

The heart of darkness by joseph conrad essay sample

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The Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad is considered by many to an important piece of colonial literature in Britain, and also the first modern psychological novel of its time. The novel describes the journey of Marlow and his encounters with the natives and Dutch colonists while traveling in the Congo; the Heart of Darkness was based on Conrad's own experiences while traveling in the African Congo. Some readers have differing opinions on the interpretation of Heart of Darkness; the varying interpretations are that it can be read as a psychological, racist, or anti-colonialist story.

As for my own interpretation of Heart of Darkness, I believe that this novel is an attack on colonialism; many of Conrad's own anti-colonial sentiments can be seen throughout the novel. Joseph Conrad's first hand experiences with colonialism were one of the main reasons he detested colonialism so much. Conrad was born to Polish parents and was educated at a young age. He and his family lived happily until Russia invaded Poland. During the Russian occupation, Conrad along with his mother and father were sent to prison.

His mother died in prison while later when Conrad and his father was released, Conrad would be devastated again with the death of his father; Conrad was only eleven years old. He would later live with his uncle and stay with him until he completed his education. Conrad moved around and traveled a lot to which would serve as backdrops for his stories such as in Heart of Darkness. The novel begins on the Thames River in London, which symbolizes the civilization in Europe at was what one time a place of darkness. Marlow tells other people on the boat about his experiences in Africa.

Marlow reminds his audience that the Thames River “ has been one of the darkest place on earth” (Conrad, 7). Therefore, from the start of the novel Conrad gives us a hint that every place originates at a similar starting point and it becomes just a matter of time before people, science, and technology come to alter an area. As the story progresses, Conrad provides anti-colonialist ideas through the character Marlow’s mind such as when Marlow describes the situation of the Congo being colonized by Europeans as the same thing as Britain being colonized by Romans long ago.

They were no colonists;... They grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. It was just robbery with violence, aggravated on a great scale, and men going at it blind... 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... ” (Conrad, 10) Through the above passage, Conrad is attacking the cruel and selfish behaviours of colonizers. He argues that the idea of colonialism is something not to be proud of, rather it is something to be ashamed of.

In Conrad’s mind, it means nothing more than robbing something from those who are weaker than us. However, people do enjoy and take pleasure doing this because they have become blinded by greed, power, money and/or personal gain. The colonizers believe and justify themselves as being superior beings for they are from a more technologically advanced race and are there for the purpose of “ civilizing” the native savages. For the colonizers, colonialism was not only looked upon as a great sacrifice but also an excessive burden.

As times passed, it became obvious that both the Roman Empire and the British Imperialists did not bring any light or civilization whatsoever to the land and peoples of the darkness as they claimed they would; they more or less plundered the land and exploited the natives to their benefit.

Nevertheless, this action continued on due to the nonsense virtuous idea of “civilizing the natives”. This imperialistic idea became common thought in western society at that time when colonialism was at its peak, and this fact alone was the heart of the problem.

Conrad questions the belief of bringing civilization to an uncivilized land by first asking whether these people (natives) are really barbaric, or whether there are just different from the British. Secondly, Conrad wonders whether colonialism truly attains its goal, or if it has just turned into some kind of excuse to justify exploiting another race. As Marlow continues his journey and reaches the Belgium Congo, he sees that the native people have been pushed to work very hard for the company.

According to Conrad, They were dying slowly - it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals,... nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. (Conrad, 24)

Conrad describes how poorly the colonists were treating the native African people and how they were being exploited. He describes them as if they were gradually dying, dying from being overworked, from ill health from malnutrition, and from just the poor inhumane treatment they have to put up with everyday from the company's officers.

This illustrates the horrible and inhumane image of colonialism at its worst not just in Africa but in other lands that have been colonized. The coldness and cruelty of the colonizers results in to terrifying picture that puts the native Africans people as just something not even human like “ bones wrapped with skin”. The natives were even forced to do most unnecessary things such as having them dig a large hole just for the purpose of having the native workers do something. Another thing to bear in mind is that these natives were doing perfectly well and living peacefully among themselves before the white colonists arrived.

It is the colonists who have forced the native African people to stay in a condition in which they can hardly survive; the natives starve and are fatigued but the white colonists do nothing except put them to more work for their benefits. Moreover, Conrad also expresses the selfishness and pitilessness of the white men who only care about their own good and well being. An example of this is when the company’s chief accountant complains about the groan of a sick person. He complains that the groan, “ distracts my attention”. Without that it is extremely difficult to guard against clerical errors in this climate. (Conrad, 27).

This reveals that even simple virtues like having sympathy for another human being is absent from a white man’s heart; how then can the “ technologically advanced” white man claim that they are of superior race when such simple feelings are missing. With this lack of moral virtues in mind, how can the white colonialists civilize others when inside they are savages themselves? Conrad once again tries to point out to us his anti-

colonial attitudes when the manager at the Central Station gives an order to beat a native when a shed caught on fire without even considering that the native was probably innocent or not.

The manager not only represents how cruel a person can become, but also he can be viewed as a symbol of the arrogance of Europeans towards the natives; torturing and unfairly punishing a person without even hearing their side of the story. The manager's good health may also represent the everlasting presence of the Europeans in Africa. The conversation between the manager and his uncle reveals the ruthlessness and immoral nature, and shows what kind of people really are. All of these intentional images that Conrad creates show the overall detest for colonialism as a whole.

The manager says that he can do all kind of things in the Congo because no rules, laws, or any kind of regulation exists there, "... get him hanged! Why not? Anything - anything can be done in this country". Up to this point we can clearly see the real reason that persuades the majority of people to go to the Congo which is definitely not the desire to educate, civilize or help the native peoples, but rather to benefit from their own pursuits for wealth of which ivory is the main source of wealth. Ivory seems to be the most important thing for everyone: the Belgian company, the manager, the pilgrims, and even Kurtz.

They are all motivated by unending greed, lust, and selfishness. They seem to worship money was their own god. They mistreat the native as well as pillage the resources of the land which they did not own in the first place.

The most important idea that Conrad tries to present in this novel is that human beings are all the same regardless of what you look like, what social status and /or background you were born to, and what color your skin is. There is no such thing as a superior race. Though we may differ in the way we look, the way we dress, the cultural beliefs we hold, we are however all connected for what we all share a primitive side.

As Conrad points out, "... but what thrilled you was just the thoughts of their inhumanity - like yours - the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar... Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you - you so remote from the night of first ages - could comprehend" (Conrad, 51-52)

Primitive people are not different from us because deep within us we still have primitive sides. Thus, primitive people are like us; they are capable of being civilized and advanced given time and resources. Once Marlow makes a fool of himself by judging people only from their appearances, as when he first met the accountant; he admired and was impressed of how neat and clean the accountant looks. It does not take him long at all to find out for himself how ignorant and pitiful the accountant really is.

Also, when Marlow refers to the natives as being, "find fellows - cannibals - in their place. They were men one could work with, and I am grateful to them." Also he admires the strength of the natives as well as their well-

formed body even though through his eyes he still thinks they are ugly. Above all, it is colonialism itself that has brought the darkness into Africa. Instead of bringing light into a place of darkness, the white explorers/colonists reveal the darkness of their mission to “civilize”.

It is not Africa which is dark but rather the intentions of the colonists. Near the end of Marlow's journey, Kurtz is very sick and everyone is waiting for the steamboat to be repaired. While Kurtz is dying, his last words or cries were, “The horror! The horror!” (Conrad, 100). It seems that Conrad indicated that at the moment when a person is going to die they get flashbacks of the various things they have done in life; both good and bad.

As for Kurtz's case, he has given in to greed, power and savagery to which was all the bad images or thoughts he saw. It seems that Kurtz can also symbolize Europe towards the end of the colonialist era in which they began to realize their cruel, inhuman actions towards the native peoples in their colonies. All in all, whether Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness consists of many different perspectives as either a racist or psychological story, Joseph Conrad seemed to attack the idea of colonialism directly yet subtly throughout Heart of Darkness.

In Heart of Darkness, Conrad conveyed to his readers that colonialism is immoral and degrading. The resulting negative effects of colonialism stemmed from the evil darkness of greed that lay dormant in an individual but if given an opportunity to give in to greed, it would lead to selfishness which would turn us into evil beings capable of the inhumanity towards other

human beings as shown through the treatment of natives by Kurtz, the manager and the other colonists in the novel.

With regard to Conrad's own experiences with colonialism, and the various characters' actions towards the natives, and the variety of symbolism found in the novel, I believe there is enough evidence to support that Joseph Conrad intended *Heart of Darkness* to be read as an anti-colonialist literature.