

# The hypocrisy of imperialism in "heart of darkness" assignment



The five men are held together by the bonds of the sea, yet are restless and meditative aboard the ship, waiting for something to happen. As darkness begins to fall, the men recall the great ships and explorers that have set forth from the Thames on voyages of trade and adventure, often never to return. Suddenly, Marrow remarks that the very region they had been admiring, "which has also been one of the dark places of the earth." (302) He points out that England would have been considered a savage wilderness by the first Roman conquerors.

This seems to be an odd statement, as the conversation about famous British explorers and their glorious voyages was being conducted in a celebratory tone. Referring to the British seamen as "knights-errant" implies that they promoted the splendor of Great Britain, expanded knowledge of the globe, while contributing to the civilization and enlightenment of mankind. "Heart of Darkness" was written in 1899, a period in which the British Empire was at its peak, controlling colonies and dependencies around the world.

While the narrator expresses the common European belief that imperialism is a glorious and worthy enterprise, Marrow contradicts this convention by conjuring images of Britain's past, when it was not the heart of civilization but the savage end of the world. Likewise, the Thames, while associated with celebrated expeditions, becomes an ominous beginning for a journey inward, into the heart of the wilderness. Marrow's own story about his job with the Belgian trading company begins as an adventure.

However, as he proceeds deeper into Africa and becomes exposed to the practices of colonization, he reveals the hypocrisy and cruelty of imperialism.

It is clear that Marrow has acquired a critical opinion of imperial conquest, as his story suggests that participation in imperial enterprises degrades Europeans by removing them from the flinging context of European society, while simultaneously tempting them into violent behavior, due to the hostile and lawless nature of the environment.

However, Marrow's experiences in Africa have not eradicated all conventional European opinion of the continent, as he believes that attempts to civilize native peoples is misguided because they are too overwhelmingly savage for such a project to succeed. Marrow's story begins with an account of his new career opportunity and his sepulcher. " (306) This is a significant comparison as a sepulcher implies death and confinement, and Brussels is the site of the Company's headquarters. Therefore, Marrow points to the fact that colonial enterprises, which originated in Europe, brought death to both white men and their native subjects.

This phrase also has biblical connections, as it is found in the Book of Matthew, where whites sepulchers are described as objects where the external beauty hides the horrors within. This symbolizes the hypocritical Belgian approach to imperialism: although heralded as a lucrative civilizing mission, Belgian colonies were notorious for the violence perpetuated against the natives. Something like an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle. There had been a lot of such rot let loose in print and talk just about that time, and the excellent woman, living right in the rush of all that humbug, got carried off her feet.

She talked about 'weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways,' till, upon my word, she made me quite uncomfortable. I ventured to hint that the Company was run for profit. (308) Marrow's exchange with his aunt exemplifies a critical view of both woman and imperial practices. Marrow, himself, claims to be well-aware that the Company operates for profit and not for the good of humanity, unlike the beliefs of his aunt and other Europeans. Marrow attributes this naiveté to propaganda and the fact that women do not live in the same world as men- as fragile creatures, they must be protected from reality.

Marrow seems to identify female fugues as representatives of home. For Marrow, this is negative, as home indicates knowledge that has been derived from books and religion, rather than from experience. However, "Heart of Darkness" is not thoroughly demeaning towards females, as the story includes many influential and powerful women. Marrow's aunt, for example, was able to get him a job with the Company. In this section, Marrow also encounters two men who demonstrate the change that occurs within oneself while in Africa, due to exposure to the wilderness and colonial sites.

Freshen was Marrow's predecessor in the Company, who, by European standards, was a good and gentle man. However, Marrow is sent to recover Freshener's bones from the centre of an African village, as he was killed violently after striking the village chief. This story indicates that either the European view of people is wrong and useless or that something in Africa makes men behave unusually. Such transformation in character is supported by Marrow's encounter with the Company doctor, who tells Marrow that once in Africa, "changes take place inside. (308) Africa becomes associated with <https://assignbuster.com/the-hypocrisy-of-imperialism-in-heart-of-darkness-assignment/>

mental and physical deterioration, which is later demonstrated with the character of Kurtz. Marrow continues to travel further upriver to another Company station. " But as I stood on the hillside, I foresaw that in the blinding sunshine of that land I would become acquainted with a flabby pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and imperialist. Instead of the usual relation with greed, violence and desire, he uses the " flabby devil" to symbolize the travesties of administration and the widespread decay caused by disorientation in the Company's stations.

The colonists are represented as flabby, because although their imperial practices are evil, they are inefficient and have let their facilities fall into disrepair. Marrow sees piles of decaying machinery and a cliff being blasted for no apparent purpose. However, Marrow's comments produce an ambivalent criticism of colonialism that almost suggests he would approve of the violent exploitation and extortion of the Africans if it was done in a more effective manner. On the other hand, Marrow is appalled by the group of dying native laborers he encounters in a grove of trees, while the other colonists show no concern.

Therefore, while Marrow does have a hypocritical view of imperialism, he does show more compassion towards the African savages than other Europeans. The grove is the dark heart of the station, showing the true evils of colonial enterprise- demutualization and death. Marrow then continues his Journey deeper into the African Jungle to the dilapidated Central Station, where he discovers that the steamer he was supposed to command is sunken. Marrow suspects that the general manager damaged the boat intentionally so as to delay him from reaching Kurtz.

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However, the general manager insists that he was trying to relieve the inner stations himself, especially since it was rumored that Kurt had fallen ill.

Marrow finds the management and condition of the Central Station equally as redundant as previous stations. He watches a man try to extinguish a fire using a bucket with a hole in it. The manager himself is described as a hollow, paper-machi figure and this disturbs Marrow, as it suggests that a man's exterior may conceal only a void or even worse, at the heart of these colonial men lies a vast, malevolent conspiracy.

The word 'ivory' rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed. You would think they were praying to it. A taint of imbecile rapacity blew through it all, like a whiff from some corpse. By Jove! I've never seen anything so unreal in my life. And outside, the silent wilderness surrounding this cleared speck on the earth struck me as something great and invincible, like evil or truth, waiting patiently for the passing away of this fantastic invasion. (317) This is Marrow's initial impression of the Central Station.

The word ivory has taken on a life of its own for the men who work for the Company. It has become far more than the tusk of an elephant to these men; it now represents economic freedom, social advancement and the possible escape from a life of tedious labor. Ivory has become an object of worship. Marrow's reference to a decaying corpse is both literal and figurative: it refers to the deaths of elephants and natives, as a result of the white man's pursuit of ivory. Essentially, European imperialism is causing Africa to become decaying corpse due to extreme greed and cruelty.

Marrow's hypocritical view of imperialism and his interest in Kurt is strengthened towards the end of Part I. He learns that the unusual painting of a blindfolded woman with a lighted torch was truth behind colonization: the blind and unseeing European attempts to bring the 'light' of civilization to Africa, when they are only interested in economic gain. However, to Marrow, the painting makes Kurt more appealing than the Company men. In Part II, Marrow finally begins his treacherous Journey to Quartz's Inner Station.

While revealing up the dangerous river, it is significant to note that the crew of natives, whom the Europeans refer to as cannibals, reveal themselves to be quite reasonable. It was unearthly, and the men were-No, they were no inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it-the suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to me. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity-like yours-the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly.

Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you are 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. And why not? (317) During this Journey, Marrow catches occasional glimpses of native villages along the riverbanks. The drums, chants and howls he hears engage his imagination, which troubles him because it suggests a kinship with these men, whom he has so far been able to classify as inhuman.

In this moment, Marrow seems to be able to admit the merits of his own perception and shows the criticism towards imperialism and the stereotypes which it fosters. Nevertheless, it is significant that Marrow still casts the Africans as a primitive version of himself, rather than as potential equals. The idea that the voyage up the river, further into the wilderness, is a trip back in time is also demonstrated when the boat is attacked by Stone Age weaponry. Instead of retaliating with bullets or other technology, the crew blow the steamer's whistle, preying on the superstitions and lack of technological knowledge of their uncivilized attackers.

At this point in his story, Marrow digresses to offer information about Kurt and his life. This suggests that Marrow feels a need to justify his own conduct, as he speaks of his fascination with Kurt as something which he has no control over. Both in Europe and in Africa, Kurt is reputed to be a great humanitarian, while the other members of the Company are only interested in economic gain. Kurt embodies the ideals and fine sentiments that Europeans used to justify imperialism- particularly that colonizing Africa brought light and civilization to these savage people.

However, when Marrow discovers Kurt, he has become ruthless and rapacious, shocking the other managers of the Company. Kurt refers to the ivory as his own and set himself up as a primitive god to the natives. It is also discovered that he has written a seventeen-page document on the suppression of savage customs. Kurt's supposed desire to civilize the natives is strikingly contradicted by his postscript: " Exterminate some flaw in his character that made him go insane in the isolation of the Inner Station, echoing the observations of the Company doctor from earlier.

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The obvious implication of Marrow's story is that the humanitarian ideals and sentiments justifying imperialism are empty and merely rationalized for exploitation and extortion. Marrow suggests that Africa is responsible for Kurtz's current illness. Having rejected European society, Kurtz has been forced to look into his own soul and this introspection has driven him mad. Kurtz's illness, caused by his body's inability to function outside of a normal (European) environment, reflects his psyche's inability to function outside of a normal social environment.

Despite the hypocrisy of social norms, they also provide a framework of security and defined expectations. In Freudian terms, Kurtz seems to have lost his superego and it is the terror of limitless freedom, with no oversight or punishment, which leads to his madness. Marrow is forced to apply this realization to himself, as he sees that Kurtz's actual depravity mirrors his own potential corruption. Therefore, if Marrow were to betray Kurtz, either by killing him or siding with the manager, he would be betraying himself.

Marrow speaks of his choice of nightmares, where his alternatives are social injustice and cruelty, or the realization that one's soul is empty and infinitely capable of immorality. Although Kurtz wants to remain in his station, where he is somewhat of a deity to the natives, Marrow has been ordered to bring him back to the civilization. During their time on the boat, Kurtz's legacy and ideas suddenly seem very important and he implores Marrow to help preserve them. Kurtz's dying ambitions, to be famous and have his words read by millions, suggests a desire to change the world.

This gives Marrow something with which he can identify, as it provides a middle ground between acquiescence to existing norms of total isolation from society. The brown current ran swiftly out of the heart of darkness, bearing us down towards the sea with twice the speed of our upward progress; and Quartz's life was running swiftly, too, ebbing, ebbing out of his heart into the sea of inexorable time... ' saw the time approaching when I would be left alone of the party of ' unsound method. "' (351) This quote connects the images of the river and the "heart of darkness" which it penetrates.

The river is also something which seems to expel the Europeans from Africa and separate Marrow from the interior. The current makes travel upriver slow and difficult, but the flow of water makes travel downriver, back toward civilization, rapid and seemingly inevitable. Although the current is brown, it is bringing the boat back to white civilization. The first sentence suggests that Kurtz has been able to leave the heart of darkness behind, but Quartz's life seems to be receding along with the darkness and Marrow has also been permanently scarred by it. Quartz's death is very closely followed by Marrow's demise.

Although the illnesses of OTOH men are blamed on the African climate, the disease can also be the result of an existential crisis. Kurtz transmits both his memory and his poor health to Marrow. Society and yet also have an influence on it. Throughout "Heart of Darkness" the men that Marrow encounters and even the African setting demonstrate the cruelty and greed within imperial colonies. Marrow's own thoughts also offer insight, as he realizes the hypocrisy behind imperialism and the hollow reasons of

enlightening and civilizing the natives, which Europeans use to defend colonization.