they will also benefit spiritually by way of the residue of his so-claimed Victorian posture.

I believe Conrad does succeed in effectively exposing the discrepancies between colonial pretence and reality. Keep in mind that during the 1880's and 1890's (the time-frame around Heart of Darkness), it was generally held by many that the Victorian World Order was collapsing. Conrad exposes this whole notion of educational, moral, and religious benefits, when he describes colonialism as "the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration" (Heart of Darkness and Nineteenth Century Thought).

"She talked about weaning those ignorant millions from there horrid ways, 'till, upon my word she made me quite uncomfortable. I ventured to hint that the company was run for profit"



(Conrad 16). Here Conrad uses Marlow as his moral compass for what is really going on in Africa. While it becomes clear that Kurtz finds the tiger and ape within himself in Africa; and lets them loose. The frenzied Kurtz allows himself to do everything he wants to and claim the righteousness of God for doing it. Conrad once wrote, "Christianity is the only religion which with its impossible standards has brought infinity of anguish to innumerable souls - on this earth." Therefore, we have reached a point of convergence that both Conrad (Colonial) and Achebe (Postcolonial) can agree on. Man shall not be God.

There is life after post colonialism. What happens after the imperialists are booted out? What happens to the colonized when they gain their independence? These are the kinds of questions that place us between post colonialism and modernity.

There is a struggle going on in Africa. It is a struggle between the old and the new, between tradition and the hegemonic influences of the West (impact of neocolonialism.) It is a struggle which has resulted in the cultural dislocation and confusion of the African.

This struggle creates a kind of cultural schizophrenia. A cultural schism is created and within this schism dwells, isolation, alienation, loneliness, and dispossession. Achebe's second novel, *No Longer at Ease*, addresses this gap, and the fallout of the dislocating dilemma that faces modern African society.

*No Longer at Ease*, was published in 1960. It is set on the eve of Nigeria's political independence. The protagonist of the novel is Obi, the grandson of Okowkwo (of *Things Fall Apart*.) "As its title suggests, the novel explores the malaise of modern Nigeria: the uneasy coexistence of traditional ethos and European values and the absence of a coherent cultural framework that can give a firm direction to the country in general, and its educated elite in particular" (Parekh 23).

Obi goes away to England and receives an excellent education at an English university. He returns home and attains a prestigious Civil Service job. As Obi is unable to integrate his anglicized attitudes and indigenous values, he increasingly finds himself rootless and alienated in his own native country! "He rejects certain Igbo cultural practices, such as the caste system that ostracizes the osu; yet he does not have the moral courage to marry his girlfriend Clara, because his parents, violently object to having an osu daughter-in-law" (Parekh 23). Obi seems stuck (immobilized) between the past and the future, and this is precisely the dilemma that plagues many Africans in modern society. His failure to formulate a coherent set of moral values ultimately destroys him. He begins to accept bribes, which is a pervasive practice among government officials. He gets caught and the novel ends with Obi's conviction.

Obi's failure was the post-colonial failure to achieve the necessary synthesis of indigenous traditions and the imposed Western values into a coherent and functional system. While individually tragic, it becomes clear that this lack also operates on a community and national level.

Colin Turnbull addresses the feelings of disconnect which is so prevalent among Africans, in his book *The Lonely African*. Turnbull's book was published in 1962. Turnbull is an established anthropologist, who has made three extended field trips to Africa. He has written several books based on his research and field work. Turnbull was born in London and studied at Oxford, where he studied anthropology, specializing in the African field.

Turnbull quite adequately describes the dilemma of the African. He says, "there is a void in the life of the African, a spiritual emptiness, divorced as he is from each world (old and new), standing in between, torn in both directions. To go forward is to abandon the past in which the roots of his being have their nourishment; to go backward is to cut himself off from the future." Turnbull continues, "The African has been taught to abandon his old ways, yet he is not accepted in the new world, even when he has mastered its ways. There seems to be no bridge, and this is the source of his terrible loneliness" (Turnbull xi).

Since the years of independence, many modern cities have sprung up in Africa. And it is in the urban areas of Africa where feelings of discontent and disconnect (the dilemma) is most pronounced. In these cities the westerner can live as though he was at home in his native country. He can eat the same food, and think the same thoughts, all while holding onto the same ideals.

To casual observers the Africans in these urban areas look and dress the same as the westerners; they speak the same language and take part in the same economic life. "But the Europeans are more at home in these African cities than the Africans themselves. The African is a stranger in his own land; he knows it; and the Europeans know it" (Turnbull 2).

This is a familiar scenario. It reminds me of the English imperialists in *A Passage to India*. There is a scene where Adela complains that they have seen nothing of India, but rather English customs replicated abroad. And of course, this is a recurrent theme or complaint about the long arm of British colonialism (the British Empire.) The British attempt to turn all of her colonial holdings into a microcosm of itself, is viewed as a sort of unwanted contamination of the indigenous culture. In fact, it soon becomes apparent in "*A Passage to India*," that an Anglo and Indian are much more likely to be friends in England than India. This kind of a paradox is also applicable to the modern experiences of Africans.

As I've stated, Europeans are quite comfortable living in the modern urban areas of Africa. This

European convenience has included separate eating and traveling facilities, separation wherever possible because there is no need to meet the African socially. This separation is degrading for the African because he has as much pride and self-respect as the European.

The fact that, there are some Africans who are fortunate enough to be able go abroad (to the first world) and study at a London University in England is and seems like a wonderful thing. Ironically, most of these same Africans found when they returned home; that even though they were in many cases better educated than many Europeans in Africa; they found that they still were not accepted as equals to them. They have found themselves being offered jobs well below their educational level because many of the Administrative positions and higher jobs were for Europeans only. Ironically, they also found themselves socially segregated at home (Africa), whereas they had lived in England (the first world) relatively free from the social barriers that prevent interracial contact.

Similarly, through the character Chacko, in "The God of Small Things," it becomes fairly obvious that he and his wife and child, Margaret and Sophie Mol, could live a significantly less problematic life in England (the first world) than they could have in India. In fact, in the post-modern period there exists the trend that people of color (the colonized) are going to the colonial countries which once colonized them. They often, as my previous examples show, find a more satisfying and more beneficial life in the country of their former colonizer.

This I believe brings us to the New World Order or what is aesthetically referred to as post-modernism. Post-modernism is generally representative of the first world; it gives a sense of being at the end of history. In a sense, as far as literature is concerned mostly everything has already been done. We are a long way out from Defoe's Robinson Crusoe (1719). Post-modern novels are typically non-heroic while emphasizing marginal characters. Many consider it to be the literature of exhaustion. Literature that re-works previously done literature. I believe there is an element of determinism in the postmodern.

Being at the end, signals a new beginning. This course from colonialism to post-colonialism to modernity and to post-modernity and it has made me realize that there is something cyclical about the so-called end of history. Often at the end of a journey we do not end quite where we thought we would have.