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Illusion of Enlightenment: A Postcolonial and Formalist Insight into Heart of Darkness through Conrad's Imperial Narrative

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Abstract
Interpreting Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness through the lens of an erudite struggling to survive in a postcolonial, disruptive world is an intellectually stimulating experience. This research paper primarily focuses on exposing the oppressive structures of imperial rule and analysing how these structures affect the culture, identity, and intellect of colonized African people. The study reassesses Conrad's Heart of Darkness through various postcolonial perspectives, particularly Edward Said's Orientalism (1978), Chinua Achebe's an Image of Africa, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's The Dangers of a Single Story, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's Decolonising the Mind. By critically examining the text, this study highlights the thematic concerns and subtle forms of violence Conrad portrays through characters such as Brickmaker, the Manager, the Accountant, and Marlow. Furthermore, the paper also engages with formalist and psychological interpretations by modern critics such as Ian Watt and Albert Guerard, questioning the moral obscurity and ambiguous narrative ideologies presented in Heart of Darkness.

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Introduction

Narrative has always played a crucial role in shaping how peoples, cultures, and histories are understood. As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) argues, "Many stories matter" yet the dominance of a single story can distort reality, strip dignity, and silence marginalized voices. Colonial literature, despite its critical ambitions, is often implicated in

this process. Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness is one such text that exposes the brutality of imperialism while simultaneously reproducing the very ideologies it seeks to critique.

Undoubtedly, Heart of Darkness offers a powerful condemnation of European colonial practices, highlighting violence, exploitation, depersonalization, and physical displacement imposed by imperial forces. Conrad attempts to denounce the moral corruption and inhumanity embedded within colonial enterprises. However, due to the persistence of imperial hegemonic thought, Conrad unintentionally constructs what Adichie terms a "single story" of colonized African peoples. For this reason, postcolonial thinkers such as Chinua Achebe and Adichie regard Conrad's anti-imperial narrative as deeply problematic.

While Conrad foregrounds both explicit violence and subtle forms of domination experienced by Africans, he remains largely indifferent to their voices, perspectives, and lived realities. Africans are rendered voiceless and are repeatedly depicted as monstrous, primitive, or less civilized. Consequently, Conrad's focus remains confined to the geopolitical dynamics of colonialism rather than addressing the profound identity manipulation and cultural erasure perpetuated under imperial rule.

This study seeks to unpack these subtle formalistic modes of subjugation by critically examining the characters of Marlow, the Brickmaker, the Manager, Kurtz, and the Accountant through Conrad's imperial perspective. Moreover, it challenges the false justification of colonizing lands and peoples deemed culturally, racially, or ethnically "different" and offers deeper formalistic and postcolonial insights into Conrad's imperial narrative.

Theoretical Framework

This research is grounded in Postcolonial Literary Theory, which examines how imperial ideologies are encoded, circulated, and sustained through canonical Western texts. Postcolonial criticism provides an essential lens for interrogating the power relations embedded in literary representation, particularly in texts produced during the height of European imperial expansion. Within this framework, Heart of Darkness is analyzed not only as a modernist literary achievement but also as a cultural artifact shaped by imperial discourse.

The primary theoretical foundation of this study draws on Edward Said's concept of Orientalism (1978), which explains how the West constructs the East or more broadly, the colonized world as inferior, irrational, and primitive in contrast to a self-defined image of Western rationality and civilization. These ideological binary forms the core of colonial discourse and is deeply embedded in imperial narratives. Said argues that literature is never neutral; rather, it often participates in reinforcing dominant power structures. In Heart of Darkness, Africa is not represented as a lived, historical space with its own agency, cultures, and complexities. Instead, it is imagined as a dark, chaotic, and unknowable landscape that serves primarily to reflect the psychological and moral anxieties of European characters. This reduction of Africa to a symbolic backdrop underscores the novel's entanglement in a Eurocentric worldview, despite its apparent critique of imperial exploitation (Said, 1978).

Complementing Said's framework, Chinua Achebe's seminal essay "An Image of Africa" (1977) forms a crucial pillar of this study. Achebe forcefully critiques Heart of Darkness for its dehumanizing representation of Africans, arguing that they are portrayed as voiceless, nameless figures who function merely as extensions of the jungle. Achebe identifies this portrayal as a form of latent but enduring racism that undercuts Conrad's condemnation of colonial brutality. His critique challenges the uncritical celebration of the literary canon and calls attention to the ethical consequences of representing Africa as Europe's primitive "Other." Achebe's perspective informs this study by foregrounding the moral responsibility of both writers and readers when engaging with texts that address race, power, and representation.

The theoretical scope is further expanded through the work of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986), whose postcolonial thought emphasizes the devastating effects of colonialism on language, culture, and imagination. Ngũgĩ advocates for reclaiming indigenous voices and narratives that speak from within the colonized experience rather than from the imperial center. In relation to Heart of Darkness, his ideas are used to interrogate how the novel systematically silences African voices and reinforces colonial hierarchies through its narrative structure. African characters remain largely passive and speechless, while European consciousness dominates the narrative. This study, therefore, approaches the text not merely as a symbolic exploration of the self, but as a politically charged narrative deeply implicated in colonial modes of representation.

To provide a balanced critical perspective, the study also engages with formal and psychological interpretations of the novel, particularly those offered by Ian Watt and Albert Guerard. Watt emphasizes the modernist narrative complexity of Heart of Darkness, highlighting its ambiguity, framed narration, and moral uncertainty. Guerard, in contrast, focuses on the psychological dimensions of the text, interpreting the Congo as a metaphor for the unconscious and Kurtz's descent as an inward moral collapse. While these readings enrich an understanding of the novel's structure and thematic depth, this research moves beyond such approaches to interrogate their ideological limitations. A postcolonial lens challenges the abstraction of Africa into metaphor and insists on

acknowledging the material, historical, and political realities obscured by symbolic interpretations.

By integrating these diverse critical perspectives, this theoretical framework offers a comprehensive approach to reading Heart of Darkness. It recognizes the text as both an influential literary work and a product of imperial ideology. Through close textual analysis and character study, the research examines how language, imagery, and narrative voice contribute to the construction of Africa as the "Other," while European characters such as Marlow and Kurtz are granted psychological complexity and moral depth denied to African figures.

Ultimately, this framework seeks to uncover the ideological structures within Heart of Darkness that continue to shape perceptions of race, empire, and cultural identity. Postcolonial theory provides the analytical tools necessary to deconstruct these structures, revealing how literature can simultaneously critique and perpetuate systems of domination. Through this lens, Conrad's novella is re-evaluated not only for its artistic merit but also for its complicity in sustaining colonial worldviews.

Literature Review

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* continues to be a central text in the study of colonialism and imperialism, provoking widespread critical attention from scholars across literary and postcolonial disciplines. From a decolonial perspective, it can be argued that although the text appears to critique European imperialism, it paradoxically upholds many of the racial and ideological foundations of the colonial worldview. This perspective aligns with thinkers such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Chinua Achebe, who have identified the subtle yet insidious ways in which the novella marginalizes African voices and centers European experience, even while claiming to interrogate the moral failures of empire.

One of the most influential critiques of *Heart of Darkness* is Chinua Achebe's essay *An Image of Africa* (Achebe, 1977), in which he argues that Conrad presents Africa not as a real place with diverse people and cultures, but as a dark and mysterious backdrop for the spiritual crises of Europeans. Achebe contends that the novella dehumanizes Africans, referring to them as "limbs," "savages," and "prehistoric man," thereby stripping them of individuality and voice. This, he claims, renders Conrad "a thoroughgoing racist," despite the novel's apparent disapproval of colonial brutality (Achebe, 1977, p. 784).

Achebe's criticism is both valid and necessary. Although Marlow expresses discomfort with the violence of imperial agents, he never fundamentally questions the legitimacy of empire itself. African characters remain silent and anonymous figures, never afforded perspective or narrative agency.

Further supporting this critique is the work of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, who, in *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), argues that colonialism exerted power not only through political and economic means but also through culture and language. According to Ngũgĩ, literary works such as *Heart of Darkness* contributed to constructing and normalizing a worldview in which Europe represents civilization and reason, while Africa is portrayed as chaos and savagery. He emphasizes the importance of dismantling this "cultural bomb" and restoring African languages and narratives suppressed by colonial discourse (Ngũgĩ, 1986, p. 3). From this perspective, *Heart of Darkness* not only imagines Africa as a place devoid of history or structure but also fails to challenge the Eurocentric narrative that defines Africa in opposition to European identity.

In contrast, scholars such as Ian Watt and Albert Guerard offer more sympathetic readings of Conrad's novel. Watt (1980) argues that *Heart of Darkness* is a modernist exploration of the moral ambiguity of imperialism, suggesting that Marlow undergoes a psychological transformation and becomes increasingly disillusioned with the imperial project as he travels deeper into the Congo. Similarly, Guerard (1958) interprets the novella as a symbolic journey into the "heart" of human capacity for evil, using the colonial setting as a metaphor rather than a direct political critique. These readings suggest that Conrad was not endorsing empire but revealing its corrupt and dehumanizing effects.

However, these interpretations are insufficient in confronting the racial dynamics at play. Marlow's partial recognition of imperial cruelty does not translate into meaningful resistance to colonialism. Instead, he remains complicit, even idealizing Kurtz after witnessing his descent into madness and violence. Moreover, the African environment is consistently described as alien, threatening, and unknowable—a representation that continues to shape Western conceptions of Africa to this day.

Edward Said (1993), in *Culture and Imperialism*, offers a more nuanced critique. He acknowledges that Conrad is not a straightforward supporter of empire, yet argues that *Heart of Darkness* never fully escapes the ideological framework of imperialism. Said notes that while Conrad exposes the hollowness of imperial justifications, he still presents Africa as a passive space devoid of historical agency. In this way, the text may critique the practice of colonialism, but it does not challenge the foundational assumptions that justify empire (Said, 1993).

From this perspective, Said helps bridge the gap between polarized interpretations. His analysis recognizes Conrad's critique of empire while also acknowledging its limitations. Ultimately, it can be observed that *Heart of Darkness*, while seemingly questioning European arrogance, does so from within a colonial consciousness that cannot imagine Africa beyond the European gaze. The novel fails to depict Africans

as fully realized human subjects and thereby contributes to a literary tradition that marginalizes non-European voices.

Cedric Watts, in his article *"A Bloody Racist": About Achebe's View of Conrad*, responds to Chinua Achebe's well-known accusation that Joseph Conrad was "a thoroughgoing racist," based on his depiction of Africans in *Heart of Darkness*. Watts argues that Achebe's critique, although influential, overlooks the literary complexity and ironic structure of the novel. He suggests that Conrad's portrayal of Africa is not an endorsement of imperialist racism, but rather an attempt to expose its horrors. According to Watts, the novella employs irony, ambiguity, and a morally conflicted narrator Marlow to encourage readers to question imperialist ideologies. While acknowledging that Conrad used language typical of his time, Watts maintains that *Heart of Darkness* ultimately functions as a critique of European colonialism rather than a celebration of it.

Watts' defense of Conrad provides a valuable counterbalance to Achebe's critique. From this perspective, his argument presents *Heart of Darkness* as a literary and moral exploration rather than a straightforward imperialist narrative. The novel's tone is not triumphant but deeply troubled, revealing the emptiness and brutality of colonialism through Marlow's disillusionment and Kurtz's moral collapse. However, it can also be argued that Watts underestimates the significance of representation. Even if Conrad's intention was critical, the absence of African voices and the portrayal of Africans as silent or "savage" figures still contribute to the kind of dehumanization that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie describes as "the danger of a single story." While Watts' emphasis on irony and nuance is important, it remains necessary to acknowledge how the novel, intentionally or not, reinforces colonial stereotypes. Thus, both Achebe's critique and Watts' defense are essential for understanding the text's complex legacy.

Furthermore, in her TED Talk *"The Danger of a Single Story"* (2009), Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie argues that reducing people, cultures, or places to a single narrative leads to stereotypes, misunderstanding, and dehumanization. As she insightfully states, "The problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete" (Adichie, 2009). This observation resonates strongly with *Heart of Darkness*, where Africa is depicted through a narrow, Eurocentric lens, reflecting precisely the danger Adichie warns against—the reduction of an entire continent to a single, primitive narrative.

Adichie further explains that when complex individuals and societies are reduced to a single perspective often shaped by dominant cultural narratives their richness, diversity, and humanity are overshadowed. She illustrates this through personal experiences, noting how Western literature and media frequently portray Africa solely in terms of poverty, war, and primitiveness. Such limited representations not only shape how outsiders perceive Africans but can also influence how Africans perceive themselves. According to Adichie, the "single story" is dangerous because it is incomplete: it silences voices, flattens cultures, and reinforces existing power structures.

"When we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise" (Adichie, 2009).

Adichie's arguments are highly relevant when analyzing *Heart of Darkness*. The novel can be seen as a classic example of the "single story," as Africa is represented primarily as a dark, chaotic, and uncivilized space, filtered through European perception. Africans are rarely given names, voices, or individual identities; instead, they appear as silent figures or faceless masses. This portrayal reinforces the colonial construction of Africa as "the Other" a blank canvas onto which European anxieties and moral dilemmas are projected. While Conrad may have intended to critique imperialism, he nonetheless participates in the narrative reduction that Adichie cautions against.

Applying Adichie's framework enables a more critical understanding of how *Heart of Darkness* contributes to a literary tradition that marginalizes African perspectives and simplifies the continent's identity. Her concept encourages a more ethical and inclusive approach to literary analysis—one that remains attentive to whose voices are represented and whose are excluded.

Similarly, Rudyard Kipling's poem *"The White Man's Burden"* (1899), written during the height of Western imperial expansion, reflects the ideological foundations of colonialism. In the poem, Kipling encourages the United States to assume the "burden" of empire by colonizing the Philippines following the Spanish-American War. Colonization is portrayed as a noble yet thankless duty, with non-European peoples depicted as "half-devil and half-child," in need of Western guidance and civilization. This perspective frames imperialism not as exploitation, but as a moral responsibility—an altruistic mission to civilize and uplift supposedly inferior societies. The poem thus serves as a symbolic articulation of the broader colonial ideology that underpinned European and American imperialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Kipling's concept of *"The White Man's Burden"* is highly relevant when analyzing *Heart of Darkness*, as it reflects the mindset that Conrad's novel both represents and critiques. From a critical perspective, *Heart of Darkness* embodies the contradictions inherent in imperial ideology. On the one hand, European characters frequently speak in the language of civilization and duty, echoing Kipling's belief that colonization is a humanitarian mission. On the other hand, Conrad exposes the moral emptiness and brutality underlying such rhetoric—Kurtz's descent into madness and Marlow's

growing disillusionment reveal how hollow the so-called "civilizing mission" truly is. However, while the novel critiques imperial hypocrisy, it does not entirely escape the assumptions embedded within the *"White Man's Burden"* narrative. Africans are rarely portrayed as autonomous individuals, and their suffering is filtered through a European lens. In this way, Conrad critiques imperial ideology while simultaneously centering European experience, leaving African voices largely unheard. Kipling's poem thus helps illuminate how even anti-imperialist texts such as *Heart of Darkness* can remain entangled within colonial frameworks.

Similarly, Rudyard Kipling's novella *The Man Who Would Be King* (1888) highlights the illusion and ultimate failure of imperial ambition. The story of two British adventurers, Daniel Dravot and Peachey Carnehan, demonstrates how attempts to establish dominance in a foreign land collapse under the weight of arrogance and deception. This narrative closely parallels the thematic core of *Heart of Darkness*, where Kurtz another European figure driven by grand ideals succumbs to delusions of power and moral decay. Both Kipling and Conrad depict imperial agents who, when removed from the constraints of law and accountability, become consumed by power.

While Kipling's tone is more ironic and adventurous, and Conrad's more psychological and somber, both texts ultimately critique the destructive consequences of unchecked imperial authority. Reading Kipling alongside Conrad deepens our understanding of *Heart of Darkness* as a narrative not only about empire, but also about the corrupting effects of power when detached from ethical responsibility.

Furthermore, Kipling's novella reinforces the idea that imperialism breeds not only exploitation but also self-deception. Both Dravot and Kurtz enter so-called "uncivilized" lands with ambitions of control and superiority, only to be destroyed by their own moral blindness. Although the two texts differ in tone—Kipling's being more detached and ironic, and Conrad's more introspective and philosophical—they converge in portraying imperial ambition as ultimately self-destructive.

From a formalist perspective, Ian Watt analyzes *Heart of Darkness* through the lens of literary impressionism and symbolism. He argues that Conrad deliberately avoids direct description, instead relying on fragmented and suggestive imagery to reflect the uncertainty and ambiguity of Marlow's psychological journey. This impressionistic technique immerses readers in a state of interpretive uncertainty, compelling them to derive meaning from recurring symbols such as darkness, the river, and Kurtz himself. Watt further situates the novel within the modernist tradition, suggesting that it prioritizes subjective experience over historical realism.

Watt's interpretation highlights *Heart of Darkness* as not merely a political text, but also an aesthetic and psychological exploration. His analysis is particularly compelling in demonstrating how Conrad's narrative style captures the disorientation and moral ambiguity of colonial encounters. However, while impressionism enhances the novel's complexity, it can also obscure its political implications. By centering European perception, the narrative risks marginalizing the lived realities of the colonized. Therefore, Watt's formalist insights must be balanced with postcolonial perspectives that foreground issues of representation and power.

Similarly, Albert J. Guerard, in *The Journey Within* (1977), interprets *Heart of Darkness* as a symbolic and psychological narrative rather than a historical or political one. He views the journey into the Congo as a metaphorical descent into the human psyche, where characters such as Marlow and Kurtz represent stages of moral awareness and disintegration. In this reading, Africa becomes a symbolic landscape a backdrop for exploring existential and psychological crises rather than a fully realized setting.

While Guerard's interpretation offers valuable insight into the novel's symbolic depth, it risks overlooking its historical and political context. By treating Africa primarily as a metaphor, such readings may inadvertently replicate the very erasure that postcolonial critics highlight. Thus, although Guerard's psychological approach enriches our understanding of the novel's ambiguity, it must be critically evaluated alongside perspectives that emphasize its colonial implications.

In addition, Helen O'Donnell (2021), in *Pattern and Paradox in Conrad's Prose*, examines the rhythmic and recursive structure of Conrad's language, arguing that his fragmented syntax mirrors Marlow's psychological disorientation. Through repetition of key symbols such as "darkness," "horror," and "ivory," Conrad constructs a network of meanings that resists closure and sustains ambiguity. O'Donnell's analysis demonstrates that these stylistic elements are not merely decorative but integral to the novel's thematic exploration of uncertainty and contradiction.

Likewise, Liam Jones (2022) emphasizes the importance of narrative structure in shaping meaning. He argues that the novel's layered narration particularly the use of a frame narrator recounting Marlow's story creates epistemological uncertainty, distancing readers from any definitive interpretation. This structural complexity invites active engagement, as readers must navigate multiple perspectives to construct meaning.

Priya Nair (2023) further explores Conrad's use of symbolism, highlighting how recurring images such as light, darkness, and ivory generate interpretive ambiguity. Rather than serving fixed allegorical functions, these symbols produce contradictions that reflect both psychological and moral uncertainty. This fluidity of meaning reinforces the novel's enduring complexity and its openness to diverse interpretations.

More recently, Marcus Li (2024) introduces the concept of the "aesthetic of enclosure," arguing that Conrad constructs claustrophobic spatial settings to mirror the psychological entrapment of his characters. From the confined space of the *Nellie* to the oppressive atmosphere of the Congo, these environments reinforce themes of alienation, moral limitation, and existential unease.

In conclusion, *Heart of Darkness* remains a complex and contested text that continues to generate diverse interpretations. While it offers moments of critique against imperialism, it ultimately remains embedded within a colonial framework that does not fully challenge racial hierarchies or narrative structures of power. Therefore, it is essential for scholars to engage critically with the text—not to dismiss it, but to interrogate its assumptions and to create space for alternative narratives that resist and reframe colonial discourse.

Critical Analysis of *Heart of Darkness*

Joseph Conrad is regarded as one of the most influential and intellectually profound literary figures of the early twentieth century. He is widely recognized as an impressionist and modernist writer due to his innovative narrative techniques and psychologically complex style. His most celebrated work, *Heart of Darkness* (1899), presents a voyage narrative in which the protagonist, Charles Marlow, recounts his journey as a riverboat captain in Africa, particularly in the Congo. Through this journey, Conrad exposes the brutality, corruption, and moral decay embedded within the imperial system. This analysis explores the key thematic concerns of the novel through the depiction of characters such as Marlow, Kurtz, the Manager, and the Brickmaker.

European Imperialism as a Symbol of Violence

During his journey into the Congo, Marlow gradually uncovers the true nature of imperialism, witnessing the hypocrisy and brutality of European colonizers. He challenges the justification of colonization by describing it as fundamentally violent and inhumane. As he reflects, the act of conquest is inherently destructive, involving the seizure of land from those who differ in race, culture, and identity. This highlights that imperialism is not a humanitarian endeavor but a system rooted in exploitation and domination.

Conrad further suggests that colonization disrupts not only the socio-cultural and political structures of indigenous societies but also their natural environment. The oppressive atmosphere of the Congo, described as "warm, thick, heavy, and sluggish," reflects the moral stagnation and decay associated with imperial presence. Additionally, the incident involving the death of Fresleven over a trivial dispute symbolizes the senseless violence perpetuated by colonial agents.

Through Marlow's reflections, Conrad critiques the flawed assumptions behind the so-called "civilizing mission," exposing it as a façade for greed, violence, and moral corruption**.**

Marlow's Disillusionment

Marlow's journey is not merely physical but deeply psychological. Initially driven by curiosity and a desire for exploration, he becomes increasingly disillusioned as he confronts the harsh realities of colonialism. His experiences reveal the moral ambiguity and hypocrisy underlying imperial ideology.

By the end of the novel, Marlow himself becomes complicit in this system, as demonstrated when he lies to Kurtz's fiancée to preserve Kurtz's image. This act reflects the pervasive deception inherent in imperialism a system that presents itself as civilizing while being fundamentally rooted in violence and exploitation. Marlow's realization that there is a "taint of death" in lies underscores the moral and spiritual corruption that accompanies imperial power.

Depersonalization and Subjugation under Colonial Rule

One of the most significant themes in *Heart of Darkness* is the dehumanization of indigenous people under colonial rule. Conrad portrays African natives as victims of systemic oppression, highlighting their suffering and marginalization. They are often depicted as "dying shadows," emphasizing their loss of identity and humanity within the colonial framework.

Imperialists justify their actions by claiming to bring civilization and progress; however, Conrad exposes this as a façade masking exploitation, violence, and greed. The portrayal of Africans as voiceless and faceless figures reflects the depersonalization inherent in colonial discourse.

While parallels can be drawn with contemporary geopolitical contexts, such comparisons should be approached cautiously in academic analysis to maintain focus and objectivity. Nevertheless, the novel powerfully illustrates how colonial

systems normalize suffering, reshape identities, and impose narratives that marginalize indigenous voices.

Hypocrisy of the Civilizing Mission

Through characters such as the Brickmaker, the General Manager, and the Accountant, Conrad reveals the hypocrisy embedded within the ideology of colonial civilization. These figures embody the bureaucratic and moral emptiness of imperial authority, prioritizing personal gain over ethical responsibility.

Marlow's observations expose how imperialism disguises exploitation as progress, while in reality it leads to widespread suffering and moral decay. The notion that imperial strength arises from "the weakness of others" highlights the fundamentally unjust nature of colonial power structures.

Kurtz as a Symbol of Magnificence and Moral Degeneration

Kurtz is one of the most central and complex characters in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. He is a European ivory trader stationed in the Congo and is initially portrayed as a figure of brilliance, dignity, and charisma. Many of the Company's agents admire him deeply, viewing him as an extraordinary and influential personality. His eloquence and commanding presence enable him to dominate and influence others, including the indigenous population. As the Russian trader remarks to Marlow, "You don't talk with that man you listen to him," emphasizing Kurtz's powerful rhetorical authority.

Marlow initially perceives Kurtz as an idealistic figure an emissary of "pity, science, and progress." This reflects the broader imperial belief that European colonizers bring enlightenment and civilization to supposedly "uncivilized" lands. However, this perception gradually shifts as Marlow travels deeper into the Congo and confronts the realities of colonial exploitation. Kurtz's repeated assertion of ownership "My ivory, my station, my river" reveals his obsessive greed and sense of absolute possession over the land and its resources.

As the narrative progresses, Kurtz's character undergoes a dramatic transformation. Rather than embodying civilization, he becomes a symbol of moral and spiritual decay. Marlow observes that "the wilderness had found him out early," suggesting that Kurtz's descent into madness is not accidental but a consequence of unchecked power and isolation. His infamous declaration, "Exterminate all the brutes!" exposes the extreme brutality and dehumanizing ideology at the heart of imperialism.

Through Kurtz's transformation from an idealized figure into a morally corrupted individual, Conrad reveals the duplicity of imperial ideology. Kurtz ultimately embodies both the grandeur and the grotesque reality of colonial power, highlighting the destructive consequences of greed, domination, and moral collapse.

Contrast between the River Thames and the River Congo

Conrad constructs a striking contrast between the River Thames and the River Congo to expose the hypocrisy underlying imperial ideology. The novel opens on the River Thames, which is portrayed as a symbol of civilization, history, and continuity. It represents dignity, stability, and the legacy of exploration. Marlow reflects on the Thames with reverence, associating it with the greatness of past achievements and imperial expansion.

However, this romanticized view is contrasted with the depiction of the Congo River, which is described as dark, mysterious, and threatening. As Marlow journeys into the Congo, the river becomes a symbol of uncertainty and moral descent. He describes it as one of the "dark places of the earth," suggesting both physical obscurity and ethical ambiguity. The Congo is portrayed as a space that challenges European notions of order and civilization, revealing instead the chaos and brutality underlying imperial enterprise.

This contrast is further emphasized by Chinua Achebe, who argues that the Congo functions as the antithesis of the Thames. While the Thames is associated with civilization and progress, the Congo is constructed as its opposite primitive, dangerous, and unknowable. This binary opposition reflects the Eurocentric worldview embedded within the narrative.

Thus, the juxtaposition of these two rivers not only highlights the contradictions of imperial ideology but also reveals how colonial discourse constructs hierarchical distinctions between Europe and Africa.

The Brickmaker: A Symbol of Bureaucratic Inefficiency and Hypocrisy

The Brickmaker is a minor yet significant character who symbolizes the inefficiency, emptiness, and opportunism within the colonial system. When Marlow encounters him at the Central Station, he appears as a figure of importance; however, his actual role is hollow and unproductive. Despite being responsible for making bricks, he produces none, as he lacks the necessary materials highlighting the absurdity and dysfunction of colonial administration.

Marlow's comparison of the Brickmaker to Mephistopheles underscores his deceptive and superficial nature. He is

described as a "papier-mâché Mephistopheles," suggesting that beneath his façade of authority lies emptiness and insignificance. The Brickmaker's behavior reflects the sycophantic and self-serving attitudes prevalent among colonial officials, who are more concerned with maintaining appearances and advancing their own interests than fulfilling meaningful responsibilities.

Through this character, Conrad critiques the bureaucratic incompetence and moral hollowness of the imperial system. The Brickmaker embodies the superficiality and inefficiency that sustain colonial power structures, further exposing the gap between imperial ideals and reality.

The Accountant

The character of the Accountant in *Heart of Darkness* appears almost mechanical in nature. Marlow initially admires his discipline and his ability to maintain order and precision amid the chaos, suffering, and disorder of the colonial environment. The Accountant represents efficiency and control, particularly through his meticulous record-keeping, which he prioritizes above all else. However, this apparent professionalism reveals a deeper moral flaw. Marlow exposes the brutality and dehumanization embedded in colonial practices through the Accountant's indifference toward the suffering of African workers. The dying natives are seen merely as obstacles to his administrative duties, as reflected in his remark: "When one has got to make correct entries, one comes to hate those savages hate them to the death." This statement highlights the extent to which colonial systems reduce human beings to inconveniences within bureaucratic processes.

Although Marlow initially respects the Accountant's polished appearance and discipline describing his "immaculate" attire and composed demeanour he later recognizes the moral emptiness behind this façade. The Accountant's ability to maintain personal order in a context of widespread suffering underscores his emotional detachment and ethical indifference.

In essence, the Accountant symbolizes the moral barrenness and bureaucratic insensitivity of the colonial system, where efficiency is valued over humanity and compassion.

The General Manager

The General Manager is another significant figure in *Heart of Darkness*, representing incompetence, corruption, and quiet brutality within the imperial hierarchy. Unlike Kurtz, he lacks charisma, intelligence, and visionary qualities. Instead, he maintains his authority through endurance and an ability to survive within the system rather than through merit or leadership.

Marlow describes him as an ordinary and unremarkable individual, emphasizing his lack of distinguishing qualities. However, what makes the General Manager particularly dangerous is not overt evil, but his passive acceptance of suffering. He embodies a form of normalized cruelty, where indifference allows injustice and exploitation to persist unchecked.

Furthermore, his jealousy toward Kurtz reveals the duplicity and insecurity of colonial authorities. The General Manager is secretly threatened by Kurtz's success and influence and appears almost relieved by his decline. His actions reflect a system driven not by ethical responsibility, but by personal ambition, fear, and competition.

Through this character, Conrad critiques the hollow and self-serving nature of colonial leadership, exposing how authority is often maintained through manipulation, passivity, and moral disengagement rather than genuine capability.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Heart of Darkness* transcends a simple narrative of colonization and instead offers a complex exploration of psychological and ideological domination, conveyed through Marlow's conflicted perspective. The novel reveals not only the overt violence of imperialism but also its more subtle forms of control, including cultural erasure, moral corruption, and narrative domination. This study draws upon key postcolonial critiques such as Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, Chinua Achebe's critique of racial representation, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's warning against the "single story," and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's emphasis on cultural and linguistic decolonization to highlight how *Heart of Darkness* both critiques and participates in colonial discourse.

At the same time, the insights of formalist and psychological critics such as Ian Watt and Albert Guerard demonstrate how Conrad's narrative structure and use of ambiguity can obscure, rather than directly confront, the realities of imperial violence. These interpretations reveal that the novel's aesthetic complexity is intertwined with its ideological limitations. Ultimately, Conrad's work challenges readers to question the very notion of "civilization," exposing it as a fragile construct built upon silenced voices, fragmented identities, and contested histories. By engaging critically with the text, readers can better understand both its enduring significance and its limitations within postcolonial discourse.

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