

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, and the Literary Critique of Colonialism in the Congo

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From Rome up to the Spanish Empire, historians have been dissecting the idea of imperialism. One era of the more modern ages of imperialism is the Victorian era. When European influence was throughout the world. This age saw many people face turbulent times and oppression under European occupation. While many indigenous people criticized their occupiers, there was little criticism from Europeans themselves. There were a few European authors who did speak out, such as the author of books like *1984* and *Animal Farm*, George Orwell. However, Orwell only shared his criticism towards the end of European imperialism. Orwell shared his criticism in his essay *Shooting an Elephant*; however, it came out in 1936 towards the end of his life and towards the end of Europe's global dominance. There is one shining example of an author who criticized European occupations through literature during the highest of their power, this author being Joseph Conrad, who lived from 1857 to 1924. Conrad shared his experience of imperialism in his novella *Heart of Darkness*, which came out in 1899, nearly forty years prior to the publication of Orwell's essay. It exposed to Europe how their citizens were affected by their colonialism and greed. Through his criticism of King Leopold II's Congo in *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad prompted many Europeans question the actions of their empires.

Heart of Darkness is a book about a man named Marlow, a sailor recalling his time working on a steamboat on the Congo River. During this, he reveals to his fellow sailors all the horrors that he bore witness to during his journey. Marlow shares his previous excitement to see the world, and that he had been dreaming since his youth to see the African Coast. He reflects on how naive he and his family were when he set off on his journey. Marlow would later regret how naive he was as he saw the horrible practices, like death, disease, and destruction that his company was doing

to the Congo River. Like enslaving the local population to help collect Ivory for European buyers. Marlow's first account of beholding Europe's oppression was on the voyage to the Congo. He would see skirmishes and explosions coming from the African coast from an unknown European war with the native. Later in his story he shares that he sees how horrible the natives were being treated, and witnesses' death, disease, and cannibalism. During this journey, Marlow hears praise about another captain named Kurtz, and how important he is as Kurtz produces the majority of ivory for the company. Marlow would gain an admiration of Kurtz based solely on what he's been told. Eventually, Marlow was sent to retrieve Kurtz, who had fallen ill and possibly developed madness. Later after being attacked and exploring the Congo River, Marlow retrieves Kurtz who is near death due to his sickness. Eventually Kurtz dies, never being able to realize the effects of his actions. Kurtz's last word being "The horror! The horror!"¹ The story ends with Marlow visiting Kurtz's widow, to which he lies about his journey in the Congo, his last words, and the condition in which he was found. By lying, Marlow compromises a part of himself to the evil that he despised at the start of his story.

This story, while fictional, is significant because of how it relates to Joseph Conrad's life. Conrad actively used his life experience in his writing to express his opinions and to document what he experienced. Historian Maya Jasanoff examines this relationship between Conrad's life and his books in her book, *The Dawn Watch: Joseph Conrad in a Global World*. Jasanoff argues that "Conrad's life and fiction, in short, was a history of globalization seen from inside out."² This thesis communicates the idea of Conrad's life and works and showcases a history of how he viewed imperialism and the growing globalization of the world. Conrad sharing his life in his fiction is

¹ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (Blackwood Magazine, 1899), 99.

² Maya Jasanoff, *The Dawn Watch: Joseph Conrad in a Global World* (New York, Penguin Books, 2017),

especially showcased in *Heart of Darkness*; this is seen when Jasanoff writes, “*Heart of Darkness* also in some ways like a clear passage from truth into fiction. As a matter of biographical fact, none of Conrad's other works of fiction could be so closely pegged to contemporary records of his life experience.”³ Conrad’s first-hand account of imperialism, especially of the Congo, is unique for many European authors of the time. President Obama wrote in referencing a conversation about *Heart of Darkness*, “the book teaches me things About white people, I mean. See, the book’s not really about Africa. Or black people. It’s about the man who wrote it. The European. The American. A particular way of looking at the world”⁴ This showcases that this book does offer a unique perspective. It also echoes the argument made by Jasanoff that Conrad's experience and perspective, as a European make it unique as both see this as rare instance of a European self-reflection and view.

Born Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski, he faced many hardships during his life. He was born in Ukraine but being ethnically and culturally Polish Conrad was already affected by Imperialism, being forced to live a life without a nation, a life of constant movement. This is mainly due to his father’s lifelong dream to see a free Poland. He would write to help the Polish people gain their independence from the Russian Empire. Jasanoff writes about Conrad’s father Apollo, “Apollo remained equally steadfast in his pursuit of his other great pass, Poland, he wrote, watched, and waited for the moment to rise.”⁵ His father's pursuits would affect him in many ways. Like his father, he learned how to write and articulate himself without a formal education Despite his father's constant persistence he would die young, due to years of moving causing him to live in exile for years due to his father's political aspirations. This Would cause him and his wife to

³ Jasanoff, *The Dawn Watch*, 205.

⁴ Barack Obama, *Dreams from my Father*, (New York: Three Rivers press, 2004), 60.

⁵Jasanoff, *The Dawn Watch*, 205.

suffer constant cold weather and illness. Later Conrad would be forced to live in exile from the Russian Empire to escape military conscription, eventually moving to France and later Britain. He would later become a British national after working for merchants as a sailor, however, he would not just work for the British, he would eventually sign on to sail for the Congo for six months. Here he would bear witness to many events and eight years later Conrad would write them into *Heart of Darkness*. With these unique experiences of being the oppressor and opposed, Conrad's personal experience provided him with a different perspective than most other Europeans.

This unique life experience and its effect on Conrad's personal view can be seen in work, especially in *Heart of Darkness*. Hunt Hawkins writes about this in his essay article "Conrad's Critique of Imperialism in Heart of Darkness." Hawkins writes how Conrad's perception within the British Empire has affected his view of imperialism. Within that view, Hawkins argues that Conrad actively seeks to share the activity of atrocities created by imperialism with people of Europe. This can be seen when Hawkins writes, "He was making an appeal to the values of his audiences so that they might censure the atrocities in the Congo, a colony materially different from Britain territories. In the subtext of *Heart of Darkness* Conrad suggests a further judgment against British imperialism itself, but this judgment is made according to entirely different criteria and remains implicit."⁶ This articulates the idea that Conrad was trying to appeal to his audience about the reality of imperialism by taking out the bias of the British by talking about King Leopold II's Colony. This argument also adds that Conrad was trying to argue that imperialism could be horrific to the British people while making sure to not offend his audience by talking about British atrocities. This idea is continued by Hawkins throughout the article. "Compared with these other rulers," he writes, "British imperialists undoubtedly seemed preferable to Conrad but that does not

⁶ Hunt Hawkins, "Conrad's Critique of Imperialism in Heart of Darkness." *PMLA* 94 no. 2, (1979), 282.

mean he sanctioned them absolutely. Conrad opposed imperialism generally, of whatever type, because in conquering foreign peoples it violated their cultures.”⁷ In writing this gives Conrad’s perspective of disdain toward imperialism. For example, Conrad does critique imperialism through the character Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* who is stated to be half-English and committed the atrocities for the company throughout the book. The way in which this character is written is argued by Hawkins to be the same way that Conrad subtly criticizes all of imperialism. This argument is also posited by authors like Jasanoff. She writes, “Conrad’s Congo story has always been about more than one specific place. His insistence on the universal potential for savagery, and the hollowness of civilization.”⁸ Jasanoff contribution here is that Conrad's work transcends the Congo, and that it reprimands all of imperialism. The word choice of “civilization” reflects the Conrad view that Europe was not civilizing native, they were being used for the betterment of the European elite.

During this time of colonization, many Europeans were ignorant of the atrocities created by their empires. The lack of awareness and the story of advocacy for the oppressed in the Congo is seen in works like Adam Hochschild’s book *King Leopold’s Ghost*. In this book, Hochschild shares the history of the Congo, from its first European exploration like those of Henry Morgan Stanley, to how King Leopold II of Belgium gained both European and American support to take the region for himself and later to the governmental body of Belgium. He does this when he writes, “By the time Stanley and others working for the king were done, the blue flag with the gold star fluttered over the villages and territories, Stanley claimed, of more than 450 Congo basin chiefs. The texts varied, but many of the treaties gave the king a complete trading monopoly, even as he

⁷ Hawkins, “Conrad’s Critique,” 294.

⁸ Jasanoff *The Dawn Watch*, 8

placated European and American questioners by insisting that he was opening up Africa to free trade. More importantly, chiefs signed over their land to Leopold, and they did so for almost nothing.”⁹ Hochschild here exposes the back dealing of these empires, how many European nations turns a blind eye. This quick acceptance was due to the greed of the empire gaining new resources from themselves. This adds to Conrad's account of the driving factor of greed in the mind of Marlow's superiors.

Hochschild shares the perspectives and contributions of those who opposed Leopold's subjection of the Congolese people during his reign, like Edmund Dene Morel. Hochschild writes, “Just as he had done in Britain, Morel smoothly shaped his message for different American constituencies. Most of his allies were progressive intellectuals like Mark Twain... He made shrewd use of Senator John Tyler Morgan, the former Confederate general who had helped to engineer U.S. recognition of Leopold's Congo twenty years earlier.”¹⁰ Hochschild shares in the advocacy that was being done by Morel, and the condemnation of King Leopold II's rule of the Congo. However, while the quotes show the continuation of advocacy against Belgian control of the Congo, they reveal how late this criticism of the West was being done. These examples convey the agency of Conrad's story and how unique his criticism is. Hochschild echoes how unique *Heart of Darkness* is when he writes, “Heart of Darkness is one of the most scathing indictments of imperialism in all literature.”¹¹ In highlighting the specialty of *Heart of Darkness* Hochschild articulates that the story is a part of the legacy of advocacy of the Congo. Helping Europeans break free from their ignorance.

⁹ Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 74.

¹⁰ Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, 242.

¹¹ Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, 27.

Hochschild's necessary background of the oppression and horrors seen in the Congo provides the European perspective. For example, "Europe's excitement was the hope that Africa would be a source of raw materials to feed the Industrial Revolution, just as the search for raw materials—slaves—for the colonial plantation economy ...but Europeans liked to think of themselves as having higher motives. The British, in particular, fervently believed in bringing 'civilization' and Christianity to the natives"¹². This Hochschild expresses the reasons why Europeans wanted to be on the African continent for both its resources and to enforce Western ideals. Hochschild essentially explains why people like King Leopold wanted to have a piece of Africa. It also divulges how Europe justified itself in its atrocities. This higher purpose gave a reason for why the citizens of Europe either supported or were complacent about the efforts of their empires. Conrad also believed that Europe was bringing civilization to the world when he set off on his voyage in 1890. Hochschild writes, "In conversations before he took up his new job, the thirty-two-year-old Korzeniowski showed that, like almost everyone in Europe, he believed Leopold's mission in Africa was a noble and "civilizing" one."¹³ Hochschild shares this to show us that before his trip to the Congo River, Conrad was also ignorant of what King Leopold's actions were in the Congo River as the rest of Europe.

This viewpoint of the naiveness of Europe can be seen directly through Conrad's life and his character Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad's character recounts, "What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth! . . . The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires."¹⁴ The purpose of this line is to show the haste with which Marlow wanted to see the world. It maintains the reason he wanted to visit the Congo

¹² Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, 147.

¹³ Hochschild *King Leopold's Ghost*, 141.

¹⁴ Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 6.

and seek riches and stories he would gain from his experience. This view is important to understand why people, like Conrad, had their belief in their empires before they saw the abhorrent acts of imperialism. It provides insight into why Conrad would author stories of these horrible events and places, so they might break these lies that imperialism told its people. This ignorance of imperialism is perpetuated through people like Marlow's aunt, who represents the European perspective of Africa. Conrad writes, "She talked about 'weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways'" ¹⁵ Here Conrad is displaying that it was not just himself that was unaware of the reality of imperialism. This character portrays an irony of calling the Africans ignorant while having no knowledge about them.

Conrad openly expresses his view of imperialism and does a remarkable job of illustrating this through Marlow's experiences and the themes of the novella. For example, Conrad writes, "They were dying slowly—it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now— nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. Brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest."¹⁶ This quote highlights the sickness that Europe had brought to these people as Marlow, in this sense, is appalled that these men were left to die after being deemed useless to his company. Conrad points this out to show the readers that the company never truly tried to 'civilize them' by only giving the bare minimum of care. It exposed that the company believes that these people are disposable. The second that they were not useful, they were left behind like a broken tool. Europe was not helping these people and were instead directly

¹⁵ Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 13.

¹⁶ Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 18.

causing their deaths. They are the reason that these workers were enslaved, overworked, left to die, and nothing about what they did should be considered civilized.

Conrad also believes that these empires did not care about their people the moment they were not useful. Conrad writes, “I was, so to speak, numbered with the dead. It is strange how I accepted this unforeseen partnership, this choice of nightmares forced upon me in the tenebrous land invaded by these mean and greedy phantoms.”¹⁷ This quote communicates Marlow himself was seen as dispensable to the company. Here Conrad, through Marlow, reflects that the company, or King Leopold II's kingdom, did not care about its workers. Even the ones that were European, as Marlow knows that he can be left to die. Ultimately showing his audience that empires throughout Europe only care that their citizens are useful in enhancing their wealth.

Conrad's themes of the corruption of morals are also meant to portray the loss of humanity and imperialism at the cost of its citizens. This is evident in the book through the character of Kurtz, who is considered as the most valuable person in the company. He was meant to symbolize the strength and education of Europe as he is characterized as highly educated and half British and half French. As the story progresses it divulges to the reader that the greed of Kurtz had cost him his life and sanity. Conrad demonstrates this loss of humanity when Marlow arrives to retrieve Kurtz, and Kurtz “kept on looking out past me with fiery, longing eyes, with a mingled expression of wistfulness and hate. He made no answer, but I saw a smile, a smile of indefinable meaning.”¹⁸ The corruption of Kurtz reveals that even Europe's best will fall due to greed and a lust for hate. It is meant to convey that in these situations, the only real people gaining anything from imperialism is the Empire itself, or in the case of *Heart of Darkness*, the company that took the

¹⁷ Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 91.

¹⁸ Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 90.

last and profited from Kurtz's ivory. The individuals who live and work for it have paid the price for the company, whether with their lives or with their humanity. Even Marlow had himself compromised his morals, as he promised to lie to Kurtz's widow about her late husband Kurtz's last moments. Marlow says earlier in the book, "You know I hate, detest, and can't bear a lie, not because I am straighter than the rest of us, but simply because it appalls me. There is a taint of death, a flavour of mortality in lies—which is exactly what I hate and detest in the world—what I want to forget."¹⁹ This character is purposely portrayed to the reader of this book that imperialism is costing Europe the humanity that they believed they were sharing with the world.

The theme of this loss of humanity is further explored within articles like "Heart of Darkness": "Anti-Imperialism, Racism, or Impressionism?" by Patrick Brantlinger. In this article, Brantlinger questions whether the story is a criticism of imperialism or whether it adds to the racist ideals that Europeans had of Africa during the Victorian Era. Brantlinger writes "Conrad's critique of the empire is never strictly anti-imperialist. Instead, in terms that can be construed as conservative rather than nihilistic, he mourns the loss of the true faith in modern times."²⁰ Here Brantlinger concluded the *Heart of Darkness* is more of Conrad's story about imperialism, by showing that imperialism ultimately fails its citizens. It was a failure of the ideals that the Europeans had built to justify their colonization of Africa. The quote exhibits an insight into the purpose of Conrad's book of trying to help the people of Europe to gain self-realization and that imperialism has taken from their supposed enlightenment.

Conrad's work continues to teach and advocate against imperialism. Though his works are being read and taught in schools around the world. Mainly because of its importance and how it

¹⁹ Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 33.

²⁰ Patrick Brantlinger, "'Heart of Darkness': 'Anti-Imperialism, Racism, or Impressionism?'" *Criticism* 27 no. 4, (1985): 382.

shares this truth of Imperialism. This is seen when Hochschild writes early on in his book, “my own ignorance of the Congo's early history. Then it occurred to me that, like millions of other people, I had read something about that time and place after all: Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* ...I had mentally filed away the book under fiction, not fact.”²¹ Here he shows that while he may have not realized it at the time, Conrad did teach him about the history of imperialism and the Congo, and that he gave an insight that few authors could have. Hochschild put this clearly in his article, “*Stranger in Strange Lands: Joseph Conrad and the Dawn of Globalization*,” “Conrad’s most searing portrait of such a business is *Heart of Darkness*, published in 1899. No one who reads that book can ever again imagine the colonizers of Africa as they liked to portray themselves.”²² This conveys that this book continues to affect the way people have interacted with this book. It is a lasting testimony of the legacy of imperialism not only to the reader but to history as well. This idea is repeated by Jasanoff when she writes, “Conrad captured something about the way power operated across continents and races, something that seemed as important to engage with today as it had when he started to write.”²³ This quote by Jasanoff gives her own purpose in writing, and teaches about Conrad, but it also conveys the importance of *Heart of Darkness*.

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* contributed to the world by giving an early criticism of imperialism. Conrad does this by imparting to the reader a unique story that reveals the reality of Imperialism during the height of Europe's influence on the world. He does this by drawing from his personal experience as someone who has seen and contributed to imperialism and as someone who has been affected by imperialism. With these personal experiences, he paints very descriptive scenes and employs his characters throughout his book to show the hypocrisy of Europe without

²¹ Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, 3.

²² Adam Hochschild, “Review of *Stranger in Strange Lands: Joseph Conrad and the Dawn of Globalization*, by Maya Jasanoff” *Foreign Affairs* 97 no. 2 (2018), 151.

²³ Jasanoff, *The Dawn Watch*, 4.

compromising his ideas to his audience. In doing so, Conrad paved the way for many others like George Orwell and Mark Twain to illustrate their insights and personal experiences to the world the injustice of European colonialism. Overall, *Heart of Darkness* continues to give to the world by presenting an insight into this time of European dominance and inspires readers to continue to speak out against the continuing legacy of imperialism.