

King leopold ii | analysis



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King Leopold II has the dishonorable reputation as one of the most brutal and cruel colonial rulers of the 19th century for what he has done in Congo. Even after his merciless reign was completely turned over to Belgium, tons of books, articles, photos, and essays were released to reveal all of King Leopold II's atrocities to the people around the world. Some scholars have tried to justify his actions arguing that King Leopold made a great contribution to modernizing and civilizing Congo. However, one cannot ignore the unchangeable fact that King Leopold II has, in fact, committed unforgivable crimes against the natives of Congo for his own wealth from ivory and rubber collected through forced labor. Therefore, despite what some people argue in helpless attempts to justify King Leopold II's actions in Congo, what he did during his 22-year reign in Congo are too inhumane and unjustifiable for people to honor him as a sage king.

Leopold II was the king of Belgium from 1865 to 1909 and was the founder of Congo Free State (Present-day The Democratic Republic of Congo). By the time Leopold II succeeded his father as king, he had travelled around the world much and had become a supporter of the expansion of Belgium into other territories. He managed to formulate an agreement with Henry Stanley, an ambitious journalist who is famous for exploring Africa, to bring Congo under European control through unfair trade and slavery. This is how Congo Free State of King Leopold II was founded and it existed from 1885 to 1907.

Disappointed and outraged by what King Leopold II was doing in Congo Free State, many journalists and writers began to write about the crimes he was committing. Among these works, Mark Twain, encouraged by the Congo

Reform Association, wrote a gripping literary work expressing his thoughts about King Leopold II called King Leopold's Soliloquy. It is a satiric soliloquy, or dramatic monologue published by Congo Reform Association rather than a commercial publisher, which means that Twain was writing for a cause, not personal gains. The main influence on making Twain write this particular work was Edmund D. Morel of the English Congo Reform Association who wanted Twain's help in gathering support for an American branch of Congo Reform Association.

This work specifically focuses on several issues regarding King Leopold II, and among these are brutality, absolute materialism, morality and media. As for brutality, 2 million to 15 million people of Congo supposedly died during the reign of King Leopold II. The exact number is nearly impossible to discover as no concrete records of Congo Free State could be found today. King Leopold's 19, 000-man army used their developed weapons such as rifles, cannons, and machine guns to slowly take control of Congo from the natives who were only equipped with spears or antiquated muskets. The theme of brutality is very closely related to materialism. At first, King Leopold II's main interest was ivory. However, in the early 1890's, with the invention of bicycles and their wide-spread usage, the demand for rubber suddenly skyrocketed and started what people call " The rubber boom." Luckily for King Leopold II, nearly half of Congo Free State was covered with rubber trees that would have taken over 50 years to fully grow elsewhere. With an increasing demand for rubber from Congo, King Leopold II quickly came up with a cruelly effective idea to collect rubber. It was quite simple; executive officers under King Leopold II would go into a local town and take

the women there as hostages. To free their wives, men had to go out into the woods and collect a certain amount of rubber. If they did not fulfill their required amount of rubber, they received cruel punishment from these officers; they were often whipped with chicotte, a lash made from hippo hide, or their hands were cut off for not meeting the demands. Also the soldiers were ordered to bring back a hand for every bullet fired. As it was not actually possible, these soldiers instead cut off the hands of the living resulting in mutilation and a decrease in the population.

As for morality and press, a fairly large amount of the soliloquy is used to criticize the media (newspapers and photographs), for revealing what King Leopold's done in Congo Free State. Before the invention of Kodak, cameras, all the atrocities and chaos King Leopold II was creating in Congo Free State could not be fully known. Many articles and essays were written but there was no visual evidence for the public to prove it. Also, King Leopold II went out of his way to ensure that none of his deeds became known to the public, or as Morel puts it, " Not one in a thousand of the dark deeds performed under such a regime can ever, in the nature of things, become publicly known." In King Leopold's soliloquy, King Leopold blames the results from his cruel actions on reporters and the camera, rather than himself. This also means that Leopold cares much more about how people conceive him as a king instead of the morality or justness of his actions. This can be witnessed when he says " Ten thousand pulpits and ten thousand presses are saying the good word for me all the time and placidly and convincingly denying the mutilations. Then that trivial little Kodak, that a child can carry in its pocket, gets up, uttering never a word, and knocks them dumb." He also calls the

camera “ The only witness I have encountered in my long experience that I couldn’t bribe.”

King Leopold’s Soliloquy is quite significant in its form. Twain takes the character of King Leopold himself, embattled by those who wish him to change. By presenting his ideas through a soliloquy, which is a monologue rather than a literary work with a plot or characters, he creates special tension in the reader’s mind. From the reader’s perspective, hearing such ravings and evil deeds from King Leopold II’s own mouth would have made a strong impact on their mind; it brings the reader into a greater sense of anger and disgust at the callousness of deeds and thought from the king. As effective as it may be, however, readers of this work must be aware that this is not a transcript of King Leopold II but a soliloquy written by a different person based on his imagination. Therefore, certain parts of it must have been somewhat exaggerated and may not even be true. Although most of what was happening in Congo Free State was well known by the time King Leopold’s Soliloquy was written thanks to the development of technology, especially Kodak, it would have been quite difficult to be aware of all of King Leopold II’s intentions for his actions. Nevertheless, Mark Twain, with his effective usage of language and satire, was able to create quite a sensation across America. According to Justin Kaplan, it was “ the most effective and most widely circulated piece of American propaganda in the cause of Congo reform.” Twain once said in an interview of Boston Herald on Nov 6. 1905, “ The condition of things in the Congo is atrocious, as shown by the photographs of children whose hands have been cut off. Leopold thinks this can go on because the Congo is a distant out-of-the-way country. But once

we can get England and America to investigate, and take this matter up, something will be done. We Americans are especially interested, because it was our recognition of the flag there that led to recognition by other powers." By writing such work, considering the social and political impact of Mark Twain, he was trying to encourage its readers to actively participate in speaking against King Leopold's regime. By touching on pathos of the readers, Twain was clearly arousing them to active protest with his very effective writing style which may sound satiric and scornful to the readers.

Advocates of King Leopold II's reign in Congo Free State, however, argue that this is all just an accusation of the King and he made a great contribution to modernizing and civilizing Congo. In *An Answer to Mark Twain* by Donald Kerr, a pamphlet written in response to King Leopold's *Soliloquy*, Kerr states that "lies and slanders are accumulated and, as stated by Mark Twain - the only true thing in his soliloquy - they slander and still slander." Like such, lots of controversies exist among scholars and historians regarding King Leopold II's Congo Free State. Advocates first criticize Mark Twain for stating that "King Leopold taxes his stolen nation but provides nothing in return but hunger, terror, grief, shame, captivity, mutilation and massacre" More than half of the pamphlet, *An Answer to Mark Twain*, is dedicated to showing photographs of what King Leopold II gave them in return. It contains more than 30 photographs of schools, bridges, hospitals, villages, railways, motor-cars, and all other things that were built during King Leopold II's regime. As the anger and disgust towards King Leopold II spread across the world after witnessing photographs thanks to the development of Kodak, Kerr must have thought it would be effective to show pictures supporting King Leopold II's

achievements during his reign. Advocates of King Leopold II also insist that there is no factual evidence connecting the mutilations and murders of the natives to the army of King Leopold. Kerr also questions the validity of the photographs of the mutilated natives asserting that “ such is the value of the photographs produced, and as it is not proved by specific dates and places that these acts of cruelty can be directly or indirectly imputed to Belgians having resided in the Congo they must be considered as slanderous.”

These advocates of King Leopold II endlessly try to justify the chaos he created in Congo Free State, but nothing will ever change the fact that the natives of Congo suffered greatly from the reign of King Leopold II both emotionally and physically. What people can read from King Leopold’s Soliloquy by Mark Twain, and all the other evidence that people can see such as photographs, articles, essays, and historical records point to the fact that King Leopold II was willing to apply any and all possible measures to gain wealth and did not care one bit about the natives. Despite the contributions the king made to Congo, like modernizing and civilizing Congo during his reign, people of our generation remember him as a brutal and greedy colonial ruler rather than a sage king. Therefore, even though what these advocates say of King Leopold II may be true, what he did to the natives of Congo and how he gained his wealth are too inhumane and cruel to be justified.