

Heart of darkness imperialism, hegemony, and othering assignment



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Narrative of Thought I remember when I first read Heart of Darkness. I was a sophomore in high school when I had been required to read it. I remember when I got it. I thought to myself that it might be a cool book. I read the first five pages and wanted to throw it the window. It was confusing, frustrating and a little weird. Eventually I did read it. The more I read the more it made sense. When I finished it, I was still a little confused, but I understood it better. I would not say that the exact word “ imperialism” came to my mind when I thought about Heart of Darkness.

Granted back then I did not really understand the word imperialism. I did know that I was repulsed by what the Europeans were really doing in the Congo. I just did not associate it with the actual word of imperialism. I just knew what was going on was inhumane. Imperialism in Heart of Darkness was rather intense. There were many times when I questioned the main character's, (Marlow's), ethics. At one point in the book, he sees the African slaves in the Congo and comments rather distastefully on them. He comments about an African boy who he describes has having “ sunken eyes... normous and vacant” Marlow says, “ The man seemed young ??? almost a boy ??? but you know with them it's hard to tell. ” He then further describes two Africans sitting at a tree. “ Near the same tree two more bundles of acute angles sat with their legs drawn up... ” (Conrad 156). Marlow then watches aghast, as one of the Africans gets up and crawls to the river to get a drink. As the African does this Marlow refers to him as “ one of these creatures”(157). This shows examples of how mistreated the Africans were. It shows the true consequences of imperialism.

The Africans were underfed, overworked, given little care and medical attention need. As Marlow sees them, he does not see them as poor unfortunate souls. He sees them as creatures, inhuman, unearthly.

Throughout the novel, Marlow never once gives the Africans human traits or unique characteristics. ? This quote showed me how bad imperialism can be. How could the Europeans do this? How could they not see that the Africans were human too? It all comes down to one word. Truth. How do you know that your belief is correct and that your adversary's belief is wrong?

It is the same thing with imperialism. Who gave the Europeans the right to go into Africa and tell the Africans that they were uncivilized and wrong in their beliefs? Maybe the Africans thought they were already civilized in their own way. Why did the Europeans get to say that being civilized is the correct way and the Africans were “ doing it all wrong’? These questions could also be asked for the book, Things Fall Apart. What gave the Europeans the right to say that the Igbos religion and spirituality was wrong? There is no correct answer. The Europeans had an opinion.

Opinions cannot be right, nor can they be wrong. It was their opinion that the Africans needed to be civilized and were inhuman. In addition, if the Europeans were “ civilizing” these Africans, why were they made slaves? It comes back to the truth. How do you know your right? The only rational answer to this question would be that you do not know. There is not a right or wrong to opinions. Thus, there is not a right or wrong to imperialism, since most of it opinionated However, even though there is no right or wrong idea about imperialism, appalling things can come from imperialism.

An example would be greed. When most people hear greed they automatically think of money. On the other hand, in Heart of Darkness this is true but not always. Many of the company's men are in pursuit of wealth, but they are also power hungry. The men, especially Kurtz, are in such desire of power they would do anything. Their moral code has been destroyed by greed. The company is so greedy, that to pay the cannibals, they give them wire as payment for food. The pilgrims would not have had to do that if they had not thrown the cannibals' food overboard.

The pilgrims expected them to buy their food at nearby villages, but there were none or they were hostile, or the manager would not stop. " Besides that, they had given them [Africans] every week three pieces of brass wire, each about nine inches long..." (178). Marlow then talks about how useless it was; unless they planned to actually eat the wire or bend it into fishhooks, they would have no food. He later ponders why, the cannibals, do not attack. After all, they threw the hippo meat overboard because of greed and selfishness. Indeed, the cannibals were in some ways more civil than the pilgrims.

They could have killed the pilgrims anytime they wanted. However, they seemed to have a secret humanity in them. Perhaps it was because they were not corrupted by greed or power. This says a lot about the Europeans. Through out the novel, the European's attitude constantly reminds us that if there is something for them to gain from, then they do not care who they trample on to get to it. Another example for imperialism is " Shooting an Elephant", but there is also evidence that there is othering and hegemony.

However, the story mostly centers on hegemony.

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In “ Shooting an Elephant”, the narrator was pressured to shoot the elephant in order to be accepted by the natives. Orwell did not want to shoot the elephant but felt pressured to in order to maintain his rank of power and respect. Orwell ends up shooting the elephant because he does not want to lose even more respect and look idiotic. If he had not killed the elephant, but simply walked away, he would have been laughed at. Had he approached the creature and it was still angry, he could have been killed. He simply did not have a win- win situation. So he chose what he thought was best for him.

One of the more famous lines in “ Shooting an Elephant” is, “ When the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys. ” What I perceived from this quote was when a white man becomes tyrant he destroys his own free will. Orwell will constantly be doing what he thinks the Burmans want. He will live as a fake. When he put himself in a hierarchy over the Burmans and limited their freedom, he destroyed his own in the process. Orwell’s free will, on the other hand, was in no way destroyed. Orwell could have decided to do the opposite to what the Burmans wished.

When he was faced with the decision of whether or not to shoot the elephant, he could have chosen the latter. In fact, that is precisely what he wanted to do: “ I did not want to shoot the elephant. ” His choice, in itself, to listen to Burmans was an act of free will. He could have just as easily chosen to not shoot. Instead, he chose to shoot. He was entirely at the mercy of his own free will. Therefore, really he never destroyed his free will. He always had it. When God created mankind he gave us the gift of freewill, and free will of choice can never be destroyed.

The final example I have about imperialism is “ White Man’s Burden” The poem is seen as a Eurocentric world, in which non-European cultures are seen as childlike and demonic. The Europeans felt a need to improve the rest of the world and make other cultures civil and less “ demonic”. In the poem is says to “ Take up the White Man’s burden?????????????”. It is a condescending view of the non-European culture and traditions. But who made it the white man’s/ European’s burden? Why should the Europeans care? If it is because of religion and missionaries, then that is a reason. However, not every person who took on the “ burden” had religion in mind.

It is as if they saw the world through rose colored glasses, except when everything they saw that did not quite agree with them, they sought out to judge and change. The point of the poem is that it argues that the Europeans had the right and responsibility to rule over and try to improve “ lesser” cultures by converting them to Western ways. As a sophomore, I began to understand how the world must have looked and thought back when Heart of Darkness and was written. Toward the end of the unit of imperialism, I began to appreciate the light that Heart of Darkness brought me.

I saw the truth in the book that was filled with shadows. I saw the heart of greed in men, and the way that other human beings were mistreated and how opinions can do damage. Though I found many negative things about imperialism, I also found some positive things. Imperialism could bring some cultures up to date with technology. It could bring new appreciation for the non- Western cultures, such as its bringing music, religion, and food to other cultures. Imperialism can do positive things, but it can just as easily do negative things.

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