

## The Perpetuation of Racism

Charlie Marlow travels silently up the Congo River, every moment coming closer to the agent Kurtz and the true heart of darkness—the center of Africa. As he journeys inward, Marlow senses a loss of sanity going on around him, symbolized by the increasing appearance of savage and uncivilized natives. Joseph Conrad, in Heart of Darkness, depicts Marlow's journey to the heart of depravity as a voyage that is surrounded by chaotic and barbarous Africans. His portrayal of human corruptibility as the core of African culture only serves to perpetuate the racist stereotypes that existed during his time. Although Conrad presents a strong critique of the corrupt colonialist mentality in Heart of Darkness, the novella simultaneously reinforces the racist stereotypes that are the foundation of colonialism.

Many aspects of Heart of Darkness show that Conrad detested Europe's imperialistic activities. Jonah Raskin, in "Conrad's Heart of Darkness," explains Conrad's critique of the European colonizers, writing that Heart of Darkness "demands to be read for...its moral condemnation of a colonialism which was, in Conrad's own words, 'the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration' " (Raskin). The men who work for the Company, who Marlow encounters on his trip up the Congo River, demonstrate this "vilest scramble," as Marlow describes them as utterly incompetent. When Marlow arrives at the Outer Station, the chaotic atmosphere that surrounds the station surprises him, and he views the activity occurring there as purposeless. He says, "The cliff was not in the way or anything; but this objectless blasting was all the work going on" (Conrad 81). Marlow comments sarcastically on the pointless work at the station: "After all, I also was a part of the great cause of these high and just proceedings" (Conrad 82). He is disgusted by what he sees but is even more disgusted and bitter that he is associated with the activity that he describes as "a

rapacious and pitiless folly” (Conrad 82). The manager that Marlow encounters at the Outer Station epitomizes colonial incompetence. Marlow says he “had no genius for organizing, for initiative, or for order even.... He had no learning, and no intelligence.” He had gotten the position as manager “because he was never ill” (Conrad 88). By depicting the highest authority, the manager, as superficial and depraved, Conrad condemns all of the corrupt colonizers who traveled from Europe.

While the Company employees Marlow encounters represent the incompetence of the supposedly civilized Europeans, the agent Kurtz represents the potential insanity that accompanies the European imperialists’ growing desire for wealth and power over native cultures. When Marlow finds Kurtz, he is ill, but he is also completely corrupted by greed. Marlow sees how Kurtz’s goals of helping to civilize the Africans have turned to goals of possessing and controlling them so he can obtain ivory. Right before his death, Kurtz is haunted by “images of wealth and fame,” and he boastfully names off his possessions, “My Intended, my station, my career, my ideas” (Conrad 152). Marlow sees Kurtz as a man who believes everything belongs to him, and because Kurtz thought it was all his, he became insane with greed. “It was as though he had wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the men before him,” Marlow observes (Conrad 140). Along with his lust for wealth, Marlow speaks of Kurtz’s insatiable thirst for power. The natives treat him like a god, and it is clear that he has authority grant life or death to the natives he lives among. Marlow concludes Kurtz “was hollow at the core”—“hollow” because he can never be satisfied, always wanting more power (Conrad 138). Kurtz’s corruption represents the greed and power that corrupt the European colonizers.

In Heart of Darkness, Kurtz represents all of Europe. “His mother was half-English, his father was half-French. All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz” (Conrad 127). Every

corrupt quality that Kurtz portrays is a reference to the same corruption that influenced the European imperialists. The colonizers first went to Africa because they wished to help bring civilization to the African natives; however, their motives turned to gaining power over the natives and gaining wealth. Commenting on 19<sup>th</sup> century imperialism, David Papke writes, “This grotesque political and economic phenomenon not only controlled and exploited non-European peoples but also left empty and deranged the agents of imperialism” (Papke). He explains how Europe’s attempt to colonize other nations and obtain dominance not only destroyed other cultures, but also engaged the Europeans in activities that compromised their moral values. By showing Kurtz as ultimately deranged by his imperial experience—his initial moral plans to civilize the natives give way to his insatiable thirst for wealth and power—Conrad is able to present a strong critique of the European colonizers who went to Africa in hopes of helping the people but who ended up exploiting them and their land.

Joseph Conrad does emphasize that European colonizers became corrupted by their hunger for power and resources; however, the novella reinforces those colonialist attitudes through the use of dark racist stereotypes. Conrad is unable to break free from the racist stereotypes of the natives in his critique of colonialism and only perpetuates the view that all Africans are savage and subhuman. For instance, in Marlow’s first encounter with the natives, he sees them as animals rather than humans. He says, “While I stood horror-stuck, one of these creatures rose to his hands and knees, and went off on all-fours towards the river to drink. He lapped out of his hand, then sat up in the sunlight” (Conrad 84). By depicting the natives in this way, Conrad only reinforces the idea that native peoples are inferior to Europeans. Even when he acknowledges their humanity, Marlow clearly sees them as savages. He describes the natives bringing Kurtz on a stretcher: “a cry arose whose shrillness pierced the still air like a sharp

arrow... streams of human beings—of naked human beings—with spears in their hands...with wild glances and savage movements, were poured into the clearing by the dark-faced and pensive forest” (Conrad 140). Readers with little knowledge of Africa and its people, like those living in Europe in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, will believe Conrad’s representation of the nature of Africans, embedding racist stereotypes in their minds. Raskin confirms Conrad’s racist perception of Africans. He writes, “Conrad believed that blacks were a corrupting force” and “He knew little about Negroes...he always remembered 'an enormous buck nigger encountered in Haiti' who crystallized his 'conception of blind, furious, unreasoning rage, manifested in the human animal” (Raskin). Thus, it is not surprising that this racist attitude is reflected in Conrad’s depiction of the natives in Heart of Darkness.

One example that seems on the surface to counter the idea that Conrad only offers racist portraits of the natives is his portrayal of the African woman, who also may be Kurtz’s mistress, as a brilliant goddess. However, his description of her barbaric adornments and exotic air serves to “other” the African woman. Marlow says, “She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress” (Conrad 142). Marlow and his fellow European “pilgrims” view this African woman not as an individual but as a thing, and the significance of her place within African culture is completely misunderstood. Conrad does not include many women in his novella, but it is clear that he thinks much more highly of Kurtz’s Intended than this African woman. Connor Wyer writes in “Two Readings of *Heart of Darkness*” that “Conrad endows one with language and the other without; one's status is lover the others is mistress,” and he concludes, “This reflects the essence of Conrad's failure to deal with the inequalities between blacks and whites” (Wyer). Chinua Achebe points out that this woman is only “a savage counterpart to the refined, European woman who will step forth to end

the story” (Achebe). In this way, Conrad perpetuates the racist stereotype that African women are exotic and fulfill the colonizers’ sexual desires. He does not give readers a chance to understand what intricate role African women may have in their culture.

On a more metaphorical level, the novella also perpetuates racist stereotypes by associating Kurtz’s slide toward insanity and corruption with native ritual and African darkness. Kurtz goes “native” when he becomes obsessed with power, and he savagely raids other camps to steal ivory and obtain more control. In his demise, Kurtz becomes just like the Africans; Marlow refers to him like he refers to the natives earlier in the novel as a “Shadow—this wandering and tormented thing” (Conrad 148). He later refers to Kurtz as “that soul satiated with primitive emotions” (Conrad 152) and concludes that “His was an impenetrable darkness” (Conrad 153). Kurtz is thus repeatedly associated with the natives as he succumbs to his primitive instincts and uncivilized lusts. As Kurtz loses all remaining moral stability, Marlow finds him crawling through the jungle. Marlow is struck by the insanity that has captivated Kurtz, saying, “though indeed he could not have been more irretrievably lost than he was at this very moment” (Conrad 148). Kurtz becomes as savage as the natives as his heart becomes increasingly dark, and Conrad draws a connection between the horror within Kurtz’s soul and the horror that exists in every native.

While focusing on characters to confirm his racist stereotypes, Conrad also directly associates the “heart of darkness” with the geographic heart of African culture. This comparison emerges as the dominant symbol of his racist views. The setting for his novel is a foreboding, evil place where the human spirit becomes corrupted, and this place is Africa. Marlow describes it as “The edge of a colossal jungle, so dark-green as to be almost black” (Conrad 78). It is possible that Conrad wanted to choose a mysterious and unknown continent for his setting, but

readers are unable to simply look past the blunt correlation Conrad makes between the “black jungle” and horror. In “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*,” Chinua Achebe insists, “Heart of Darkness projects the image of Africa as ‘the other world,’ the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality” (Achebe). Achebe claims that Conrad truly saw Africa as another world completely, cut off from civilization—a place where tribes of cannibalistic Africans fought for power. He writes, “Conrad saw and condemned the evil of imperial exploitation but was strangely unaware of the racism on which it sharpened its iron tooth” (Achebe). In other words, although Conrad critiques the abusive practices of colonialism, he does so by embedding utterly racist stereotypes into his novella. Inga Clendinnen also looks past Conrad’s critique and reveals his ardent racism. In “Preempting Postcolonial Critique,” she writes, “Conrad was not only a racist but a conscious and devious one, concealing his sinister motives and achieving his sinister ends through calculated sentimentality and extravagant language” (Clendinnen). Conrad’s racism is somewhat obscured by his suspenseful plot and dense language, but once his racist views are brought to light, it is difficult to ignore them.

Even though Joseph Conrad offers a critique of imperialistic colonialism in Heart of Darkness, he bases this critique on racist stereotypes that ultimately influenced the way Europeans and other people viewed African culture. As Conrad portrays Kurtz’s corrupted nature at the heart of African civilization, he may be critiquing colonialism, but he is even more strongly discriminating against African culture. Because of Heart of Darkness, readers gathered the idea that African native culture was not unique but a place of savagery, certainly inferior to European civilization. When readers see natives dancing and beating drums, they do not see it as an important facet of their culture—they see it as savagery. Conrad started out to critique

colonialism, but, like the change in motives that early colonizers underwent when they arrived in Africa, Conrad resorted to racial stereotyping and created a darkness surrounding all of African culture.

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