

Heart of darkness

[Parts of the World](#), [Europe](#)



The Transformation of Marlow - Conrad's Explication of Europe's Colonial Practice in Africa In "Heart of Darkness" Conrad introduces his protagonist Marlow, his journey through the African Congo and the "enlightenment" of his soul. With the skilled use of symbols and Marlow's experience he depicts the European colonialism in Africa, practice Conrad witnessed himself. Through Marlow's observations he explicates the naiveness of the Europeans and the hypocritical purpose of their travelling into the "dark" continent. Marlow's experience in Africa starts with the desire for travel and great journeys to conquer the "blank spaces" on the map and the naive believe that the mission of the Europeans is to civilize the natives. Marlow's aunt believes that this voyage is a mission to "wean those ignorant millions from their horrid ways." (Conrad, 16). In reality everywhere they went they colonized the land, used the natural resources, and left ruins behind them. Marlow says, "They grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind - as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness. The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves..." (Conrad, 10). With the unfolding of his journey Marlow starts his "enlightenment." We can observe his evolution from "everyday European" to someone who realizes his own naiveness and begins to see the surrounding reality. This is the moment when he witnesses the shelling of the continent, "In the empty immensity of earth, sky, and water, there she was, incomprehensible, firing into a continent. Pop, would go one of the six-inch guns: a small flame would dart and vanish, a little white smoke would

disappear, a tiny projectile would give a feeble screech - and nothing happened. Nothing could happen. There was a touch of insanity in the proceeding, a sense of lugubrious drollery in the sight;" (Conrad, 17). Marlow is watching this occurrence, what to his fellow Europeans appear to be a fierce battle, in his eyes is a senseless destruction. He sees them firing "tiny projectiles" producing a "pop," which symbolically represents the falsity of the European mentality. With that passage Conrad starts Marlow's realization, and from this point on he begins his separation from the typical Europeans that surround him. He sees the sluggish bureaucratic machine in the face of the "company," which also symbolizes Europe at that time. Marlow meets the "brick maker," however he points out, "... but there wasn't a fragment of a brick anywhere in the station, and he had been there more than a year - waiting." (Conrad, 27). Later on he faces the same problem when he needs something so insignificant - rivets. He can not get them, because nobody cares for his purpose, they only see their own interest - ivory. Marlow confirms, "They wandered here and there with their absurd long staves in their hands like a lot of faithless pilgrims bewitched inside a rotten fence. The word 'ivory' rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed. You would think they were praying to it." (Conrad, 26). Another evidence of the Europeans' ignorance towards the reality in Africa is shown when Marlow recounts his story on board of the Nellie. He tells his comrades, "When you have to attend to things of that sort, to the mere incidents of the surface, the reality - the reality I tell you - fades. The inner truth is hidden - luckily, luckily. But I felt it all the same; I felt often its mysterious stillness watching me at my monkey tricks, just as it watches you fellows performing on your

respective tight-ropes for - what is it? half a crown a tumble..." (Conrad, 36). What Marlow actually says here is that while he is in Congo, and although he has to focus on the everyday little things, such as repairing his steam boat, he is still aware of the horrible reality that surrounds him. On the other hand his friends on the *Nellie*, just as most of the Europeans at the time are not aware of these realities, and their ignorance provokes them to say, " Try to be civil, Marlow" (Conrad, 36). Conrad's choice of symbols is very interesting in order to describe the European colonialism in Africa. The most powerful one is, "... a small sketch of oils, on a panel, representing a woman draped and blindfolded carrying a lighted torch. The background was sombre - almost black. The movement of the woman was stately, and the effect of the torchlight on the face was sinister." (Conrad, 27). The painting represents the " blind" ivory company, fraudulently letting people believe that besides the ivory they were taking out of Africa, they were also bringing light and progress to the jungle. In reality the " torch" was used to set fires that burned the natives' villages, and instead of progress the pilgrims brought misery to the Africans as they took their land and enslaved them. The oil sketch can also be looked at from another angle. Europe, in the face of the blindfolded woman, trying to " enlighten" the " dark" continent, but leaving death behind her - the " sombre almost black" background. The blindfold on the woman's face is a perfect symbol of the Europeans' ignorance toward the reality in Africa. Overpowered by their greed they can not see the " sinister" face of Europe. We should take under the consideration who is the artist of this powerful painting, and that is, Kurtz. He fully understands what is going on in the jungle, may be this is why he drew the sketch. Kurtz had

encountered the extreme “ darkness” of the colonialism. He had seen what the woman (Europe) left behind her. He experienced “ the horror” that existed in Africa, which was the price he paid for his personal greed. Marlow observes, “... It had taken him, loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation. He was its spoiled and pampered favourite. Ivory! I should think so. Heaps of it, stacks of it! (Conrad, 49). Now Marlow sees his hero, someone overtaken by greed, who kills, steals, and is worshipped as a god. He has encountered two extremes, the European mentality, which is ignorant to reality, and Kurtz, someone who has found his reality, but is one of horror. Marlow returns to Europe, to face his former world, but now he has a new understanding of it, he has “ been enlightened.” He now sees the life in the sepulchral city through the prism of his experience in Africa. Marlow resents the way Europeans live their life, and this is the moment of his complete revelation, “... hurrying through the streets to filch a little money from each other, to devour their infamous cookery, to gulp their unwholesome beer, to dream their insignificant and silly dreams... I had no particular desire to enlighten them, but I had some difficulty in restraining myself from laughing in their faces so full of stupid importance.” (Conrad, 70). When placed in the extreme environment of Congo, and faced with the atrocious behaviour of the Europeans and their ignorance to the reality in the jungle, Marlow undergoes a drastic transformation. Conrad’s protagonist was shown the white man’s imperialistic ideals and the meaninglessness of their standards at the time. The European’s cruelty and hypocrisy in Africa leaves a permanent imprint

on Marlow's mind, and therefore changes his entire perception of the world he lives in. With the character of Marlow, Conrad achieves his ultimate goal - to show the bitter reality of the European colonies in Africa.