

Imperialism in *Heart of Darkness*

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is a powerful critique of imperialism, exposing its brutality, hypocrisy, and moral corruption. Set in the Congo during European colonial rule, the novel presents a grim picture of imperialist exploitation and the psychological effects of unchecked power. Through the protagonist Marlow's journey into the heart of Africa, Conrad illustrates how imperialism dehumanizes both the colonizers and the colonized, revealing its true nature as a system driven by greed and destruction rather than the so-called "civilizing mission."

1. The Hypocrisy of Imperialism

European powers justified their colonization of Africa by claiming they were bringing civilization, enlightenment, and progress to the so-called "savages." However, Conrad reveals the hypocrisy of this claim by depicting the cruelty and exploitation that imperialism actually entails. Marlow, the narrator, is skeptical of imperialism from the beginning and critiques its moral contradictions:

- "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."

This quote directly challenges the idea that imperialism is a noble cause. Marlow acknowledges that European expansion is not about spreading civilization but about taking land and resources from people who are deemed inferior based on superficial racial differences. The novel suggests that imperialism is not about progress, but about domination and exploitation.

2. Brutality and Exploitation of the Natives

Rather than uplifting the native people, imperialism in *Heart of Darkness* subjects them to immense suffering. Conrad vividly describes the cruel treatment of Africans by European colonizers. When Marlow arrives at one of the Company's stations, he sees a horrifying scene:

- “They were dying slowly—it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now—nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation.”

This imagery portrays the African labourers as dehumanized figures, reduced to mere “shadows” by the brutal conditions they endure. The phrase “dying slowly” highlights the prolonged suffering inflicted by European exploitation. Instead of receiving civilization, the natives are subjected to forced labour, starvation, and extreme cruelty.

Furthermore, the infamous “grove of death” scene reinforces this theme. Marlow stumbles upon a group of native workers who have been left to die from exhaustion and malnutrition:

- “I don't think a single one of them had any strength left to kill me. Oh, I don't mean to say I felt scared. That would have been absurd. What thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar.”

Here, Marlow acknowledges the shared humanity between himself and the suffering natives, challenging the racist ideology that justifies their mistreatment. However, the colonizers refuse to see them as human beings, treating them as disposable labor.

3. Greed and the Lust for Ivory

The Europeans are not in Africa for any humanitarian purpose—they are there to plunder its resources, particularly ivory. Ivory symbolizes the wealth and greed that drive the imperialist machine. The pursuit of ivory is so intense that it consumes men, corrupts their morals, and turns them into ruthless profiteers.

Marlow encounters a European trader, the Company's chief accountant, who remains obsessed with profits despite the suffering around him:

- “There is a touch of death in the lies of that flabby devil, and the river was there—fascinating—deadly—like a snake.”

The “flabby devil” represents the corrupt, self-serving European businessmen who benefit from imperialism, while the snake-like river symbolizes the dangerous and deceptive nature of colonial ambition. This passage suggests that imperialism is a seductive but ultimately destructive force.

4. Psychological Corruption: Kurtz as the Embodiment of Imperialism

One of the most significant ways in which *Heart of Darkness* critiques imperialism is through the character of Kurtz, an ambitious European who has completely surrendered to the greed and cruelty of colonial rule. Kurtz initially arrives in Africa with high ideals—he writes a report advocating for the civilizing of natives—but his time in the Congo transforms him into a ruthless tyrant.

By the time Marlow meets Kurtz, he has become a god-like figure among the natives, using violence and intimidation to maintain his power. His obsession with ivory and his unchecked authority drive him to madness:

- “Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts.”

Kurtz’s decline demonstrates how imperialism corrupts the minds of those who wield power. Removed from European society, he indulges in every desire without consequence, exposing the hypocrisy of European “civilization.” He becomes so consumed by his own excesses that his final realization is one of horror and despair:

- “The horror! The horror!”

These last words encapsulate the central message of the novel. “The horror” represents Kurtz’s recognition of the true nature of imperialism—the suffering, the greed, and the moral decay it causes. His death serves as a warning about the dangers of unchecked power and colonial exploitation.

5. Conclusion: The Darkness Within Imperialism

In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad reveals imperialism to be a corrupt and destructive force that dehumanizes both the oppressed and the oppressors. Through the hypocrisy of European justifications, the brutal treatment of African natives, the greed for ivory, and the psychological downfall of Kurtz, the novel dismantles the myth of imperialism as a noble enterprise.

By the end of the novel, Marlow returns to Europe, where he realizes that the people there live in ignorance of the horrors committed in Africa. When he meets Kurtz's fiancée, he chooses to lie to her, preserving the illusion that Kurtz was a great man rather than a fallen tyrant. This suggests that Europe continues to deceive itself about the morality of its empire, refusing to acknowledge the "heart of darkness" within its own soul.

Through its powerful imagery, symbolism, and psychological depth, *Heart of Darkness* remains one of the most haunting critiques of imperialism in literature.