

Heart of Darkness:

A Critique of Capitalism

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In his novel *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad sets up a parallel between Marlow's journey to the center of the Congo and his journey to the heart of imperialism, the heart of darkness. Through Marlow's journey, Conrad seeks to expose the gap between the idea of imperialism and imperialism in practice. Marlow's journey begins aboard the *Nellie* where his idea of imperialism is one of efficiency and accomplishment. It continues through the Congo where his realization of the gap between the idea of imperialism and its practice strengthens. Finally, it peaks with his journey's end as he exits the center of the Congo and is fully enlightened to the inhumane practices and falsities imperialism entails in practice. Through Marlow's journey, Conrad shows that imperialism gives those who commit to its ideology a false sense of power and purpose. Through the abuse and suppression of the Africans the colonizers gain their sense of power and importance, but in reality the colonizers are only a means of production for the superstructure, the idea of imperialism itself and the company back in England. The heart of darkness is the heart of imperialism, and it is through Marlow's journey to the dark heart of imperialism that Conrad brings to light the gap between the idea of imperialism and the horror and lies of its practice.

If the Marxist structure is applied to *Heart of Darkness*, one can conclude that the workers in the Congo are what make up the base of the structure and the company back in England and imperialism, as an ideology, make up the superstructure. If this application is understood, there are obvious gaps between the structure and the superstructure, one being literal and the other abstract. Both the literal gap between the company in England and those working in the Congo and the abstract gap between the idea of imperialism and the imperialism being practiced by those working for the company in the Congo can be understood through the eyes of Marlow and his journey to the center of imperialism.

Aboard the *Nellie*, Marlow reflects on the starting point of his journey, stating that England was once a place of darkness before it was conquered by the Romans who

were no colonists, their administration was merely a squeeze, and nothing more. [...] They were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force – nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others. They grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on the great scale, and men going at it blind. (Conrad 7)

Marlow compares this type of imperial brute force to the idea of British imperialism of his day. He states that none of us, referring to those aboard the *Nellie* and back in England, would behave in this manner because “what saves us is efficiency – the devotion to efficiency” (7). He emphasizes that the British idea of imperialism is one founded on efficiency and accomplishment, not merely conquering native lands and the people who live there, but turning these lands into colonies and bettering the lives of the colonizers and the colonized alike. Recalling the starting point of his Congo journey, Marlow has only been educated on the idea of imperialism and has not had any experience with imperialism in practice. He is far removed from the practice of imperialism in the center of the Congo and is blind to the falsities and violence British imperialism really holds at its center.

Marlow's first encounter with imperialism in practice is aboard a French steamer on his way to the station on the coast of Africa. He states that he sees a “‘man-of-war’ anchored off the coast” firing at the continent, and he assumes the French must be fighting one of their wars (14). He describes this scene as having “a touch of insanity [. . .], [and] a sense of lugubrious drollery [. . .]; [that] [. . .] was not dissipated by somebody on board assuring [him] earnestly that there was a camp of natives—he called them enemies—hidden out of sight somewhere” (14). Marlow sees this attack as having no purpose, and he begins to question the integrity and purpose of these colonizers who have come to Africa. This is Marlow's first insight into the practice of imperialism. The ideology of imperialism attempts to “help” those of the colony learn and

prosper from colonization. In practice, imperialism is a brutal attack on the natives achieved by asserting power by means of violence over them. This is the first evident gap between the idea and practice of imperialism.

Marlow's journey to the Congo continues and he is further enlightened to the violence and falsities of imperialism as he arrives at his company's station on the coast of Africa. When he arrives, he describes the land as “acquainted with a flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly” and states that this devil is as “insidious as he could be too I was only to find out several months later and a thousand miles farther” (16). The devil Marlow is referring to is imperialism and this foreshadows his realization to how horrible it really is when he arrives to the center of the Congo. He refers to imperialism as a pretending devil because it only pretends it has an agenda to help and accomplish moral progress. In retrospect, Marlow sees that imperialism is full of violence and only seeks to gain more power and wealth for the superstructure. After he wanders for a while, he sees a group of African workers lying under the trees “dying slowly,” and he states, “they were not enemies, they were not criminals, [...] they were nothing but black shadows of disease [. . .]. Brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, [. . .] they sickened, [and] became inefficient” (17). Marlow is overwhelmed and disgusted at what he sees. He has yet again been a witness to the false idea of imperialism that teaching the natives to work will better them. The natives are only seen as a means of production for the company and it is this false power the colonizers have over these people that keeps them working hard for the company as well. Louis Althusser explains this idea well in his essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” when he states, “the reproduction of labor power not only the reproduction of its skills, but also, [. . .] a reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology correctly for the agents of exploitation and repression [functions] so that they, too, will provide for the domination of the ruling class” (5). In other words, imperialism gives those who commit to it a false sense of power over those underneath them, the colonizers over the Africans in this case, so they will suppress these lower people into working hard for the superstructure. And by doing this, those who feel as if they are in command are fed this lie of having power in order to have them work hard for the superstructure as well. Marlow's arrival at the coastal station further opens his eyes to the falsities of imperialism, and his opinion of imperialism quickly changes. Through his journey to Africa, he no longer holds his once pure vision of imperialism; he has been enlightened to the gap between the idea of imperialism and its practice. His view continues to change as he journeys farther and farther into the Congo and is further exposed to what imperialism entails in practice.

Marlow further realizes this gap between his idea of imperialism and its practice when he travels from the coastal station to another station 200 miles closer to the center of the Congo. When he first arrives to the Central Station, he describes the station: “the first glance at the place was enough to let you see the flabby devil was running that show” (21). Here again, Marlow refers to the imperialism as the devil. He is coming to recognize how the practice abandons the pure vision it claims to model. The next day after his arrival, Marlow sees the men strolling aimlessly and wonders what they are even doing there. He refers to these men as “pilgrims bewitched inside a rotten fence,” meaning committed members of imperialism in practice who have found themselves within the hold of the abandoned and rotten idea of imperialism. Marlow says he can hear the whispers of ivory and how he has never seen anything so unreal in his life. He has further realized the true root of imperialism, wealth. These men wander around the station for the opportunity to gain wealth and power, when in reality they are not the ones who will gain anything; it is the superstructure, the company back in England that will gain from their being in Africa. Marlow sees the illusions imperialism projects on its followers and how these men, these followers of imperialism, are blinded by these illusions.

Marlow, while staying at the central station, also encounters a man he describes as “a first-class agent, young, gentlemanly, a bit reserved, with a forked little beard and a hooked-nose” (24). Marlow converses with this man and learns he is the manager's spy over the African workers. His stated business is making bricks, yet Marlow notices there are no bricks at the station. The man informs Marlow he has been waiting over a year for a supply that “could not be found there, and as it was not likely to be sent from Europe it did not appear clear to [Marlow] what he was waiting for” (24). Marlow notices that the hooked-nosed man, along with all of the other pilgrims, or colonizers, seems to be waiting for something and never doing any real work. Marlow sees them as unreal, “unreal as everything else—as the philanthropic pretense of the whole concern, as their talk, as their government, as their show of work” (24). Here, Marlow realizes that their practice of imperialism at the station is unreal in the sense that it does not mirror the idea of imperialism they are claiming to model. They are not there to

better the African people, they are there to use them for economic means. Their government, or chain of command, is not real; they are workers for the company just like the Africans they are suppressing. And finally, their work is not real either; they have been given a false sense of purpose by the company. They have no true work to do. They are standing around waiting for something that will never come.

This waste and inefficiency exemplify the fact that imperialism offers false promises that will never be fulfilled. Through this experience, Marlow's eyes are opened further to the falsities and inhumanity of imperialism as a practice.

Marlow is fully enlightened to the violence and falsities of imperialism in practice when he arrives to the center of the Congo. Here, Marlow finally meets Kurtz and through his experience with Kurtz he not only fully realizes the gap between the idea and practice of imperialism, but also sees the damaging effects this ideology has on people who fully commit to it. Marlow describes the original Kurtz, the Kurtz before his commitment to imperialism, as being “educated partly in England and—as he was good enough to say himself—his sympathies were in the right place” (49). He then goes on to say, “all Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz” (49), making him into a committed member of imperialism, and suggests that this original Kurtz was altered when he committed himself to the ideology of imperialism. Peter Edgerly Firchow discusses this change in Kurtz in his book *Envisioning Africa: Racism and Imperialism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness*. Firchow refers to Kurtz before his commitment to imperialism as the “original” Kurtz and the Kurtz who is altered by imperialism as the “sham” of Kurtz. Firchow states that the original Kurtz was a man who was not only ethically part British, he was also politically pro-British meaning he accepted the ideologies and practices of the imperial British nation. The original Kurtz's goal was colonization, but his methods of colonization were rooted in morality and in accomplishing something unlike the attempt made by the sham of Kurtz who colonized by violent means and focused his attention on gaining power and wealth. Firchow states that the original Kurtz was transformed into the sham of himself as he found himself in the heart of darkness, in the heart of imperialism, and “ceased to act and to think in a gentlemanly manner and became an immoral brute who decapitated people [. . .] and took to participating in 'unspeakable rites'” (83). Firchow concludes that this transformation occurs because imperialism itself is a sham and those who participate in its ideology cannot help but turn into a sham version of themselves.

Marlow continues his discussion of the difference between the original Kurtz and the sham of Kurtz when he talks of the pamphlet written by Kurtz, for the “International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs” and how it was “eloquent, vibrating with eloquence, but too-high strung” (49). Marlow states that it was “a beautiful piece of writing” and “began with the argument that we whites, must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings” and “by the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded” (50). This writing of Kurtz exemplifies the idea of imperialism and how it should be practiced. Kurtz believes that through their power and the power of colonization, he and the other colonizers can do something good for the company and the Africans as well. At the note of the last page, Marlow notices the phrase “exterminate all the brutes” written in an unsteady hand and blazing at him “luminous and terrifying like a flash of lightening in a serene sky” (50). This last entry was written by Kurtz after his experience with imperialism. He is so committed to it that it has altered him completely; he no longer holds the moral compass and hopes of helping the Africans as he once did. His metaphor of a flash of lightening in a serene sky illuminates how different the practice of imperialism is from the idea of it. The idea of imperialism is filled with serene ideas of accomplishment and being able to move up in the chain of command while the practice of imperialism is violent and full of falsities. There is no personal feeling of accomplishment, only the superstructure benefits, and there is no real chain of command, it is a false idea created by imperialism. Through his own journey from his first idea of imperialism and his experience with the practice in the center of the Congo, Kurtz finds himself in the heart of darkness completely changed into a sham of his original self because he has been engulfed by the dark practices of imperialism. By considering the evidence of Kurtz's change on paper, Marlow's eyes are opened to the terrifying effects imperialism has on those who commit to its ideology.

Marlow's journey through the Congo brings him to varying levels of imperialism, and his enlightenment to the reality of what the practice entails peaks with his experience of Kurtz and the heart of imperialism. Kurtz has been completely engulfed by the darkness it contains. Kurtz is no longer the original Kurtz, but a product of imperialism, and it is only through his death and exit from the center of the Congo that he realizes what it has done to him. In his last encounter with Kurtz, Marlow states,

the change that came over his features I have never seen before and hope never to see again. [...] It was as though a veil had been rent. I saw on that ivory face the expression of sombre pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror – of an intense and hopeless despair. He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision – he cried out twice [...] 'The horror! The horror!' (69)

In this scene, the horror Kurtz describes is his vision into imperialism and what it has done to him as a man. He has come to the realization of everything he has done and by yelling the horror, he is admitting guilt. The metaphor of the veil is the idea of the falsities imperialism impresses upon those who fall under its control. Once Kurtz is taken from the center of the Congo, the heart of darkness in imperialism, he is able to see the horror of imperialism. This concludes the idea that one cannot escape the ideology and become repulsed by imperialism until it is experienced first-hand; it is only through Marlow's journey from England to the center of the Congo and Kurtz's own journey to the center and finally exit from the heart of darkness where he has been for so long, that they are able to realize how horrible imperialism really is in practice and how different this practice is from the pure vision of imperialism they once held.

Nursel Icoz further develops the idea of the separation from the idea and practice of imperialism in her article "Conrad and Ambiguity: Social Commitment and Ideology in *Heart of Darkness* and *Nostramo*." Icoz argues that Marlow has been raised in an environment that sees imperialism as a smooth, efficient, and moral practice and it is only through his experience with imperialism in the Congo that Marlow exposes the gap between the "aspirations of the official doctrines of colonialism and its actual practices" (245). Marlow, according to Icoz, through his journey from England to the center of the Congo, offers an alternate view of imperialism and reverses judgments attached to certain activities of imperialism that "colonization, civilizing progress of dreams of empire become mass murder, robbery with violence, and nightmare" (245). Icoz concludes her argument by asserting that it is only the idea, not the practice of imperialism that can be used to justify itself, and any endeavor to devise an ethical basis for imperialism is destined to fail. She and I agree on the idea that it is through Marlow's journey to the heart of imperialism that he reverses his view and judgments of imperialism in practice and finds the practices of it hold no moral justifications. Icoz differs from my beliefs in that she asserts that the idea of imperialism can be used to justify itself. I disagree with this because I do not see any evidence that it can ever be seen as a morally justified ideology because it itself is a sham. How can you justify something that is full of sophistry and lies? If one is fully aware of the true teachings and desires of imperialism, one will notice the idea and practice are one and the same; they are both rooted in an attempt to gain power and wealth by any means necessary. They lack even the basic levels of morality, and therefore cannot be justified.

Through Marlow's journey from England to the center of the Congo, Joseph Conrad attempts to show the lies and deceit behind the idea of imperialism and how these surface in it as a practice. It is through Marlow's experiences at the different stations in Africa that he is able to experience the different levels of imperialism, and his negative view of imperialism strengthens as he grows closer and closer to the center of the Congo where imperialism is in full force. It is only through his experience in the center of the Congo with Kurtz that he is fully enlightened to the horror and sophistry that lies at the core of imperialism. Conrad attempts to show that one is blind to the truth of ideology until one truly experiences ideology in practice. We must not be blinded by the power of ideology; we must be able to remove the veil ideology places over our eyes in order for us to uncover its true intentions and remain our original selves. If we allow ideology to blind us and use us for its personal means, we will turn into a sham of ourselves and fall into the heart of darkness.

Works Cited

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