



## The role of colonialism in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness

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### Abstract

Joseph Conrad's seminal novella, *Heart of Darkness*, stands as a profound and multifaceted exploration of European colonialism in late 19th-century Africa. This paper argues that the novel offers a powerful, yet complex and often ambivalent, critique of the colonial enterprise, exposing its brutal practices, its corrupting influence on colonizers, and the inherent hypocrisy of its "civilizing mission," while simultaneously reflecting some of the era's pervasive biases. Through the journey of Marlow into the Belgian Congo and his encounter with the enigmatic Kurtz, Conrad vividly depicts colonialism as a system driven by insatiable greed, leading to the physical and psychological devastation of both the colonized and the colonizers. The narrative challenges conventional notions of "civilization" and "savagery," revealing the moral decay at the core of imperial ambition. While the novel's portrayal of African people has drawn significant postcolonial criticism, its enduring relevance lies in its unflinching examination of power, morality, and the enduring legacies of imperialism.

**Keywords:** Heart of Darkness, Joseph Conrad, colonialism, imperialism, postcolonialism, moral decay, dehumanization, Kurtz, Marlow, Africa

### Introduction

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, published in 1899, holds a distinguished place in literary history as a pioneering work of modernist fiction and a profound examination of European imperialism. Recognized as one of the best novellas in literary history, it is uniquely positioned as the first major English novel to explicitly deal with overseas colonization, offering a complex narrative that continues to provoke diverse critical interpretations<sup>[1]</sup>. Its enduring power stems from its intricate portrayal of human nature, morality, and the devastating impact of unchecked power.

The novel is set against the backdrop of late 19th-century European imperialism in Africa, a period characterized by an intense "race to colonize and exploit the resources of the continent"<sup>[3]</sup>. The specific setting, the Belgian Congo, was notoriously synonymous with immense greed and brutal treatment of indigenous populations<sup>[4]</sup>. Conrad's narrative gains particular authenticity from his own direct experience in the Congo, making his account distinct among European authors of his era.<sup>5</sup> His personal history, born in Russian-occupied Poland, exposed him early to the harsh realities of imperial rule, shaping a unique perspective that he later channeled into his fiction<sup>[5]</sup>. This first-hand engagement with the consequences of imperial power, especially in a region as brutalized as the Congo, means the novel stands out not just for its content but also for its rarity. It underscores a broader silence or complicity within European literature regarding colonial atrocities, highlighting how few European writers of the time dared to offer such a direct and unflinching portrayal of the moral decay inherent in the colonial project.

This paper argues that *Heart of Darkness* offers a powerful, yet complex and often ambivalent, critique of European colonialism. It exposes the brutal practices and the corrupting influence of imperialism on colonizers, while simultaneously laying bare the inherent hypocrisy of the "civilizing mission." However, the novel also reflects some of the pervasive biases of its era, leading to ongoing critical debate about Conrad's ultimate stance. While many readers

and critics regard it as an important anti-colonial work, viewing Conrad as an anti-colonial writer, a closer reading reveals elements that suggest a defense or at least an embodiment of colonial thought<sup>[1]</sup>. This enduring ambiguity is not merely a critical puzzle; it mirrors the inherent complexities and moral compromises of colonialism itself. Colonialism was never a monolithic phenomenon; it encompassed diverse motivations—economic, civilizing, personal—and manifested in varying degrees of brutality, eliciting a spectrum of moral responses from its participants. Conrad, living in the British Empire during the Victorian era and influenced by its prevailing ideology<sup>[1]</sup>, encapsulates this internal conflict. His work, therefore, serves as a literary artifact that reflects the messy, contradictory nature of the historical process it depicts, rather than offering a simplistic moral judgment. This complexity allows the novel to remain a powerful tool for exploring the nuanced psychological and ethical dimensions of imperialism.

### Colonialism as a System of Brutality and Exploitation

*Heart of Darkness* vividly portrays European colonialism not as a noble endeavor, but as a system fundamentally rooted in brutality and exploitation, where the rhetoric of "civilization" serves as a thin veneer for rapacious greed and violence.

#### 1. The "Civilizing Mission" as a Facade for Greed and Violence

European colonizers frequently justified their presence in Africa by claiming to bring "civilization" and enlightenment to a continent they depicted as "dark" and "primitive"<sup>[3]</sup>. They presented themselves as "lightbringers," ostensibly rescuing Africans from their supposed "darkness"<sup>[1]</sup>. However, the novel starkly contrasts this idealistic rhetoric with the grim reality on the ground. Marlow, the protagonist, quickly perceives the true nature of the enterprise, noting that "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,

is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only" [1]. This "idea" is revealed to be a mere justification for profound exploitation, masking the imposition of Europe's "narrow and rigid ideas of civilization on the native population" [3]. The supposed "light" they shine is often depicted as "sinister" and fleeting, ultimately leading to a "true darkness full of violence and cruelty" [7].

**2. Physical and Economic Exploitation: The Ivory Trade**

At the heart of the colonial enterprise depicted in the novel is an insatiable economic drive. The European powers engaged in a "ruthless competition for control over the region" [3], primarily driven by the exploitation of Africa's abundant resources, most notably ivory [3]. The pursuit of ivory becomes the central obsession for characters like Kurtz [9], and the company manager views human lives "merely as tools required towards the ultimate goal of ivory" [7]. This relentless pursuit of wealth connects the colonial project to a "larger system of global capitalism that perpetuates exploitation and inequality" [3]. The economic imperative is not merely a motivation; it is the fundamental cause of the profound dehumanization depicted. By reducing Africa to a source of wealth and its people to disposable tools or beasts of burden, the colonial system systematically strips them of their humanity. This objectification makes their brutal treatment and exploitation morally permissible in the eyes of the colonizers, effectively removing any ethical barriers to violence and forced labor. The loss of humanity among the colonizers is thus a direct consequence of their pursuit of wealth and power within the colonial project [6].

**3. Dehumanization and "Othering" of African Indigenous People**

A pervasive and problematic aspect of the novel's portrayal of colonialism is its consistent depiction of African natives as "mysterious, primitive, and almost inhuman" [3].

They are frequently labeled "savages" and treated as "beasts of burden" by the European colonizers [3]. Conrad's narrative employs overtly discriminatory language, referring to them as "some black shapes crouched," "the black bones reclined," and "a whirl of black limbs". [1] Even an "educated black man" is depicted as "alienated into a specimen and compared to a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat," highlighting a profound depersonalization and a portrayal of foolishness. [1] This "cultural hegemony" and the "distortion of the image of Africa and African indigenous people" served to justify the necessity of European colonization and to absolve colonizers of their guilt [1]. The "darkness" of the title initially functions as a colonial projection, vilifying Africa to justify intervention and the imposition of European "light." However, the narrative powerfully subverts this by revealing the true "heart of darkness" to reside within the European colonizers themselves and their exploitative system [3]. This inversion is a powerful rhetorical device, turning the colonial justification back on itself and challenging the fundamental premise of colonial ideology, suggesting that the colonizers, not the colonized, are the source of true savagery and moral decay.

**4. Depiction of Atrocities, Forced Labor, and Moral Blindness**

The novel provides unflinching descriptions of the "brutal and exploitative practices of colonialism" [3], including "slavery, forced labor, and genocide" [3]. Marlow witnesses "tortured slaves so emaciated that 'every rib [could be seen]' and every 'limp were like knots in a rope'" [7]. These graphic details underscore the "moral blindness among the colonizers" [3] who consistently "fail to see Africans as fully human" [3]. Marlow's initial assessment of the enterprise as "a robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a greater scale" [7] immediately establishes the narrative's critical stance against the physical and moral devastation wrought by colonialism. The contrast between the stated ideals and the depicted realities is stark, as illustrated in the following table:

**Table 1:** European Justifications vs. Colonial Realities in Heart of Darkness

European Justifications/Rhetoric	Reality Depicted in Heart of Darkness
Bringing civilization and education	Robbery with violence, aggravated murder
Lightbringers, rescuing Africans from darkness	Cruel plunder of material wealth
White man's burden, science and progress	Dehumanization, moral decay, spiritual emptiness
Imposing order and advancement	Brutality and inhumanity, forced labor, genocide
Benevolent mission	Greed and materialism, imposing narrow ideas of civilization

This table visually highlights the profound hypocrisy at the core of the "civilizing mission." The stated intentions of European colonizers are directly contradicted by the actual events and moral degradation depicted in the novel. It underscores how the "darkness" is not an inherent quality of Africa, but rather a consequence of European actions and intentions, which are driven by avarice and a distorted sense of superiority.

**The Corrupting Influence on Colonizers: The Descent of Kurtz**

Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness powerfully illustrates how the colonial environment, far from civilizing, corrupts and ultimately destroys the European colonizers themselves.

Mr. Kurtz stands as the central embodiment of this moral decay.

**1. Kurtz as a Symbol of Moral Decay and Unchecked Power**

Kurtz, initially presented as a brilliant and idealistic "emissary of science and progress" [9], is a figure who "has gone beyond the bounds of civilization" [3]. His initial admiration for his "perceived enlightenment" [6] quickly gives way to a descent into "greed and a lust for hate" [5], transforming him into a tyrannical figure who exploits the native population without restraint. His "descent into madness is seen as a metaphor for the moral decay of the entire colonial enterprise" [3]. Kurtz's trajectory reveals an inherent contradiction at the heart of the imperial project.

The very systems designed to bring "civilization"—science, progress, order—paradoxically create the conditions for their most extreme antithesis: unchecked savagery, exploitation, and moral decay. Kurtz is not an anomaly but the logical extreme of a system that grants absolute power without accountability, driven by insatiable greed<sup>[8]</sup>. His ultimate "horror" is not just personal regret but the recognition of this systemic failure, where the "light" of civilization becomes the "darkness" of barbarism. This suggests that colonialism is not merely a flawed enterprise but a fundamentally self-destructive one, consuming both the colonized and the colonizer in its moral vacuum.

## 2. The Wilderness as a Catalyst for Savagery

The African wilderness in *Heart of Darkness* is more than just a setting; it acts as a powerful catalyst and metaphor for the "hollowness and superficiality of European civilization" itself.<sup>4</sup> Kurtz "capitulates to his barbaric side due to his environment"<sup>[9]</sup>, as the "silent wilderness" strikes Marlow as "something great and invincible, like evil or truth, waiting patiently for the passing away of this fantastic invasion"<sup>[4]</sup>. It is not that the wilderness causes the darkness, but rather that it reveals the pre-existing moral void and latent savagery within the "civilized" European. The breakdown of external societal structures and moral codes in the colonial setting allows the "dark essence" that Conrad implies resides "in the core of every human" to manifest<sup>[9]</sup>. The wilderness "whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude—and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating"<sup>[4]</sup>. This implies that Kurtz's "primitive instincts" were always present, merely suppressed by societal constraints. This perspective extends the critique beyond specific colonial practices to a more universal commentary on human nature and the precariousness of moral order, suggesting that "civilization" is a thin veneer easily peeled back under conditions of absolute power and isolation.

## 3. "The Horror! The Horror!": Kurtz's Final Revelation

Kurtz's dying words, "The horror! The horror!"<sup>[6]</sup>, represent the novel's most potent condemnation of the colonial project. This moment of epiphany signifies Kurtz's realization of the "terrible consequences that his actions had caused"<sup>[7]</sup> and the "dark truths of colonialism"<sup>[6]</sup>. It encapsulates the "dark, violent, and consuming" nature of European colonialism<sup>[7]</sup>. This final utterance serves as a stark acknowledgment of the profound moral corruption and devastation that Kurtz has not only witnessed but actively embodied, leaving a lasting impression of the destructive power of the imperial endeavor.

## Marlow's Disillusionment and Psychological Confrontation

Marlow, as the primary narrator, serves as the reader's guide through the moral labyrinth of colonialism, his journey tracing a path from initial curiosity to profound disillusionment and a confrontation with the "darkness" within himself and humanity.

### 1. Marlow's Evolving Perspective on Colonialism

Marlow is initially drawn to the idea of Africa and the colonial enterprise, a common sentiment among Europeans

of his time.<sup>3</sup> However, as he witnesses the "brutality and inhumanity of the colonizers," his perspective undergoes a radical transformation. He experiences a growing "disillusionment with the colonial enterprise as he becomes increasingly aware of the moral compromises made by Europeans".<sup>6</sup> He begins to push against the very idea of colonialism, expressing shock and horror at the "frightening results" of the ivory company's dreadful treatment of the natives.<sup>7</sup> His evolving perspective shapes the narrative's critical stance, designed to elicit a similar response from the audience.

## 2. A Metaphorical Journey into the "Heart of Darkness"

Marlow's expedition up the Congo River is presented as both a literal journey into the geographical heart of Africa and a "metaphorical descent into the depths of the human psyche"<sup>[6]</sup>. His quest to find Kurtz becomes a "journey into the self, one's 'inner spirit'"<sup>[9]</sup>, forcing him to confront "the enigma that is humanity, and the blurred line between light and dark"<sup>[9]</sup>. This dual journey elevates the novel beyond a mere travelogue, making it a profound exploration of internal psychological and moral landscapes. Marlow's engagement with the colonial project, while critical, is primarily psychological and introspective, rather than an active political or social resistance. His journey is one of internal revelation and moral awakening, compelling him to confront his own potential for darkness and the inherent flaws of European "civilization." While he witnesses and condemns the atrocities, his actions do not fundamentally alter the colonial machinery. This suggests that Conrad's focus is less on revolutionary change and more on the individual's moral burden and the psychological cost of participating in or witnessing such a system. The "horror" becomes internalized by Marlow, transforming into a personal trauma rather than a call to collective action.

## 3. The Blurring Lines between "Civilization" and "Savagery"

One of the most powerful aspects of Marlow's experience is his observation that "the barrier segregating civilization from savagery is equally obscure"<sup>[9]</sup>. He witnesses a stark inversion of conventional expectations, where the "white pilgrims" are portrayed as "materialistic, violent, and savage ivory seekers who possess 'dark souls'," while the black natives are depicted as "civil and spiritual with 'light souls'"<sup>[7]</sup>. This challenges Marlow's "preconceived notions" as he confronts the "brutality of the European colonizers"<sup>[6]</sup>. This reversal forces the reader to question the very definitions of "civilization" and "savagery" and to consider where true barbarity lies. The "incomprehensible" nature of Africa for Marlow is not merely a descriptive detail but a deeper critique of European epistemology and its inability to grasp non-Western realities<sup>[4]</sup>. Colonialism was often predicated on the idea that Europe could understand, categorize, and therefore control the "Other." Marlow's struggle with the "incomprehensible" suggests the failure of this Eurocentric framework to truly comprehend the complex realities of Africa and its people. This inability to understand leads to fear and ultimately, the imposition of their own narrow ideas of "civilization" because true engagement is impossible within the colonial mindset. This highlights the intellectual arrogance of colonialism, where anything outside the European frame of reference is deemed "dark" or

"savage" because it resists categorization and control, thus justifying its domination.

#### 4. Marlow's Critique and Complicity

While Marlow displays a significant "form of resistance by questioning and critiquing the colonial project" [6], his position is not entirely unblemished. He "remains complicit to some extent" [6], most notably by lying to Kurtz's intended about his final words [5]. His "powerless disgust" [4] and his ultimate inability to fully escape the system's pervasive influence underscore the profound and insidious nature of colonialism [3]. Marlow's compromises and internal struggles make his critique more realistic and complex, highlighting the inherent difficulty of remaining morally untainted within a corrupt and dehumanizing system.

#### Conrad's Ambivalent Stance and Critical Interpretations

The interpretation of Conrad's stance on colonialism in *Heart of Darkness* remains a central and contentious academic debate, reflecting the novel's inherent complexity.

##### 1. The Debate: Anti-Colonialist vs. Colonial Advocate

A significant body of criticism views Conrad as a staunch anti-colonialist, arguing that through Marlow's narration, he "not only described the European colonists' destruction of African people's spiritual culture and cruel plunder of material wealth... but also revealed the anti-colonial consciousness of some European intellectuals" [1]. These critics consider Conrad a "complete anti-colonialist" who exposed and criticized the brutal acts of colonizers with peculiar acuity [1]. Conversely, other scholars contend that Conrad "not only criticized colonialism, but also showed his defense of colonialism" [1], suggesting he was an "accomplice of other colonialists" [1]. This perspective acknowledges that Conrad's portrayal "is not a straightforward condemnation of the practice," but rather a depiction of colonialism as a "complex and multifaceted phenomenon" [3].

##### 2. Influence of Victorian-Era Ideology on Conrad's Perspective

A key factor in understanding this critical ambivalence is Conrad's historical context. He "lived in the British Empire in the Victorian era and was rightly influenced by the ideology of the time" [1]. As a "member of the 'Empire on which the sun never set'," he inherently "embodied the idea of colonialism" to some extent [1]. For instance, he suggested that "Africa in its infancy could not be compared with Europe in its adult age," implying a need for European "advancement" [1]. His descriptions of African people, often using "obviously discriminatory" terms [1], reflect these prevailing biases. The novel thus presents a paradox: it attempts to critique colonialism from within the very discourse and worldview of colonialism itself. Conrad, as a product of his time, could not entirely escape the prevailing racist and Eurocentric assumptions [1]. Therefore, his critique, while powerful in exposing European hypocrisy and moral decay, often fails to grant full agency or humanity to the colonized, reducing them to symbolic backdrops for European introspection [8]. This means the novel's "anti-colonial" message is inherently limited by its embedded colonial perspective, highlighting the profound difficulty,

even for a critical mind, of fully transcending the dominant ideologies of one's era.

#### 3. Conrad's Unique Biographical Context

Conrad's personal history provides a crucial lens through which to understand his nuanced perspective. Born Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski in Russian-occupied Poland, he was personally affected by imperialism, living "without a nation, a life of constant movement" [5]. This early exposure to imperial rule likely fostered a sensitivity to oppression. His direct experience in the Congo, where he "bore witness to many events" as a sailor, provided him with a unique "first-hand account" of the colonial atrocities [5]. This unique life experience profoundly "affected his view of imperialism," motivating him to "actively seek to share the activity of atrocities created by imperialism with people of Europe" [5]. While he may not have fully escaped the biases of his time, his personal history undeniably fueled his critical engagement with the subject.

#### 4. Postcolonial Critiques: Chinua Achebe and the "White Tragedy"

From a postcolonial perspective, *Heart of Darkness* has faced significant criticism, most notably from Chinua Achebe. Achebe argues that the novel "effectively silenc[es] the 'Other' by portraying Africans as beings without language, culture, or history, thus dehumanizing them" [8]. He views Africans in the novel as "grotesques or as a howling mob" and primarily as a "mere foil to Europe" [8]. This critique positions the novel as a "white tragedy," where the "non-European setting serves as a 'metaphysical battlefield' for European internal struggles, with the natives reduced to 'props'" [4]. While the claim of "universal potential for savagery" [5] can broaden the novel's philosophical scope, it can also be interpreted as a strategic evasion of the specific historical and racial dimensions of colonialism. By universalizing "darkness" to human nature, it risks diluting the accountability for the specific, racially motivated atrocities committed in the Congo. If everyone has a "heart of darkness," then the particular horrors of European colonialism might be seen as merely an expression of a universal flaw, rather than a consequence of a specific political and economic system built on racial hierarchy. This interpretation supports the "white tragedy" argument, where the focus shifts from the victims of colonialism to the moral struggles of the perpetrators, raising a critical question: can a text truly critique colonialism if it simultaneously universalizes its themes in a way that de-emphasizes the unique suffering and agency of the colonized?

#### Subtle Resistance and the Enduring Legacy

Despite its focus on the European experience, *Heart of Darkness* also contains subtle acknowledgments of African resilience, contributing to its complex and enduring legacy as a foundational text for understanding imperialism.

##### 1. The Presence and Limitations of African Resistance

"Resistance against colonialism is a subtle yet present theme in the novella" [6]. Despite their marginalized position, African characters demonstrate resilience by maintaining their "own cultural practices and social structures" [6]. This quiet perseverance counters the complete dehumanization often imposed by colonial narratives. However, Conrad also

"suggests the limited effectiveness of resistance in the face of overwhelming colonial power" [6], with the "futile bow-and-arrow attack" being the only direct act of opposition depicted [8]. The "subtle" nature of African resistance in the novel is not necessarily a reflection of historical reality, but rather a narrative constraint imposed by Conrad's Eurocentric perspective. By focusing on Marlow's internal journey and Kurtz's moral decay, active African resistance is marginalized or rendered ineffective, reinforcing the "white tragedy" narrative. The maintenance of cultural practices, while a form of resilience, is presented more as an inherent quality than a conscious, organized act of defiance against overwhelming power. This further highlights the novel's limitation in fully representing the colonized experience, even as it critiques the colonizers.

## 2. The Novel's Lasting Impact as a Critique of Imperialism

Heart of Darkness continues to be a pivotal text because it "offers a critical examination of the destructive effects of colonialism" [6]. It "continues to teach and advocate against imperialism, serving as a lasting testimony to the legacy of imperialism" [5]. Despite its problematic elements, the novel remains a powerful and influential work for its unflinching portrayal of colonial brutality and its profound psychological insights. It consistently prompts "critical conversations about the legacies of colonialism and imperialism" [3].

## 3. Continued Relevance in Discussions of Power, Race, and Morality

The novel's exploration of "the complexities of human nature within the colonial context" [6] and its engagement with "issues of power, race, and morality" [3] ensure its ongoing relevance. The novel's portrayal of the "ambiguity of human nature" and how "Colonialism can corrupt and dehumanize both the colonized and the colonizers" [6] makes it a valuable text for contemporary discussions on exploitation, ethical responsibility, and the impact of systemic injustice. The novel's enduring legacy is not simply as a straightforward anti-colonial text, but precisely as a catalyst for broader postcolonial dialogue. Its problematic aspects, particularly its dehumanization of Africans, have spurred vital counter-narratives and critical theories, such as those by Achebe, forcing a deeper examination of how colonial power operates not just through physical force but also through representation and discourse. Thus, its lasting value lies not only in what it says about colonialism but also in the critical conversations it continues to provoke, pushing literary studies to confront the complexities of representation and power. This positions Heart of Darkness as a foundational, albeit controversial, text for understanding the evolution of postcolonial thought and the ongoing process of decolonizing literary canons.

## Conclusion

Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness stands as a profound and enduring literary work that meticulously dissects the role of colonialism in late 19th-century Africa. The novel presents a dual narrative: a scathing critique of the brutal realities of European imperialism, exposing its inherent hypocrisy and the devastating physical and moral toll it exacted, juxtaposed with elements that reflect the pervasive biases of its Victorian-era context. Through Marlow's journey into the

Congo, the narrative vividly illustrates how the "civilizing mission" was a mere facade for ruthless economic exploitation, particularly the ivory trade, which systematically dehumanized African people and reduced them to disposable commodities.

The descent of Mr. Kurtz serves as the novel's most potent symbol of colonialism's corrupting influence. His transformation from an idealistic "emissary of science and progress" to a tyrannical figure consumed by savagery exemplifies how unchecked power and the absence of societal constraints can strip away the veneer of "civilization," revealing a profound moral void within the colonizer. Marlow's own journey mirrors this psychological confrontation, as he grapples with the blurring lines between "civilization" and "savagery" and experiences a profound disillusionment with the colonial enterprise. While his critique is largely internal and psychological, it underscores the individual moral burden imposed by participation in such a system.

The novel's complex portrayal has led to ongoing critical debate regarding Conrad's own stance, highlighting the paradox of critiquing colonialism from within its own dominant discourse. Despite its problematic elements, particularly its dehumanization of African characters, Heart of Darkness remains an indispensable text. Its enduring significance lies not only in its unflinching portrayal of colonial atrocities but also in its capacity to provoke crucial conversations about the legacies of imperialism, power dynamics, race, and morality. By forcing readers to confront the "horror" at the heart of the colonial project, the novel continues to serve as a vital catalyst for critical reflection and postcolonial dialogue, ensuring its continued relevance in understanding the complexities of human nature and the profound impact of historical injustices.

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