

Literary analysis of the passage with "heart of darkness"

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



At the crux of Heart of Darkness lies a psychological and physical odyssey towards the confronting and profound realities of colonialism. Through constructing a complex tale based on opposites: civilised versus savagery, a core of faith and belief versus hollowness, self-restraint and its lack, Joseph Conrad reveals that behind the rhetoric of civilisation lies an ironic hypocrisy in the colonial conquest's claim to be the agent of progress.

Pointedly, Marlow's journey up-river acts to undermine the position of the civilised, rendering it futile against the primitive.

The imagery of a 'man-of-war' 'shelling the bush' when 'there wasn't even a shed there' accentuates a sense of futility in the actions of colonisers in their attempt to conquest and progress. The minutiae of "Pop" in juxtaposition to the magnanimity of 'immensity of earth, sky, and water' is encompassed by a 'sense of lugubrious drollery', rendering the man-made insignificant against the primitive, which further exemplifies a sense of hollowness and inefficiency in the colonial empire-building conquest.

The description of the "brown current" carrying the colonisers 'towards the sea with twice the speed of [their] upward progress', once again, laments machinery of the civilised, Western world powerless and insignificant against the primordial. Moreover, the repetition of 'nothing' in 'nothing happened. Nothing could happen' brings forth an indication of finality and solidity in the inefficacy of the colonial conquest, thereby affirming the power of the primordial.. Even the 'short flipper of an arm' of an European is juxtaposed with the primordial landscape ['the forest, the creek, the mud, the river'], placing an emphasis on the minuscule nature of the imperialist word against

the backdrop of the primitive. Thus, Conrad creates an image that is at once concrete and confounding, rendering the savage and primitive triumphant against the civilised.

Furthermore, the narrative exposes the colonial conquest to be a system of negligence, where there exists no recognition of the historical values of a country. As Marlow recounts how names of places are deemed as 'farcical', there lies imbued a sense of theatricality and ridicule—Congo has been reduced into nothing but an 'overheated catacomb', waiting for the demise of the Europeans—the demeaning nature of the description leaves Congo without historical context and value, as if the country itself merely came into existence once the colonisers decided to set foot upon it. Additionally, this denial of individuality and history for Congo and its natives is epitomised by 'nowhere did we stop long enough to get a particularised impression'. Instead, the country is summarised as a 'vague' and 'oppressive wonder'—an opaque entity, unfathomable to and unacknowledged by its 'intruders', which only seemed to exist to fulfil the purpose of a mundane 'merry dance of death and trade'. The languid nature of the rounded vowels in 'thickened' and 'contorted mangroves' symbolises the barrier faced by the colonial agents as it literally slows down moment within the lines, thus further constructing the pilgrimage as a rather unproductive and thoughtlessness process.

As Marlow's physical journey progresses, the psychological journey constructed by Conrad at the same time is far more revealing of the rhetoric of civilisation. When Marlow refers to their pilgrimage as a 'fantastic

invasion', the irony is not lost as it reminds us Marlow's recount of when one of the pilgrims referred to the natives hidden 'out of sight' as 'enemies!'. This confounding recognition on Marlow's part accentuates the failure amongst other colonial agents to see themselves as 'intruder(s)' and the real 'enemy'; Indeed, as Marlow notes, there lies a touch of 'insanity in the proceeding' of 'humanising, improving, instructing'; this introspective statement laments a sense of hollowness within the colonial conquest expedition by exposing the hypocrisy in colonial agents who see themselves as liberators and 'forerunner(s) of change, of conquest, of trade'. The claim by colonialists to be agents of progress is contradicted by the sense of lulling, inefficacy and lethargy in the descriptions of the French warship— "dropped limb like a rag", "slimy" "swell", the imagery acting to dismantle the claim of colonialism to be 'a beacon on the road towards better things'.

The undoing of Kurtz, a man to be seen as the epitome of European imperialist ideology, further brings the hypocrisies of colonialism to the foreground. Kurtz, who possesses essentially the key to European imperialism—'nobility' and the 'inextinguishable gift...of lofty expression'— is defeated by the primordial as his lack of self-restraint leads to his succumbing to the 'primitive emotions of the Forrest'. Thus, the fall of man 'all Europe contributed to the making' of, symbolises the folly of the colonial conquest. The Kurtz we are greeted with towards the end of the novella is revealed to be no more than a 'hollow sham' 'satiated with...all the appearance of success and power', Kurtz is 'contemptibly childish. Within the metamorphosis of Kurtz lies Conrad's implicit critiques of the colonial

process— there is lack of meaning and purpose behind the conquest of empire-building, instead, there exists only a blind greed for power, wealth, for 'lying fame' and 'sham distinction', which ultimately results in the defeat of the civilised. The false civility of colonial agents is exemplified once more as it is revealed the manager had 'no vital anxieties' now that Kurtz's life was 'running swiftly'—the lack of emotions and care further exposing the hollowness behind the civilised veneer of the European imperialist, thus a hollowness at the core of the civilising mission.

Hence, Conrad constructs a journey that is both corporeal and mental, through which tension is created between the civilised and the primordial, dichotomies set up between hollowness and meaning, ultimately exposing the hypocrisy behind the colonial conquest.