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*Joseph Conrad's Congo*

*Criticism and Symbolism*

Masterproef voorgelegd tot het behalen van de graad van Master in de taal- en letterkunde Engels - Scandinavistiek

2013

Promotor Prof. dr. Marysa Demoor

Vakgroep Letterkunde
Acknowledgements

I would like to express my greatest gratitude to everyone who showed me support in writing my master's dissertation. First of all, my promoter, who helped me find a new subject after my previous idea proved impractical, and followed up on its execution. Secondly, some close friends and family members who had to put up with endless discussions about a writer - formerly - largely unknown to them. My dad deserves especial thanks for lending me his laptop when my own decided to crash and for marking some interesting passages in Van Reybrouck's Congo: een geschiedenis. And finally, the faculty library staff, for always lending a helping hand.
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1. 
Introduction

Joseph Conrad appears to have been a man of ambiguity and paradox, which renders the study of both his personal life and his literary work fraught with difficulty. His “Congo Episode” and the works originating from this period are no exceptions; in fact, they are prime examples of Conrad’s notorious duplicity. A critic once captured Conrad’s complexity by calling Heart of Darkness “a rich, vivid, layered, paradoxical, and problematic novella or long tale; a mixture of oblique autobiography, traveller’s yarn, adventure story, psychological odyssey, political satire, symbolic prose-poem, black comedy, spiritual melodrama, and sceptical meditation” (C. T. Watts, “‘Heart of Darkness’” 45). Unsurprisingly, Conrad’s works - Heart of Darkness in particular - have unchained a massive scholarly debate that started in the twenties with the works of Jean-Aubrey, but really exploded during the sixties with the rise of the postcolonial studies. The overarching issue in this debate is the question as to whether these works can be considered a critique of imperialism, and if so, to what extent. Although Conrad’s works are viewed as anti-imperialist by the larger public, some critics contend this, for example by arguing that his supposed racism or sexism actually perpetuated imperialism. One of the goals of this dissertation will therefore be to create an overview of the most important topics of this discussion, and their respective implications on the critical nature of Conrad’s Congo works. There is a second goal, however. In Heart of Darkness, Conrad seems to suggest “that under certain conditions and to certain people one can communicate one’s experience through symbol, metaphor, analogy and imagery; one can indirectly portray his experiences through art” (Spegele 322). I will therefore take a closer look at this symbolism, in particular the dual symbolism of light
and dark imagery in *Heart of Darkness*. My intention is to see if a comprehensive analysis of all of these images combined can reveal something about the critical nature of Conrad's Congo works, thus contributing to the discussion above.

Firstly, though, I will try to explain why these works are so popular in postcolonial studies. The next chapter is meant to clarify Conrad's Congo episode and will encompass a short biographical note, a summary of the most important historical facts surrounding the Congo Free State, and a discussion of Conrad's link to the Congo Reform Association. The following two chapters treat with the criticism and symbolism discussed above, after which comes the conclusion.
1. Theory and Method

1.1. Theoretical Framework: Postcolonialism

With *Heart of Darkness* and “An Outpost of Progress”, Joseph Conrad provided some of the earliest and most well known negative portrayals of imperialism and colonial exploitation. In fact, the questioning of (until then) fixed morals in *Heart of Darkness* is of the main reasons why some consider it “the first twentieth-century novel, with its climate of doubt and vagueness, its loss of moral confidence, its need for ‘belief’ in the midst of moral wilderness, its exploration of the subconscious, and its affirmation of individual freedom” (O’Prey 121). Many other scholars, such as Cedric Watts (“‘Heart of Darkness’” 45), have considered *Heart of Darkness* to be “‘ahead of its time’: an exceptionally proleptic text” that anticipated many topics of discussion that are still popular today. For example, Marlow, the narrator and protagonist of *Heart of Darkness*, has some remarkably modern, though ambivalent, opinions about colonialism, as this much-discussed excerpt illustrates:

> The conquest of the earth, which mostly means taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea – something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to . . .’ *(Heart of Darkness 6; from here onwards HD)*
On the one hand, Marlow seems to support imperialism by believing in an “idea at the back of it.” This idea, which is part of what Edward Said (Reflections on Exile and Other Essays 575) calls “a rhetoric of civilizational self-justification,” is probably best explained in the words of Joseph-Ernest Renan, who in La Réforme intellectuel et morale (1871) offered one of the most well-known justifications for colonisation:

The regeneration of the inferior or degenerate races by the superior races is part of the providential order of things for humanity. . . . Regere imperio populous, that is our vocation. Pour forth this all-consuming activity onto countries which, like China, are crying aloud for foreign conquest. Turn the adventurers who disturb European society into a ver sacrum, a horde like those of the Franks, the Lombards, or the Normans, and every man will be in his right role. Nature has made a race of workers, the Chinese race, who have wonderful manual dexterity and almost no sense of honor; govern them with justice, levying from them, in return for the blessing of such a government, an ample allowance for the conquering race, and they will be satisfied; a race of tillers of the soil, the Negro; treat him with kindness and humanity, and all will be as it should; a race of masters and soldiers, the European race. . . . Let each do what he is made for, and all will be well. (qtd. in Said, Reflections on Exile and Other Essays 418–9)

The essence of this idea is that the European or Western world is supposedly inherently superior to the non-Western world. In return for civilising and helping “inferior peoples” to develop, the colonisers were able to expand their economy. This way, colonisation was considered to be beneficial to both parties, both coloniser and colonised, and
therefor entirely justifiable. On the other hand, however, Marlow only seems to support this idea in theory. He calls the Roman conquest of Britain “robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, men going at it blind – as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness” (HD 6), but over the course of the story, he comes to realize that the European colonisation of Africa is no better; these so-called philanthropic ideas are merely a cover-up of the real purpose, namely “self-aggrandizement, power, conquest, treasure, and unrestrained self-pride” (Said, Reflections on Exile and Other Essays 574–5). Moreover, any results of colonisation that could be considered progress are dwarfed by the amount of horrors committed in the name of this same so-called progress. In conclusion, there is a “vast gap between man’s good intentions, high ideals and what he actually does,” (O’Prey 121) and Heart of Darkness is still so popular and relevant today because this gap is by no means a thing of the past.

In fact, Watts claims that “Conrad addressed issues of the day with such alert adroitness and ambiguity that he anticipated many twentieth-century preoccupations” (“Heart of Darkness” 45), a claim supported by C. B. Cox and other critics. He even goes as far as calling Heart of Darkness a prophetic text, and supports this claim with a range of examples (C. T. Watts, “Heart of Darkness” 50). Firstly, he proposes that Conrad’s “depiction of the ways in which men in Africa served, and died for, a remorseless organization” foreshadows the horrors of the First World War. Secondly, he sees Kurtz as a precursor to and the Holocaust; “Kurtz, potentially ‘a splendid leader of an extreme party’, celebrated for his intoxicating eloquence, is the persuasive genius whose grandiose ambitions are reduced to the exclamation ‘Exterminate all the brutes’” (C. T. Watts, “Heart of Darkness” 50). Apparently, this analogy had first been noted by George Steiner, who in his novella The Portage to San Cristobal of A. H. (1981) cast an aged
Hitler in a Kurtzian role, perpetuating his crimes in the Amazon jungle (C. T. Watts, “Heart of Darkness” 60). Thirdly, Watts observes the gap between the “good intentions” and the harsh reality of imperialism has gained widespread recognition over the course of the 20th century. Finally, he uses Francis Ford Coppola’s film classic Apocalypse Now (1979) as an example of how Heart of Darkness even seems to criticise the Vietnam War. Watts (“Heart of Darkness” 50) concludes that “it seemed that the sombre, sceptical aspects of the tale had been amply vindicated by the follies and brutalities of twentieth-century history”, calling to mind the closing line of Heart of Darkness, “The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky – seemed to lead into the hart of an immense darkness” (“Heart of Darkness” 102). If we follow Watts’ advice and see this as a prophecy of impending moral darkness in the 20th century, it has most certainly come true.

This notorious ambiguity and enduring relevancy are some of the reason why Conrad quickly became one of the most popular authors to be discussed in the postcolonial studies. In Colonialism/Postcolonialism, Ania Loomba explains that postcolonialism is an extremely encompassing and vague field of research, but that it could be helpful to think of it as “the contestation of colonial domination and the legacies of colonialism” (12). If we use this as a working definition, it immediately becomes clear how Joseph Conrad fits into this field, as he was one of the first authors to contest the European colonial domination of Africa. However, not all scholars agree with this to the same degree, and this has sparked a debate that is still on-going today. As some of the most important scholars who contributed to this debate will be discussed in the Criticism chapter, they will not be treated here. The most famous theorist of postcolonial
studies, Edward Said, called Conrad one of those authors who “stood apart from, and were untimely, anxious witnesses to, the dominant currents of their own time” (*Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* xxi). Abdirahman Hussein even claimed that Conrad’s novella *Heart of Darkness* was “foundational to Said’s entire career and project” (McCarthy 16). This holds some truth, as there are many references to the novella in Said’s work, and his very first published work, an expansion on his doctoral dissertation, was *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (1966). In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), he dedicates an entire chapter ("Two Visions in *Heart of Darkness*") to the novella, and other influential works, such as *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, contain many references to Conrad as well. Said’s most famous contribution to the literary criticism of the post-colonial theory is his introduction of the concept of Orientalism. This concept most commonly refers to Western prejudices about the Islamic or Middle-Eastern world, but some scholars - who wield a somewhat wider interpretation of the concept, meaning exoticism in general – have found that *Heart of Darkness* can also be used to illustrate orientalism/exoticism. After all, there existed a Victorian “myth of the Dark Continent” (Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness* 173) of which even Conrad himself was almost certainly influenced, even more so because he loved reading - then hugely popular - accounts by explorers such as Mungo Park and David Livingstone. As a result, Conrad left for Congo with a strong image of ‘Africa’ in his mind, before he ever experienced it first-hand. This, as Peter Nazareth points out, created certain unrealistic expectations; “while he went to Africa expecting to find the darkness there, and in Africa, he had to admit, in spite of himself, that the darkness is in ‘us’” (qtd. in White 181).
1.2. **Method of Analysis**

This dissertation does not follow a strict and theorised methodology. The *Criticism* chapter tries to identify some major issues in the debate around the critical nature of Conrad’s Congo works, and it is therefore based on a comparative analysis of the work of other scholars, supplemented with own interpretations and illustrations based on the close reading of relevant excerpts. The *Symbolism* chapter, which focuses on the light and dark imagery of *Heart of Darkness*, works the other way round. There, I have started with a close reading of those excerpts where this imagery is most apparent, and supplemented my findings with the research of others.
2. Research Corpus

2.1. Joseph Conrad

2.1.1. Congo Episode

For some more clarity about how exactly Joseph Conrad - a naturalised British subject of Polish origin - came to find himself in Belgian-occupied Congo, and what he did there, this dissertation will provide a concise biographical note based on the research of some of the best Conrad biographers. The two main sources are Jocelyn Baines' *Joseph Conrad: A Critical Biography*, which “received immediate recognition as the definitive biography of Conrad, a study concise and thorough, comprehensive and reliable, sympathetic and shrewd,” (C. T. Watts, “Mr. Jocelyn Baines” 73) and the “To the End of the Night” chapter of Zdzisław Najder's *Joseph Conrad, A Chronicle*, which is “generally regarded as the best of the available Conrad biographies for many reasons, not least because of the author’s familiarity with Conrad’s Polish background” (Moore 10).

Joseph Conrad (1857 – 1924) is undoubtedly one of the most famous names in English literature and even the entire Western canon. Ironically, he was born under a different name: Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski. Born into a family of impoverished Polish nobility living in Russian-ruled Ukraine during tumultuous times, Conrad soon found himself on the move, seemingly unable to settle down. As a result, his biographers tend to divide his life into chapters, often depending on Conrad's whereabouts, professions and literary successes at the time. In “Polish Years”, Baines (1–32) investigates Conrad's troubled childhood. Both of his parents, Apollo and Evelina Nałęcz
Korzeniowski, were exiled when Conrad was only a young child, because they had been part of an uprising against the Tsarist rule. “Because of the murderous climate at Vologda” (Baines 14), the family was allowed to move to a region with a milder climate, but to no avail; in a span of two years, both of Conrad’s parents died of tuberculosis. Orphaned at eleven, Conrad grew up under the guardianship of Thaddeus Bobrowski, his maternal uncle. Although Thaddeus seems to have been loving towards the boy, Conrad “became increasingly bored and restless under the restrictions of this new regime” (Baines 27) and by the age of 17, he felt the need to leave his uncle and start a life on his own. “His imagination had been captured by his reading about the sea” (Baines 30), and by October 1874 Conrad set out for Marseilles to become a sailor. In the “French Experience” (33–59), Baines talks about Conrad’s time in Marseilles with intermittent journeys to in the West Indies, his involvement in an arms trafficking enterprise, and his attempt at suicide which was probably connected the fact that he lost all of his money. By 1878, “Conrad had arrived in England, aged twenty, knowing no one and apparently no more than a few words of the language” (Baines 60). Still, he decided to join the British merchant marine, and over a span of fifteen years he steadily worked his way up to the rank of Captain. Baines recounts about these travels, which took him all over the world, in “Merchant Seaman” (60–100).

Conrad became a naturalised British subject in 1886, and found himself back in London by 1889, which can be considered the start of his “Congo Episode” (Baines 101–19). In an introduction to Heart of Darkness, Conrad wrote that this story was “experience pushed a little (and only very little) beyond the actual facts of the case” (qtd. in Sherry, Conrad’s Western World 9), and although it is probable that he changed the facts more than just “a little (and only very little)”, his journey does seem to largely
correspond with Marlow’s story. A comprehensive comparison of fact and fiction, and an
investigation of Conrad’s sources, can be found in Norman Sherry’s *Conrad’s Western
World*. Like Marlow, Conrad first spent some time “loafing around” in London,
eventually securing a job with the Société Anonyme Belge pour le Commerce du Haut-
Congo, which was then presided over by Captain Albert Thys, “formerly one of Leopold’s
most able henchmen” (Baines 107). On 12 June 1890, Conrad arrived at the important
station of Matadi, where he spent roughly a fortnight. According to Najder, it is here that
Conrad was

struck at first by the greed and duplicity of the white bearers of
‘civilization’ eager for quick profits, and by the chaos and stupidity of
many enterprises. It was only later that he became aware of the outrages
perpetrated against the native population of the country. (133)

His only positive experience in Matadi seems to have been his meeting with Roger
Casement, who happened to be supervising the construction of the railway line between
Matadi and Kinshasa (Najder 131). It is probably in this context that Conrad witnessed
the chain-gangs of black labourers and the dying men in the “grove of death” (*HD* 23)
later described by Marlow. Although Marlow “ventured to hint” to his aunt “that the
Company was run for profit” (13) before he sets out to Africa, Najder claims that it is
“quite probable that Korzeniowski sailed south convinced that he would be participating
in an enterprise whose justification was not merely financial” (127). Moreover, Conrad’s
diary and letters from that time suggest that he “adopted the perspective of a European
traveller exposed to discomfort” (Najder 133), so he partly perpetuated the role of the
white explorer in dark Africa. This certainly seems to be the case in his notes about the
230 mile-long trek to Kinshasa; he often complains about how tiring it is, while he is being borne in a hammock by native porters for most of the way. For example:

To day fell into a muddy puddle – Beastly. The fault of the man that carried me. After camp[ing] went to a small stream bathed and washed clothes. – Getting jolly well sick of this fun. - (“The Congo Diary” 126)

Najder suspects that Conrad’s apparent shift between writing his diary and *Heart of Darkness* in is partly due to Casement’s influence (133). Along the road, however, Conrad catches some glimpses of the brutal reality himself. For example:

Met an off[ic]er of the State inspecting; a few minutes afterwards saw at a camp[ing] place the dead body of a Backongo – Shot? Horrid smell” (“The Congo Diary” 124)

Saw another dead body lying by the path in an attitude of meditative repose. – (“The Congo Diary” 126)

On the road today passed a skeleton tied-up to a post. Also white man’s grave – No name. Heap of stones in the form of a cross. (“The Congo Diary” 131)

When Conrad finally arrived in Kinshasa, the *Florida*, the steamer of which he had earlier been given command turned out to be severely damaged and had therefore been towed away for repairs. The Company then ordered Conrad to join the crew of the *Roi des Belges*, so he could get to know the river. It is this journey that would come to form the core of *Heart of Darkness*. Firstly, its crew consisted of a number of black crew members from a tribe “not averse to cannibalism” (Najder 142), along with Camille
Decomunne (the Company manager) and three agents, one of which was called Keyaerts.
Secondly, the steamer recovered Georges Antoine Klein, an agent who was stationed at
the remote outpost of Stanley Falls and who was suffering from dysentery. Like Kurtz,
he died on the way back, but other than this fact and the similar names, the similarities
seem to end (Najder 144). Thirdly, Conrad temporarily assumed command over the ship
when its captain fell ill - a part which he exaggerated in giving Marlow full command
(Baines 117). Some letters suggest that Conrad was planning a river journey under his
own command, but it appears that a conflict with Delcommune soon brought these plans
to a halt (Baines 118; Najder 139). Fed up with the situation, Conrad eventually gave up
on his African plans, and decided to return to Europe. Not much is known about his
journey back, but he appears to have been severely ill for a while, with attacks of fever
and dysentery that would undermine his health for the rest of his life (Baines 119;
Najder 147). According to Najder (148), the reason that there are so few letters of this
period, is that Conrad “just wanted to forget.” All in all, Edward Said claims that Conrad’s
“Congo experience had been so terrible . . . that his disgust with existence had made it
very hard for him even to stand himself” (Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography
18).

2.1.2. Congo Works

The corpus used as primary source material for this dissertation consists of every work
by Joseph Conrad that is directly related to his journey to the Congo Free State in 1890.
The most important work in this series is Heart of Darkness, a novella that was initially
published in 1899 as a three-part serial in Blackwood’s Magazine, republished in book
form in 1902 as part of Youth: A Narrative and Two Other Stories, and finally published
as an independent work in 1942. The immense importance and relevance of Heart of
Darkness resonates through the fact that today it is one of Conrad’s most popular and widely discussed works, and by many considered one of the best novels in the Western canon. Although most research connected to Conrad’s Congo experience is directly based on analyses of Heart of Darkness, there are other relevant works as well. The short story “An Outpost of Progress”, a second fictional tale drawing on Conrad’s personal experience in Congo, was first published in 1897 in the magazine Cosmopolis and republished in 1889 as part of Tales of Unrest. As the dates suggest, it was written before Heart of Darkness, and can therefore be considered as a prestudy to the latter. Conrad himself considered it his best tale – as well as his personal favourite (Moore 8) - because of its “scrupulous unity of tone” (qtd. in Hamner 119). In the ‘Author’s Note’ to Tales of Unrest, Conrad speaks about “An Outpost of Progress” as “the lightest part of the loot [he] carried off from Central Africa, the main portion being of course “The Heart of Darkness” (Tales of Unrest ix). He admits that his own plunder is “very small” and “of not much use to anybody else”, which White (190) reads as an ironic wink to the self-serving nature of European imperialism in Africa, and probably also to the vast scale in which the colonisers were plundering. These two African fictions are often studied together, probably because - as Brian W. Shaffer has argued - “each of the two African stories extends and amplifies the criticism expressed in the other” (Moore 8). Thirdly, there is the “minor but highly revealing fantasy” (Brantlinger, Rule of Darkness 258) The Inheritors: An Extravagant Story, which Conrad co-authored with Ford Madox Hueffer, later known as Ford Madox Ford. Although researchers claim that Conrad did not contribute very much to its writing, some elements clearly show Conrad’s influence, suggesting that he almost certainly supported the work’s message (Brantlinger, Rule of Darkness 258). Because this quasi science-fictional novel was not solely written by
Conrad, and moreover not set in the Congo, only some passages that are clearly related to Joseph Conrad's Congo experience will be taken into account. These three fictional works form the basis of this dissertation’s corpus, but Conrad wrote about his experience in Congo in non-fictional form as well. Firstly, he documented his journey by making notes in his “Congo Diaries”, The Congo Diary and Up-River Book, that would come to form the basis of Heart of Darkness and “An Outpost of Progress”. Interestingly, The Congo Diary and Other Uncollected Pieces was only published in 1978, although it contains Conrad's first known writing in English. Secondly, Conrad made some remarks about his journey in A Personal Record (1912) and “Geography and Some Explorers” from Last Essays (1926). Finally, there are some interesting references to his Congo episode in some of Conrad's letters to Roger Casement, R. B. Cunninghame Graham, etc.

2.2. The Congo Free State

Although Conrad's works have been widely discussed as critical to colonialism, the Congo was not officially a Belgian colony when he visited it in 1890. From 1885 to 1908, King Leopold II ruled the Congo Free State – a highly ironic name – and considered it his private property, although he never personally visited it. Remarkably, he was the only absolutist ruler in Africa at the time; other colonies were mainly ruled by the governments of their respective “motherlands”. This was the result of the Berlin Conference of 1885, because the European superpowers represented at this conference – presided over by non other than Otto von Bismarck - initially pardoned Leopold's absolutist rule because he was widely viewed as a powerful and good-natured philanthropist, and no doubt they expected the Congo region to greatly benefit from his rule (Van Reybrouck 72). Unfortunately, this was not the case.
A first regrettable fact, according to Van Reybrouck (72–4) was the completely arbitrary way in which the borders were drawn – quite literally, on a map. One day, King Leopold and Sir Henry Morton Stanley, the famous explorer who had mapped the region of the Congo delta under Leopold’s orders, sat together and sketched the borders on a nearly blank map, deciding that – in Rousseau’s words – “Ceci est à moi” (qtd. in Van Reybrouck 73). There was no consideration whatsoever for any pre-existing geographical, cultural or political borders. The new borders were notoriously vague and constantly shifting, so it must have been fairly easy for Leopold’s troops to exercise authority where they actually had none, or to deny atrocities they committed in border regions. However, the Congo Free State is nowadays much more known for Leopold’s cruel and harsh rule. According to Van Reybrouck (92), the first five years of the Congo Free State (from 1885 until 1890) were relatively peaceful; there was a relatively limited administration and the main economical activity consisted of ivory trade. After 1890, everything changed for the worse; due to a series of investments King Leopold II was nearing virtual bankruptcy, which led him to take desperate measures. Firstly, he had Belgium invest large amounts of money, although it had been agreed that Belgium would take no part in King Leopold’s colonial enterprise. Secondly, he inhibited the thriving free trade by nationalising all of the uninhabited land (along with its resources) and claiming it as the property of the Free State. Because he could not exploit all of these newfound riches himself, King Leopold assigned this task to a number of companies, such as the Anversoise and the ABIR (Anglo-Belgian Rubber Company). This second company is extremely important to the history of colonial exploitation, as the Congo Free State is widely known for the horrors connected to rubber production (Van Reybrouck 101). The invention of the inflatable rubber wheel by the Scotsman John
Boyd Dunlop in 1888 soon proved to be both King Leopold’s blessing and the Congolese people’s curse. Leopold finally saw a chance to get his “return on investment” (Van Reybrouck 102), and did not hesitate to maximise the profits by whatever means necessary. In ten years, he saw the rubber production rise from 100 tons to 6,000 tons per annum. Since rubber plantations did not make their entrance until later, he had the indigenous population pay their taxes in the form of wild rubber, which was collected by the Force Publique, a rudimentary military force usually consisting of white officers and black soldiers from other regions, or by armed guards called sentries in regions controlled by one of the concession companies. This is where the famous cruel practice of severing hands originated; the authorities wanted to make sure that every bullet was “well spent” – i.e. that it was not wasted on shooting game – and obligated their soldiers to sever a hand of every person they shot in order to account for their ammunition expenditure (Van Reybrouck 104–5). In some cases, soldiers severed the hands of the living, probably in order to obtain a kind of alibi to account for the bullets they had “wasted”, or in order to steal traditional jewellery that could otherwise not be removed.

In any case, after the turn of the century a number of photos depicting mutilated natives went around the world and caused an outrage in Europe (Van Reybrouck 105), ultimately resulting in the establishment of the Congo Reform Association. Although Leopold once declared that he would pull back from the Congo region if these horrors continued, implying that he could not be held accountable, it would seem that the horrors were inherent to the system he had set into place. As Van Reybrouck (106–108) argues, Leopold appointed certain people who were widely known to use gruesome methods and sadistic punishments. For example, René de Permentier, an officer in the Force Publique, was guilty of torturing and executing natives in his employment for the
smallest mistake, and even of massacring entire villages. However, he happened to generate the greatest amount of rubber in the entire Congo Free State. It is therefore highly probable that King Leopold decided to turn a blind eye to the cruelties originating from his system, as long as the profits were there. In addition, Leopold’s system unhinged the entire Congolese economy because the natives had to spend all their time collecting rubber in order to achieve their quotas, leaving the entire population weakened and malnourished. This, in turn, caused a pandemic of sleeping sickness, which killed up to 60 and even 90% of some population centres. Van Reybrouck (109–10) does not want to call this a genocide because the pandemic was only an indirect result of the exploitative system, and because King Leopold eventually called in the aid of the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine. He does, however, call it a hecatomb, an unintentional massacre that could be seen as the collateral damage of a politics of predatory and merciless exploitation.

Finally, in 1906, the Belgian jurist Félicien Cattier (qtd. in Van Reybrouck 111) concluded that the Congo Free State was not colonialising state at all, but merely a ruthless financial enterprise aimed at optimal profit, no matter the consequences. The exact same idea comes forward in Conrad’s works about the Congo; in his essay “Geography and Some Explorers”, he even called the colonisation of the African subcontinent “the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration” (14)

2.3. Conrad & The Congo Reform Association

Joseph Conrad was by no means the only one to write about the horrors of Belgian colonialism at the time they were being committed, although he was among the first. A
great deal of information about Conrad’s own views on the matter, and the degree of his involvement in the Congo Reform Movement, becomes clear through the study of his correspondence with some contemporaries who were also involved with the Movement, particularly Roger Casement.

Before 1900, there had already been some protest by missionaries such as Dr Henry Grattan Guinness, and humanitarians such as H. R. Fox Bourne and Sir Charles W. Dilke, co-leaders of the Aborigines Protection Society (Hawkins, “Congo Reform Movement” 66). However, these efforts remained largely unsuccessful until the turn of the century, according to Hawkins “probably because the British Government felt unprepared to deal with a dangerous power vacuum in Central Africa” (“Congo Reform Movement” 66). The tide started to turn when the young journalist Edmund Dene Morel renewed the efforts to convince the Government that something had to be done (Hawkins, “Congo Reform Movement” 66). Finally, on 20 May 1903, the Government - under the influence of Herbert Samuel - took action and ordered an inquiry into the truth of the accusations made against Leopold II (Hawkins, “Congo Reform Movement” 66). The same year, “the first substantial and official documentation of Congolese atrocities” was drawn up: the Casement Report (Hawkins, “Congo Reform Movement” 67). Roger Casement, a British consul, wrote up this sixty-one page report after touring the interior of the Congo for three months, as the first step of the British Government’s plan “to abate the evils” in the Congo (Hawkins, “Congo Reform Movement” 66). Not surprisingly, the report was very controversial, and its publication faced opposition by people profiting from the state of affairs, for example “Sir Alfred L. Jones, Congolese consul and owner of the Liverpool shipping line Elder Dempster and Co. which held the Congo-Antwerp monopoly” (Hawkins, “Congo Reform Movement” 67). In an attempt to
get the report published, Casement launched a campaign to influence public opinion, which can be considered the birth of the official Congo Reform Association. The essence of this campaign was to convince a number of famous people to speak out against the cruelties committed by Belgians in the Congo Free State (Hawkins, “Congo Reform Movement” 67).

One of these people was Joseph Conrad, whom he had met and befriended in the Congo in 1890. Conrad wrote the following about their first meeting:

Arrived at Matadi on the 13th of June, 1890. . . . Made the acquaintance of Mr Roger Casement, which I should consider as a great pleasure under any circumstances and now it becomes a positive piece of luck – Thinks, speaks well, most intelligent and very sympathetic. – (“The Congo Diary” 123)

They lived and worked together in Matadi for three weeks, and in a later diary entry, Conrad indicates that he “[p]arted with Casement in a very friendly matter” (“The Congo Diary” 123). Conrad and Casement had an enduring friendship until it ended rather abruptly during World War I, due to conflicting loyalties (Hawkins, “Congo Reform Movement” 68). However, in 1903, the two still show a mutual respect for each other, which is obvious from their correspondence. For example, when they are trying to arrange a meeting, Conrad closes one of his letters as follows:

I need not tell you that there's no more ceremony than if we asked you to stop under a tent on the road to Kinchassa. I am glad that you've read the Heart of D. tho' of course it's an awful fudge. (qtd. in Hawkins, “Congo Reform Movement” 68)
This last sentence is particularly interesting, because Conrad appears apologetic towards Casement for “glamorizing” his experience in the Congo. True enough, although the novella is semi-autobiographic, Conrad exaggerated his part in the story. However, it is clear that Casement recognized Conrad as a great authority on matters regarding the Congo Free State. For example, he consults Conrad about the “acts of persistent mutilation by Government soldiers” – i.e. the custom of cutting off human hands to account for every spent cartridge. Through Casement, Conrad and E. D. Morel also influenced each other, as the following excerpts will show:

I have to thank you for Morel’s pamphlet which reached me from L’pool a few days ago. There can be no doubt that this presentation of the commercial policy and the administrative methods of the Congo State is absolutely true. This is a most brazen breach of faith as to Europe. It is in every aspect an enormous and atrocious lie in action. If it were not rather appalling, the cool completeness of it would be amusing. (qtd. in Hawkins, “Congo Reform Movement” 69)

The following letter, as Hawkins (Hawkins, “Congo Reform Movement” 69) notes, deserves to be quoted in its entirety because it was specifically written as a contribution to the Reform Movement; with this letter, Casement finally had a chance to change the public opinion. It is also extremely interesting because it illustrates Conrad’s complex attitude, both condemning imperialism and doubting the possibility of a proper reform (Hawkins, “Congo Reform Movement” 69):

       My dear Casement
You cannot doubt that I form the warmest wishes for your success. A king, wealthy and unscrupulous, is certainly no mean adversary; for if the personality in this case be a rather discredited one, the wealth, alas, had never a bad odour – or this wealth in particular would tell its own suffocating tale.

It is an extraordinary thing that the conscience of Europe which seventy years ago has put down the slave trade on humanitarian grounds tolerates the Congo State today. It is as if the moral clock had been put back many hours. And yet nowadays if I were to overwork my horse so as to destroy its happiness of physical wellbeing I should be hauled before a magistrate. It seems to me that the black man – say, of Upoto – is deserving as much humanitarian regard as any animal since he has nerves, feels pain, can be made physically miserable. But as a matter of fact his happiness and misery are much more complex than the misery or happiness of animals and deserving greater regard. He shares with us the consciousness of the universe in which we live – no small burden. Barbarism per se is no crime deserving of a heavy visitation; and the Belgians are worse than the seven plagues of Egypt insomuch that in that case it was a punishment sent for a definite transgression; but in this the Upoto man is not aware of any transgression, and therefore can see no end to the infliction. It must appear to him very awful and mysterious; and I confess that it appears so to me too. The amenities of the ‘middle passage’ in the old days were as nothing to it. The slave trade has been abolished – and the Congo State exists to-day. This is very remarkable.
What makes it more remarkable is this: the slave trade was an old established form of commercial activity; it was not the monopoly of one small country established to the disadvantage of the rest of the civilized world in defiance of international treaties and in brazen disregard of humanitarian declarations. But the Congo State created yesterday is all that and yet it exists. This is very mysterious. One is tempted to exclaim (as poor Thiers did in 1871) “Il n’y a plus d’Europe.” But as a matter of fact in the old days England had in her keeping the conscience of Europe. The initiative came from here. But now I suppose we are busy with other things; too much involved in great affairs to take up cudgels for humanity, decency and justice. But what about our commercial interests? These suffer greatly as Morel has very clearly demonstrated in his book. There can be no serious attempt to controvert his facts. Or it is impossible to controvert them for the hardest of lying won’t do it. That precious pair of African witch-men seem to have cast a spell upon the world of whites – I mean Leopold and This of course. This is very funny.

And the fact remains that in 1903, seventy five years or so after the abolition of the slave trade (because it was cruel) there exists in Africa a Congo State, created by the act of European powers where ruthless, systematic cruelty towards the blacks is the basis of administration, and bad faith towards all the other states the basis of commercial policy.

I do hope we shall meet before you leave. Once more my best wishes go with you in your crusade. Of course you may make any use you like of
what I write to you. Cordially yours Jph Conrad (qtd. in Hawkins, “Congo
Reform Movement” 69–70)

Roger Casement then passed the letter on to E. D. Morel, who quotes most of it in King
Leopold's Rule in Africa, his next and much acclaimed book. According to Ford Madox
Ford, one of Conrad’s closest friends, he “would declaim passionately about the gloomy
imbecility and cruelty of the Belgians in the Congo Free State” whenever he had
communicated with Casement, but he remained very pessimistic and mistrustful of any
attempts to correct the colonial system (Hawkins, “Congo Reform Movement” 71).

Although his letter seems to be a “heavy indictment”, as a later reviewer of
Morel’s book calls it, Conrad was hesitant and even reluctant to actively join the
Movement (Hawkins, “Congo Reform Movement” 71). Hawkins suggests that it is very
likely that this reluctance to take action was mainly caused by Conrad’s ill physical and
mental health at the time; in a letter to John Galsworthy, for example, Conrad not only
describes his gout attacks, but also what seems to be a severe depression:

My dearest Jack

I have been ill again. Just got down, shaky, weak, dispirited. No work
done. No spring left to grapple with. Everything looks black, but I suppose
that will wear off, and anyhow, I am trying to keep despair under.
Nevertheless I feel myself losing my footing in deep waters. They are
lapping about my hips.

My dear fellow, it is not so much the frequency of these gout attacks,
but I feel so beastly ill between, ill in body and mind. It has never been so
before. Impossible to write, - while the brain riots in incoherent images. It is sometimes quite alarming. (Jean-Aubry 322)

Interestingly, Conrad describes his mental struggle in images of darkness; “everything looks black” and he is losing his footing “in deep waters”. Despite his inaction, however, he did urge his friend R. B. Cunninghame Graham to help Roger Casement and his “great cause”:

I send you two letters I had from a man called Casement, premising that I knew him first in the Congo just 12 years ago. Perhaps you've heard or seen in print his name. . . . He was I believe Bsh Consul in Beira, and lately seems to have been sent to the Congo again, on some sort of mission, by the Br Govt. . . . The letters will tell you the rest. I would help him but it is not in me. [emphasis added] I am only a wretched novelist inventing wretched stories and not even up to that miserable game; but your good pen, keen, flexible and straight, and sure, like a good Toledo blade would tell in the fray if you felt disposed to give a slash or two. He could tell you things! Things I've tried to forget; things I never did know. He has had as many years of Africa as I had months – almost. (Conrad, Joseph Conrad’s Letters to R. B. Cunninghame Graham 149)

The two men finally met on 1 January by Conrad's design; a meeting Conrad tried to accommodate by warning Casement about Cunninghame Graham’s “reputation for socialism”, and asking him to not let this influence his opinion of the man. However, Hawkins suggests that Conrad’s ill health was only one of several reasons for not joining the movement, another reason being that “[a]lthough the Congo movement had not yet
defined its ideological position, Conrad already felt himself at odds with all the anti-imperialist movements then operating” (“Congo Reform Movement” 73). He finds proof for this statement in Conrad’s essay “Autocracy and War”, which “analyses the origins of imperialism, reveals the particular nature of Conrad’s opposition, and shows why he was sceptical about reform” (Hawkins, “Congo Reform Movement” 73). Hawkins summarizes that this essay illustrates

Conrad's belief that the emergence of a united Germany destroyed the relatively peaceful old dynastic order of Europe and replaced it with a collection of fiercely nationalistic states, each pursuing its own “material interests,” dedicated to imperialist expansion, and ultimately bound to war. (“Congo Reform Movement” 73)

Thus, Conrad was opposed to many anti-imperialistic movements because they often were simultaneously nationalistic, and he believed that nationalism directly furthered imperialism (Hawkins, “Congo Reform Movement” 74). Secondly, Conrad opposed the Congo Reform movement because it had a commercial as well as a humanitarian appeal; King Leopold II held a monopoly over the Congo region, and his opposition, for example Liverpool merchant John Holt, wanted a return to free trade and the kind of laissez-faire economy which Conrad scorned (Hawkins, “Congo Reform Movement” 74). Thirdly, “his sense of the larger tragedy of the universe overshadowed his outrage against specific social wrongs” (Hawkins, “Congo Reform Movement” 74). Conrad’s “sense of the larger tragedy of the universe” comprised three things, according to Hawkins. Firstly, he seems to believe that language is in effect meaningless; in a letter to Cunninghame Graham, he writes that “[h]alf the words we use have no meaning whatever and of the other half
each man understands each word after the fashion of his own folly and conceit” (Conrad, *Joseph Conrad’s Letters to R. B. Cunninghame Graham* 65). A similar view of language can be found in *Heart of Darkness*, when Marlow is trying to tell his listeners about Kurtz:

> He was just a word for me. I did not see the man in the name any more than you do. Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream – making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is of the very essence of dreams…”

> He was silent for a while.

> ‘… No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one’s existence – that which makes its truth, its meaning – its subtle and penetrating existence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream – alone…” (*HD* 33)

If language does not possess the power to convey true meaning, then surely Conrad must have thought that contributing to the Congo Reform Movement through writing was meaningless. Secondly, Conrad was very pessimistic about human nature and doubtful of man’s ability to change; this is particularly clear in statements like “*L’homme est un animal méchant*” and an excerpt from a letter to Cunninghame Graham – “What you want to reform are not institutions – it is human nature. Your faith will never move that mountain” (*Conrad, Joseph Conrad’s Letters to R. B. Cunninghame Graham* 68). Finally, Conrad believed that the universe was dying; he was a supporter of Kelvin's
second law of thermodynamics, which supposed that the stars would eventually cool down, extinguishing all life on Earth. This led him to believe that in the end, “reform was futile,” because everyone would die all the same.

Although Conrad chose not to join actively the Congo Reform Association, there are other famous authors who did. In 1905, Mark Twain published a harsh political satire called “King Leopold’s Soliloquy”, in which Leopold II supposedly defends himself against the accusations. Interestingly, in the American Congo Reform Association’s publication of this “soliloquy”, a short quote from Conrad’s letter was used to accompany the illustration of a mutilated young boy (Carter and Harlow 739). Four years later, Arthur Conan Doyle published a long pamphlet called The Crime of the Congo, which was also especially written for the association. Brantlinger (Rule of Darkness 258) urges that Twain, Doyle, and other “prominent novelists who had never been to the Congo contributed as much or more to its work,” contending Benita Parry’s claim that

by revealing the disjunctions between high-sounding rhetoric and sordid ambitions and indicting the purposes and goals of a civilisation dedicated to global expansionism and hegemony, Conrad’s writings engender a critique more destructive of imperialism’s ideological premises than do the polemics of his contemporary opponents of empire. (10)

By exposing the horrors of the Congo Free State to the larger public and creating an international scandal, the Congo Reform Movement ultimately forced the Belgian government to officially annex the Congo as a colony, turning it into “the Belgian Congo” on 15 November 1908.
3. Criticism

3.1. Polarised Debate

The greater part of research about *Heart of Darkness*, “An Outpost of Progress”, and other writings related to Conrad’s Congo episode, takes the shape of a discussion as to if, why, and how they can be seen as supporting or opposing imperialism and colonialism. This chapter is an attempt to summarize and compare most of these responses, roughly dividing the debate according to common topics of discussion. In “Conrad and Imperialism”, Andrea White notes that Conrad’s fictions – especially those that can be read to criticize imperialism – have always excited a range of opposing responses. She effectively illustrates this with some of the very first responses on *Heart of Darkness*. On the one hand, there is what one might call an “imperialistic camp”, with responses such as the one made by The Manchester Guardian’s reviewer, warning contemporary readers that “[i]t must not be supposed that Mr. Conrad makes attack upon colonisation, expansion, even upon Imperialism” (Sherry, Conrad, the Critical Heritage 135). Sure enough, if one ignores their possible critical contents and places *Heart of Darkness* and “An Outpost of Progress” in the tradition of late nineteenth century writings about travel and exploration, such as those by Rider Haggard, Rudyard Kipling, and R. L. Stevenson, these works could be seen as imperialist. However, as said above, that would imply ignoring a large part of their underlying meaning supplied by symbolism, imagery, irony, etc. Nevertheless, some modern critics still argue that Conrad’s works did not really deliver any real criticism against imperialism, and could even be considered to support it. On the other hand, there is the “anti-imperialistic camp”, with responses such as the one already made in 1902 by Edward Garnett in *Academy and Literature*, who saw *Heart
of Darkness as “a page torn from the life of the Dark Continent – a page which has been hitherto carefully blurred and kept away from European eyes” (Sherry, Conrad, the Critical Heritage 133). In other words, White correctly observes that these two points of view have shaped the on-going political discussion that has been prevalent in Conrad studies during the past thirty – meanwhile almost fifty - years. In “Fiction as Political Theory: Joseph Conrad’s ‘Heart of Darkness’”, Roger D. Spegele pinpoints one of the main difficulties in this discussion, namely that Conrad was opposed to ideological thinking in any form:

‘Heart of Darkness’ is frequently interpreted as an anti-imperialistic tract.

. . . Such an interpretation, as readers of Conrad’s letters and other fiction (especially Nostromo) will know, is not obviously wrong. . . . But it is somewhat misleading and altogether too limiting to see ‘Heart of Darkness’ as an unveiling of the exploitation and oppression of a commercial and industrial society on a helpless, primitive community. This would make Conrad into an ideologue when, in fact, Conrad persistently denounced ideological thinking. (321)

3.2. Conrad’s Ideological Shift

Although it has been said that Conrad rejected ideology in virtually every form, Andrea White sees a shift from a naïve belief in imperialism when he was a young boy, to a “desire to expose imperialism’s fraudulent pretensions of benevolence” (481) when he was older. In “Conrad and Imperialism”, she goes into a thorough investigation of the possible reasons behind this supposed shift. Firstly, White (181) believes that the answer party lies in Conrad’s traumatic childhood in the shadow of Russian imperialism;
a theory also supported by Watts (C. T. Watts, “Heart of Darkness” 48). Both Conrad’s maternal and paternal family, the Bobrowskis and the Korzeniowskis, were members of the szlachta, Polish landed gentry who opposed the Russian autocracy. The unfortunate outcome of their struggle to achieve Polish independence was that several family members were killed or deported to Siberia and other barren regions, young Conrad and his parents amongst them. After both of his parents died due to poor health as a result of extremely barren living conditions, Conrad was raised by his maternal uncle, Tadeusz Bobrowski. Under his conservative guardianship, Conrad grew up with a “sensitivity to oppressive autocracy and a profound scepticism about the idealism of social, and particularly nationalistic, movements” (White 182). Watts adds that the combination of the romanticism of Conrad’s father and the sceptical advice of his uncle “helped to develop his sense of paradox and ethical conflict” (48). Secondly, White looks for an answer in “the shifting nature of European imperialism itself between 1880 and 1914, a period during which colonial conquests accelerated greatly and worldwide” (182). Mary Kingsley, for example, particularly displeased with modern imperialism as opposed to “the old-fashioned imperialism of her ancestors”, recorded this shift in West African Studies, which was published in 1899 (White 182–3). Interestingly, it is known that Conrad had read and enjoyed her work (White 182–3), so it can be assumed that he agreed with her as well. In Heart of Darkness, when Marlow is looking at a large map of Africa in the Company’s offices, he remarks that “there was an awful lot of red – good to see at any time, because one knows that some real work is done in there” (10). In the context of the entire story, this is a problematic remark. As Geary (499–500) notes, it seems to signify that “while Belgian imperialism is an unmixed evil, the British are uniquely qualified to carry the White Man’s Burden. However, the story itself
demonstrates the inadequacy of these conventional apologies for imperialism.” While Watt explains this as “Conrad’s nod to his late-Victorian audience” (qtd. in White 183), White proposes that “perhaps Conrad also thought there had been such a time before the devastation of the new imperialism’s ruinous consequences to both the colonized and the colonizer had become evident” (183). Both explanations seem plausible, as there was at a time a strong belief in British Imperialism paired with a distrust of other countries’ imperial endeavours, and as Conrad’s A Personal Record shows, he did not seem to be aware of negative sides of imperialism as a young boy. Thirdly, White argues that Conrad's views began to change when he first noticed the disparity between imperialist discourse and actual practice, with the help of his unique position in society and his former experiences with imperialism in Russian-occupied Poland (183–4). Although his opinion had already started to change before, the time he spent in the Congo proved to be a brutal confrontation with the harsh reality of imperialism and became a key factor for the formation of his ultimate criticism; White concludes that “[h]is seven months there transformed him, forcing him on an even more reflective view, critical of European imperial endeavours” (184–5).

3.3. Different Kinds of Imperialism

Although most scholars argue that Conrad's African fictions can be read as a critique against imperialism in general, or more vaguely as a critique against “some kind of” imperialism, only a few of them have made a real effort to distinguish between the different kinds of imperialism that are represented in these works; i.e. Roman, British, Belgian, and other European countries’ imperialism. Hunt Hawkins rightly points out that “imperialism was not monolithic” (“Critique of Imperialism” 288) and - more
arguably - that “Conrad’s harsh evaluation of the Congo need not imply any final judgement, either favorable or unfavorable, of British imperialism” (“Critique of Imperialism” 288).

One of the most telling passages about different kind of imperialism is the one about the Roman conquest of Britain:

What saves us is efficiency – the devotion to efficiency. But these chaps were not much account, really. They were no colonists; their administration was merely a squeeze, and nothing more, I suspect. They were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force – nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others. They grabbed what they could get and for the sake of what was to be got. It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind – as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness. The conquest of the earth, which mostly means taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea – something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to.

..’ (HD 5–6)

According to Marlow, this was a violent and brutal conquest, with no idealistic justification whatsoever; it was merely a pursuit of selfish ends, as “robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, men going at it blind” seems to suggest
Not entirely justifying their actions, Marlow still explains that the Romans’ “savage and brutal actions were required by the conditions in which they were compelled to live” (Spegele 326); they were “going at it blind . . . as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness”. Another excuse could be that the civilized political institutions of the British did not yet exist, and that Romans were therefore closer to their “primitive” human nature. However, which can not be said of the British, at least the Romans were “forthright” (Spegele 326), and it could even be said that “the atrocities committed by the Romans were comparable to unintended casualties necessarily incurred ‘in the midst of the incomprehensible’: understandable, though unjustifiable” (Spegele 327).

On the surface, the British seem to be saved by their idealism – “an idea at the back of it” – and their efficiency. Hawkins points out that these values also return in Conrad’s synopsis for his publisher, William Blackwood; “The criminality of inefficiency and pure selfishness when tackling the civilizing work in Africa is a justifiable idea” (Letters to William Blackwood and David S. Meldrum 37). However, as Spegele (327) observes, in this case, “[i]dealism . . . does not raise man’s morality; it lowers it.” As opposed to the Romans, the British were not “going at it blind”; instead, they flooded Africa with light, but refused to see the dark consequences of their own actions. They tried to justify their brutal and violent actions in the name of philanthropy, “in the name of some future Good – in the name of Progress and Civilization” (Spegele 326–7). As to this so-called efficiency, there is precious little of it to be found in Heart of Darkness; “if the Romans were less efficient than Kurtz, they were more efficient than the rest of the Company (Marlow himself pays tribute to their being ‘handy men’ and ‘men enough to face the darkness (p 49.))” (Hopwood 166). The scene comparing Roman and British
imperialism, then, “is less clearly disapproval of the Romans, and more apparently irony at the expense of those who think their ‘ideas’ put them above those without them” (Hopwood 166).

Then there is also the contrast between British and European imperialism, of which the Belgian kind has often been called the most brutal. In the Company’s Offices, Marlow encounters “a large shining map, marked with all the colours of the rainbow”:

There was a vast amount of red – good to see at any time, because one knows that some real work is done in there, a deuce of a lot of blue, a little green, smears of orange, and, on the East Coast, a purple patch, to show where the jolly pioneers of progress drink the jolly lager-beer. However, I wasn't going into any of these. I was going into the yellow. Dead in the centre. And the river was there – fascinating – deadly – like a snake. Ough! A door opened, a white-haired secretarial head, but wearing a compassionate expression, appeared, and a skinny forefinger beckoned me into the sanctuary. Its light was dim . . . (HD 10)

The “vast amount of red” on the map – “good to see at any time, because one knows that some real work is done in there” - suggests that the British kind of imperialism is better than the rest, for example that of the (purple) German colony Tanganyika and more importantly the (yellow) Congo Free State (Hawkins, “Critique of Imperialism” 286). It is probably no coincidence that the Congo is described as being dead in the centre, with a river like a deadly snake. Following right after these epithets, the white-haired secretary beckoning Marlow with a skinny finger almost seems to represent the Grim Reaper. As “the city of whited sepulchre” is widely accepted to be Brussels, it is possible that its
symbolical meaning applies to Belgian imperialism in particular, rather than imperialism in general. According to Hopwood (166), “the comparison of British and Roman practice, and disparagement of the latter, suggests that Conrad intended to identify the Belgian with the Roman and exonerate the British”, although he immediately goes on to prove how Conrad quickly and effectively “abandons that very simple and rather suspect distinction.” The first part of his proof can be found in the previous paragraph, while the second part consists of two convincing observations, namely that “[w]hat Marlow sees he labels European, not Belgian, and Britain is not excluded from Europe” (Hopwood 166) and that Kurtz is a product of all Europe, including Britain:

This initiated wraith from the back of Nowhere honoured me with its amazing confidence before it vanished altogether. This was because it could speak English to me. The original Kurtz had been educated partly in England, and – as he was good enough to say himself – his sympathies were in the right place. His mother was half-English, his father was half-French. All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz; (HD 64)

Besides, the “ironic comparison of modern European with ancient Roman methods of conquest”, as Watts (“Conrad and Cunninghame Graham” 159) suggests, was inspired by Cunninghame Graham, who used similar comparisons in his own works. Being a close friend to Graham, Conrad had read and approved of his works, for example ‘Bloody Niggers’, a “controversial and much-reprinted denunciation of British Imperialism,” which Conrad read in 1898, around the time he started writing Heart of Darkness. After
the first instalment of *Heart of Darkness* had appeared in *Blackwood’s Magazine*, Conrad wrote the following to Cunninghame Graham:

I am simply in the seventh heaven, to find you like the H of D so far. You bless me indeed. Mind you don’t curse me by and bye for the very same thing. There are two more instalments in which the idea is so wrapped up in secondary notions that You – even You! – may miss it. And also you must remember that I don’t start with an abstract notion. I start with definite images and as their rendering is true some little effect is produced. So far the note struck chimes in with your convictions – mais après? There is an après. But I think that if you look a little into the episodes you will find in them the right intention though I fear nothing that is practically effective” (Conrad, *Joseph Conrad’s Letters to R. B. Cunninghame Graham* 116)

This indebtedness to Graham plainly suggests that British imperialism cannot be exonerated.

3.4. **Conrad’s Commitment**

Another difficulty in assessing the critical nature of Marlow’s statements about imperialism, particularly in the Roman conquest scene, is that it is difficult to determine Conrad’s personal commitment to Marlow’s views, because

the narrative frame filters everything that is said not just through Marlow but also through the anonymous primary narrator. At what point is it safe to assume that Conrad/Marlow expresses a single point of view? And even
supposing Marlow to speak directly for Conrad, does Conrad/Marlow agree with the values expressed by the primary narrator? (Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness* 257)

There has been much discussion about this problem, and critics have been arriving at widely divergent conclusions. For example, Chinua Achebe, a critic who notoriously called Conrad a “bloody racist”, argues that Conrad’s technique of setting up “layers of insulation between himself and the moral universe of his story” by filtering the actual story through not only one, but two narrators, seems totally wasted because he neglects to hint however subtly or tentatively at an alternative frame of reference by which we may judge the actions and opinions of his characters. . . . Marlow seems to me to enjoy Conrad’s complete confidence – a feeling reinforced by the close similarities between their two careers. (8)

Meanwhile, Watts (“‘Heart of Darkness’” 55) contends this viewpoint by arguing that “Conrad has deliberately opted for doubly oblique narration . . . to preserve the possibility of critical distance between the reader and the fictional narrator,” and that this technique may be intended “to make us think: ‘Marlow can probably be trusted most of the time, but we need to keep on our guard. He isn’t fully reliable.’”

In “Conrad’s Critique on Imperialism in *Heart of Darkness*”, Hunt Hawkins goes into an investigation of this complicated matter, by comparing the contrasting views of four other scholars. Firstly, he looks at Jonah Raskin, who claims in *The Mythology of Imperialism* (1971) that Conrad’s and Marlow’s Congo experience turned them both against imperialism, British imperialism included (Hawkins, “Critique of Imperialism”
Certainly, a point can be made in favour of this theory, as Conrad and Marlow started out with the same naïve boyhood dream of exploring “the white heart of Africa” (O’Prey 107):

It was in 1868, when nine years old or thereabouts, that while looking at a map of Africa of the time and putting my finger on the blank space [the Stanley Falls region] then representing the unsolved mystery of that continent, I said to myself with absolute assurance and an amazing audacity which are no longer in my character now: ‘When I grow up I shall go there.’ (A Personal Record 13)

This excerpt from A Personal Record is strikingly similar to something Marlow says in the opening scenes of Heart of Darkness:

Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say, When I grow up I will go there. (HD 7)

Moreover, Conrad and Marlow soon find themselves disenchanted with their colonial adventure, arriving at the same conclusion; while Conrad says that he witnessed “the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration” (“Geography and Some Explorers” 14), Marlow says about the Eldorado Exploring Expedition that “[t]o tear treasure out of the bowels of the land was their desire, with no more moral purpose at the back of it than there is in burglars
breaking into a safe” (HD 37–8). Moving back to the discussion, Raskin explains away the pro-British passages as gestures to the British audience, and proposes that Conrad is aping the British to disguise his foreignness, but Hawkins later disputes this claim, proposing a theory of his own instead (Hawkins, “Critique of Imperialism” 287–8). Secondly, Hawkins discusses Eloise Knapp Hay’s theories proposed in The Political Novels of Joseph Conrad (1963). Whereas Raskin lumps Conrad and Marlow together, Hay makes a difference between them, and claims that Marlow truly believes in British Imperialism, but that “Conrad undercuts these values in the course of the story” (Hawkins, “Critique of Imperialism” 287). According to this theory, the reader sees what Marlow fails to see, although this is rather arguable. A third theory discussed by Hawkins is the one proposed by Avrom Fleishman in Conrad’s Politics (1967). Fleishman claims that Conrad believed in the redeeming “idea” behind imperialism, but that he did not believe in the “good work” Marlow claims it delivers (Hawkins, “Critique of Imperialism” 287). He notes Conrad’s use of “colonists” as opposed to “conquerors”, and claims that Conrad approved of the former - because of the “idea” behind it - but disapproved of the latter – the only type to be found in Heart of Darkness, and probably also in “An Outpost of Progress” (Hawkins, “Critique of Imperialism” 287). Finally, Hawkins mentions the views of Robert F. Lee, a proimperialist, who claims in Conrad’s Colonialism (1969) that the passage about the Romans shows that “[o]ne of the major directions of Conrad’s colonial fiction is a recognition of and an accord with the conception of Anglo-Saxon superiority in administering the lives of Oriental and other peoples” (qtd. in Hawkins, “Critique of Imperialism” 287), but Hawkins agrees with Wilfred Stone that this is a gross misreading.
“Whatever our answers,” Brantlinger concludes, “Heart of Darkness offers a powerful critique of at least some manifestations of imperialism and racism as it simultaneously presents that critique in ways that can be characterized only as imperialist and racist” (Rule of Darkness 257). Interestingly, Hawkins proposes that Conrad selected the values of efficiency and “the idea behind [imperialism] because they were widely held in England at the time and were well suited to condemning the type of imperialism practiced in the Congo” (288), so it is fairly certain Conrad and Marlow “agree” in their critique of Belgian imperialism. He goes on to claim that it is entirely possible to read a judgement of British imperialism in the subtext of Heart of Darkness, but that this judgement is based on “entirely different criteria and remains implicit” (Hawkins, “Critique of Imperialism” 288).

3.5. Going Native

Many critics have used the depiction of Kurtz – and to a lesser extent that of Kayerts and Carlier – to prove or to disprove the anti-imperialistic nature of Heart of Darkness and “An Outpost of Progress”. Anie Loomba (136) explains that for both points of view, “the crossing of boundaries appears as a dangerous business, . . . ‘Going native’ is potentially unhinging.” About Kurtz, Marlow tells us that his “intelligence was perfectly clear . . . his soul was mad. Being alone in the wilderness, it had looked within itself, and by heavens! I tell you it had gone mad” (HD 87). However, this going mad – and the reasons behind it – can be read in different ways, resulting in either imperialistic or anti-imperialistic interpretations.
3.5.1. Césaire, Kidd and Nordau

The anti-imperialistic reading sees Kurtz’s descent into madness as a direct result of the colonial system. This reading is not far-fetched, as it seems to be suggested by the story of Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*. Moreover, at the very beginning, during Marlow’s medical check-up, the Company doctor seems to have a theory that certain individuals can go mad in Africa:

“I always ask leave, in the interests of science, to measure the crania of those going out there,” he said. “And when they come back too?” I asked. “Oh, I never see them,” he remarked; “and, moreover, the changes take place inside, you know.” He smiled, as if at some quiet joke. “So you are going out there. Famous. Interesting too.” He gave me a searching glance, and made another note. “Ever any madness in your family?” he asked, in a matter-of-fact tone. I felt very annoyed. “Is that question in the interests of science too?” “It would be,” he said, without taking notice of my irritation, “interesting for science to watch the mental changes of individuals, on the spot, but . . .” “Are you an alienist?” I interrupted. “Every doctor should be – a little,” answered that original, imperturbably. ”I have a little theory which you Messieurs who go out there must help me to prove. This is my share in the advantages my country shall reap from the possession of such a magnificent dependency. The mere wealth I leave to others. (*HD 12*)

Disturbingly, when the doctor says that he doesn’t see anyone when they return, he seems to suggest that they don’t return at all; either they die, or they go mad. However, the company doctor is not the only one to theorize on the relationship between
colonisation and madness. For example, in his *Discourse on Colonialism*, Aimé Césaire claims:

colonization . . . dehumanizes even the most civilized man; that colonial activity, colonial enterprise, colonial conquest, which is based on contempt for the native and justified by that contempt, inevitably tends to change him who undertakes it; that the colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as *an animal*, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal, and tends objectively to transform *himself* into an animal. (41)

This “boomerang effect of colonization” (Césaire 41) can be directly applied to *Heart of Darkness* and “An Outpost of Progress”; by seeing the indigenous population as animals, Kurtz, Kayerts and Carlier have become no better than animals themselves. It could even be argued that Conrad used this as a method of convincing his contemporaries that imperialism has a negative influence on the coloniser as well as the colonised. Interestingly, an extreme version of method was actually employed by Benjamin Kidd, one of Conrad’s contemporaries. In *Social Evolution*, published in 1894, Kidd introduced “external social Darwinism”, a justification of imperialism, “because it was for ‘this quality of social efficiency that nations and peoples are being continually, and for the most part unconsciously, pitted against each other in the complex rivalry of life” (qtd. in Hawkins, “Critique of Imperialism” 288). However, in his *Control of the Tropics*, published four years later, he advised that “more highly evolved races” should steer clear of “lower races”, because he believed there was a real risk of contamination and even the resulting devolution of “higher races” (qtd. in White 186). There is one vast
difference between Césaire and Kidd; where as the latter actually believes that Africans are no better than animals, the former only warns against seeing them as animals, which they are not. We can assume that Conrad would agree with Césaire rather than with Kidd. After all, as White (190) points out, Conrad rejected “then current attitudes about race that naturalized native inferiority and justified European domination.” Among Conrad’s most effective ways of undermining these attitudes, is his use of irony. In “An Outpost of Progress”, for example, he portrays the only two white characters, Kayerts and Carlier, as severely damaged characters who are completely dependent on black characters, Makola and Gobila, in order to survive at their outpost of “progress”. Naturally, the title itself contributes to Conrad’s famous irony that, in its turn, “intensifies his criticism of the civilizing work of empire underway in Africa” (White 190). The juxtaposition of “Kayerts and Carlier's utter uselessness with their self-congratulatory reading of fictional and newspaper accounts” (White 190) about the glorious mission of bringing civilization to Africa effectively illustrates the title’s ironic meaning. In Heart of Darkness, most of the white characters also seem so utterly inefficient and incompetent “as to make it seem unlikely that the imperialists in Africa could ever establish viable railways, road systems, or towns” (C. T. Watts, “’Heart of Darkness’” 48). Watts explains this as satiric exaggeration, which is probably meant to intensify the criticism. Watts (“Conrad and Cunninghame Graham” 161) notes that R. B. Cunninghame Graham, one of Conrad’s friends, had introduced him to Max Nordeau’s theories about degenerate and criminal psychology postulated in Degeneration. Nordeau – as well as his mentor Lombroso - “claimed that civilization was being corrupted by the influence of people who were morally degenerate” (C. T. Watts, “’Heart of Darkness’” 46). Watts goes on to suggest that Conrad may have based his depiction of Kurtz on
Nordeau’s account of the “highly gifted degenerate” (“Heart of Darkness” 46). If this is true, then the question is not so much about superiority or inferiority of race (cf. Kidd), or the animalistic transformation as a result of seeing “the Other” as an animal (cf. Césaire), but about the innate moral degeneracy of certain individuals, regardless of race, and the dangers of putting those individuals in a colonial situation, where they are “allowed” to spin out of control.

3.5.2. Panopticism, Primitivism and Psychoanalysis

Many scholars claim that Heart of Darkness - and by connotation “An Outpost of Progress” - can be connected to theories about primitivism and classical psychoanalysis. Ania Loomba observes that in Conrad’s works, “Africa is a place where the European mind disintegrates and regresses into a primitive state” (136). Conrad appears to believe that this regression is only possible in places where there is an absence social policing. This is apparent in one of his comments on “the dedicated creative writer”:

In that interior world where his thought and his emotions go seeking for the experience of imagined adventures, there are no policemen, no law, no pressure of circumstance or dread of opinion to keep him within bounds. Who then is going to say Nay to his temptations if not his conscience? (A Personal Record xx)

This comment about artistic freedom is eerily similar to Marlow’s “explanation” of Kurtz’s descent into madness:

He had taken a high seat among the devils of the land – I mean literally. You can’t understand. How could you? – with solid pavement under your feet, surrounded by kind neighbours ready to cheer you or to fall on you,
stepping delicately between the butcher and the policeman, in the holy terror of scandal and gallows and lunatic asylums – how can you imagine what particular region of the first ages a man’s untrammelled feet may take him into by the way of solitude – utter solitude without a policeman – by the way of silence, utter silence, where no warning voice of a kind neighbour can be heard whispering of public opinion? These little things make all the great difference. When they are gone you must fall back upon your own innate strength, upon your own capacity for faithfulness. (HD 63)

Moreover, both of these excerpts are mirrored in C. G. Jung’s comment about “the visionary mode of artistic creation”, which is

a strange something that derives its existence from the hinterland of a man’s mind – that suggests the abyss of time separating us from pre-human ages, or evokes a super-human world of contrasting light and darkness. It is a primordial experience which surpasses man’s understanding, and to which he is therefore in danger of succumbing.

(from Modern Man in Search of a Soul, qtd. in C. T. Watts, “‘Heart of Darkness’” 50–1)

According to this theory, Kurtz, in his visionary attempts to “civilise” the indigenous population, looked to far within “the hinterland” of his own mind. His “primordial experience” in the jungle, however, lead him to succumb to his temptations, taking the form of becoming a kind of god to the natives, combined with his exclamation of
“Exterminate al the brutes!” In “An Outpost of Progress”, Kayerts and Carlier undergo a similar experience:

They were two perfectly insignificant and incapable individuals, whose existence is only rendered possible through the high organisation of civilised crowds. Few men realise that their life, the very essence of their character, their capabilities and their audacities, are only the expression of their belief in the safety of their surroundings. The courage, the composure, the confidence; the emotions and principles; every great and every insignificant thought belongs not to the individual but to the crowd: to the crowd that believes blindly in the irresistible force of its institutions and of its morals, in the power of its police and of its opinion. But the contact with pure unmitigated savagery, with primitive nature and primitive man, brings sudden and profound trouble into the heart. To the sentiment of being alone of one’s kind, to the clear perception of the loneliness of one’s thoughts of one’s sensations – to the negation of the habitual, which is safe, there is added the affirmation of the unusual, which is dangerous; a suggestion of things vague, uncontrollable, and repulsive, whose discomposing intrusion excites the imagination and tries the civilised nerves of the foolish and the wise alike.

... 

Society, not from any tenderness, but because of its strange needs, had taken care of those two men, forbidding them all independent thought, all initiative, all departure from routine; and forbidding it under pain of
death. They could only live on condition of being machines. And now, released from the fostering care of men with pens behind the ears, or of men with gold lace on the sleeves, they were like those lifelong prisoners who, liberated after many years, do not know what use to make of their faculties, being both, through want of practice, incapable of independent thought. ("OP" 20)

All of these excerpts – especially the parts where Conrad refers to civilised man as a “prisoner” controlled by “police” – are strongly reminiscent of Michel Foucault’s theory of panopticism. This theory was first proposed in *Discipline and Punish* in 1975, and based on Jeremy Bentham’s famous design of the Panopticon, the ultimate prison which was meant “to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault 75). In other words, the individual resort to self-policing when it is under constant surveillance. This mechanic lies at the basis of modern society, also in *Heart of Darkness*; “the crowd . . . believes blindly in the irresistible force of its institutions and of its morals, in the power of its police and of its opinion”. When the individual – in this case Kurtz, Kayerts and Carlier - is suddenly released from this social control imposed by society, its self-policing disappears as well:

> It was not the absolute and dumb solitude of the post that impressed them so much as an inarticulate feeling that something from within them was gone, something that worked for their safety, and had kept the wilderness from interfering with their hearts. ("OP" 34)
It could be argued that the “something from within them” that was gone, is in fact the restraint that was placed on them by social control, and that without this restraint, the individual reverts back to its “primitive” self. That this happens in a place of darkness is not surprising to Foucault, because “[f]ull lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected” (Foucault 75). Moreover, Spegele argues that Marlow’s tale is meant to teach his listeners that “[p]olitical society, as a consequence of man’s nature, requires restraint” (Spegele 324). In Africa, away from the self-regulating influence of society, Marlow also recognizes his own “primitive” self, and man’s true, violent nature:

Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings . . . You lost your way on that river as you would in a desert . . . till you thought yourself bewitched and cut off forever from everything you had known once – somewhere – far away – in another existence perhaps. There were moments when one’s past came back to one . . . but it came back in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream, remembered among the overwhelming realities of this strange world of plants, and water, and silence. And this stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace. (HD 42–3)

He even feels a certain kinship to the natives, and has a strong suspicion that all men are the same at their core, but he asserts that he, as a civilized man, must attempt to restrain his primitive nature:
The earth seemed unearthly. *We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there – there you could look at a thing monstrous and free.* [emphasis added] It was unearthly, and the men were - No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it – this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would slowly come to one. 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 were 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? The mind of man is capable of anything – because everything is in it, all the past as well as the future. What was there after all? Joy, fear, sorrow devotion, valour, rage – who can tell? – but truth – truth stripped of its cloak of time. Let the fool gape and shudder – the man knows, and can look on without a wink. But he must at least be as much of a man as these on the shore. He must meet that truth with his own true stuff – with his own inborn strength. (*HD 45-6*)

Furthermore, Watts (“Heart of Darkness”) notes that Kurtz’s (and by extension Kayerts and Carlier’s) experience can also be linked to Sigmund Freud’s theories about the divided self. In “Freud, Conrad and *Heart of Darkness*”, John Tessitore goes into a deeper investigation of this link, using a psychological rather than a symbolical reading of the text. Although he claims that it is highly improbably that Conrad and Freud ever read
each other’s work - and if they have, definitely not before Conrad wrote *Heart of Darkness* - Tessitore observes that the “two great minds found themselves arriving at identical conclusions” (31). He applies Freud’s theories about the individual’s relationship to the society, and more specifically the “fundamental tension underlying man and civilization”, namely “the pleasure principle vs. the reality principle”, to Kurtz (Tessitore 31). Freud proposes that man has a natural tendency toward pleasure, and that he initially tries to separate unpleasant experiences from the ego (Tessitore 31). However, as the individual grows older, he learns that some unpleasant experiences can originate from the ego, and that some externally based experiences can be pleasant; this drives the individual toward the reality principle (Tessitore 31). Tessitore (32) claims that Kurtz started out as “an extremely enlightened individual” and “quintessential Western man”, but that he “took a step away” from the reality principle. Kurtz’s reverting back to his preserved primitive instincts can be illustrated with the discrepancy with his apparently enlightened report for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs, and the postscript he later added, “Exterminate all the brutes” (Tessitore 32). Furthermore, Tessitore (32) is not satisfied with acknowledging that the primitive instinct still exists in “civilized man”; he goes on a search for the reasons of their release in Kurtz. He claims that Kurtz, who initially set out to the Congo in order to earn enough money to be able to marry his Intended, but was bitterly disappointed in the process, resorted to what Freud calls “palliative measures” (Tessitore 32–3). In “An Outpost of Progress”, Kayerts is similarly disappointed; he originally came out to the station to earn money for his daughter’s dowry, but he ends up sorely missing all of the luxuries he left behind (cf. p. 21). According to Tessitore (33), these “palliative measures” present themselves in three forms based upon primitive
instincts; powerful deflections, substitutive satisfactions, and intoxicating substances. For Kurtz, the most powerful deflection is his “relentless and brutal pursuit of ivory”, which “illustrates the exercise of primitive instincts, instincts which are deeply rooted in the pleasure principle” (Tessitore 33). An interesting side note here is that while Kurtz resorts to his work as a palliative measure, Spegele (329) claims that Marlow uses a devotion to work as a way to keep in touch with reality, for example when he says, “I don’t like work – no man does – but I like what is in the work – the chance to find yourself. Your own reality – for yourself, not for others – what no other man can ever know” (HD 35). Spegele (328) claims that this way, a devotion to work can be used as a restraining force, of which the starving cannibalistic crewmembers are the most remarkable example:

Why in the name of all the gnawing devils of hunger they didn’t go for us – they were thirty to five – and have a good tuck in for once, amazes me now when I think of it. They were big powerful men, with not much capacity to weigh the consequences, with courage, with strength, even yet, though their skins were no longer glossy and their muscles no longer hard. And I saw that something restraining, one of those human secrets that baffle probability, had come into play there. (Conrad, HD 52–3)

However, Spegele notes that, in the context of colonisation, this entails a dilemma: “if man puts his faith in some ephemeral humanitarian ideal, it may lead to a system of oppression, violence and brutality” (239). Thus, a devotion to work can be seen as both a restraining force keeping back the “primitive” and violent nature of man, as well as an excuse to for the gratification of “primitive” needs. Combining the two, perhaps it is best
seen as a way to channel primitive needs – entailing both restraint and various measures of gratification. Moving on, Kurtz’s substitutive satisfactions, then, are the pleasure he gains from being successful in his business, along with the pursuit of painting, poetry, and love – or, as the passage about the “wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman” might suggest, lust (Tessitore 34). Although Kurtz does not seem to abuse real intoxicating substances, Tessitore suggests that he suffers from a form of mania, “in which a situation similar to intoxication arises without the administration of any intoxicating drug” (Freud, qtd. in Tessitore 34); “Mania - no other single word so adequately captures Kurtz’s appetite for lust, power, adoration and, finally veritable godhead among the savages; and underlying all his appetites lie the “unspeakable rites” (Tessitore). These unspeakable rites almost certainly refer to cannibalism, a practice which surely illustrates man’s most primitive nature (Tessitore). Speaking of the impaled heads surrounding Kurtz’s hut, Marlow says that

They only showed that Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts, that there was something wanting in him – some small matter which, when the pressing need arose, could not be found under his magnificent eloquence. Whether he knew of this deficiency himself I can’t say. I think the knowledge came to him at last – only at the very last. But the wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude – and the whisper had proved irresistible fascinating. It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core. (HD 75)
What the wilderness whispered to Kurtz, according to Tessitore, is “that man’s principal ambition is pleasure and, if left unrestrained, he will do anything to obtain it” (Tessitore 35). However, this does not mean that he will eventually achieve a happy life; “the horror”, an exclamation which Marlow identifies as “an affirmation, a moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats, by abominable terrors, by abominable satisfactions” (HD 93), can be read as the Freudian realization that one cannot “successfully shut out reality, and reality here is the incontrovertible opposition of primitive (natural) instincts and the compelling social structures of modern (civilized) Western man” (Tessitore 37).

Again, Spegele seems to agree; there is a “tension between one’s ideals, of what ought to be, and reality, of what is. . . . man’s nature – his passions, his greed, his desire to dominate- prevent him from achieving what he may think he wants” (324), and “the horror” is “an affirmation that accepts the limitations and imperfections of human existence” (332). Left to himself, Kurtz reverts back to what Freud calls “original personality, which is still untamed by civilization and may thus become the basis . . . of hostility to civilization” (qtd. in Tessitore 38), and thus he becomes an antithesis of Robinson Crusoe; an anti-civilisation figure. Lionel Trilling (18) even goes as far as calling Kurtz a “hero of the spirit” for turning away from civilisation, but Brantlinger terms this reading a perversion (Rule of Darkness 268). Thus, Tessitore (39) concludes that the “ineffable darkness” which Kurtz has confronted is in fact the realization that “the cultural claims of the group are irreconcilable with the individual’s claim to freedom”, and that of both the individual and society – or imperialist Europe – are willing to commit brutal atrocities in the pursuit of pleasure and dominance.
But what, one may ask oneself, is the impact of all this on the critical nature of Conrad's African fictions? Perhaps the result of this primitivism is best summarized in Terry Eagleton's Marxist response:

Conrad neither believes in the cultural superiority of the colonialist nations, nor rejects colonialism outright. The ‘message’ of Heart of Darkness is that Western civilisation is at base as barbarous as African society – a viewpoint which disturbs imperialist assumptions to the precise degree that it reinforces them. (135)

3.6. Racism

Although Heart of Darkness has been widely read as a critique of imperialism and colonialism, there are many critics who accuse Conrad of being racist and “committed to a conservative, 'English view' of imperialism” (White 179). For example, Annie Loomba insists that “it can be seen to rehearse the primitivism of classical psychoanalysis” (136), which has already been proven above - and she goes on to quote Ethiopian novelist and critic Chinua Achebe, who called Heart of Darkness “a story in which the very humanity of black people is called in question” (11) and Conrad “a bloody racist” (9). Moreover, Achebe claims that Heart of Darkness makes Africa into “a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest” (2) and “a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril” (9). Although these accusations are probably based on a belief that Conrad supported Kidd’s theories, rather than those of Nordeau or Césaire, they are not so easily waylaid, especially when one looks at the text with Achebe’s comments in mind, as Watts has done. Certainly, there is
something in the claim that African characters are portrayed as inhuman, and rather as a howling mob than as individuals. When Marlow’s steamer is under attack, it “seemed as though the mist itself had screamed” (HD 50), and later Marlow “made out, deep in the tangled gloom, naked breasts, arms, legs, glaring eyes – the bush was swarming with human limbs in movement, glistening, of bronze colour” (HD 57). A second charge is indicated when “bush began to howl” (HD 58), and again Marlow sees “vague forms of men running bent double, leaping, gliding, distinct, incomplete, evanescent” (HD 58). In these quotes, the African natives are metonymically reduced to nature itself, and they come across as a group of wild animals. Moreover, Watts (“‘Heart of Darkness’” 54) claims that the Faustian theme of Kurtz’s madness “associates supernatural evil with the African wilderness,” supporting his claim with the scene where Marlow comes across the dying Kurtz, who escaped from the boat and seems to be crawling towards some kind of ritual ceremony:

A black figure stood up, strode on long legs, waving long black arms, across the glow. It had horns – antelope horns, I think – on its head. Some sorcerer, some witch-man, no doubt: it looked fiend-like enough… I tried to break the spell – the heavy, mute spell of the wilderness – that seemed to draw him to its pitiless breast by the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts, by the memory of gratified and monstrous passions. This alone, I was convinced, had driven him out to the edge of the forest, to the bush, towards the gleam of fires, the throb of drums, the drone of weird incantations; this alone had beguiled his unlawful soul beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations. (HD 85–6)
Marlow clearly seems to associate the African sorcerer with the devil, and compares the ritual to an evil supernatural force (suggested by “spell” and “incantations”) unearthing Kurtz’s inner primitive nature. Edward Said also calls attention to this topic when he remarks that in telling the story of his African journey Marlow repeats and confirms Kurtz’s action:

restoring Africa to European hegemony by historicizing and narrating its strangeness. The savages, the wilderness, even the surface folly of popping shells into a vast continent – all these reaccentuate Marlow’s need to place the colonies on the imperial map and under the overarching temporality of narratable history, no matter how complicated and circuitous the results. (Culture and Imperialism 164)

However, the response by Third World writers is not entirely negative, and even Achebe later moderated his attacks against Heart of Darkness. Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, Wilson Harris, Frances B. Singh, and C. P. Sarvan all agree that it was “progressive in its satiric accounts of the colonialists” although “Conrad was certainly ambivalent on racial matters” (C. T. Watts, “Heart of Darkness” 55). Watts (“Heart of Darkness” 55) maintains that it is extremely important to keep in mind that it was written and published in the 1890s, and that several racist aspects of the text, such as the use of the word “nigger” and the connotation of Africa with supernatural evil, are a direct result of the influence of Victorian culture and society. Although one can see this as dangerously close to “excusing” racism, it must be stressed that the text is otherwise very progressive; or as Sarvan concluded, “Conrad was not entirely immune to the infection of the beliefs and attitudes of his age, but he was ahead of most in trying to break free”
(qtd. in C. T. Watts, “‘Heart of Darkness’” 55). Watts goes on to support this with further proof of Conrad’s progressivity; for example the fact that Conrad wrote this at a time when most people were in favour of imperialism and even thought it “an admirable enterprise” (“‘Heart of Darkness’” 56). Another fact is that, by describing the horrible plight of Africans in the Congo, he was drawing attention to it, and contributing to the international campaign protesting against Belgian colonialism (C. T. Watts, “‘Heart of Darkness’” 56). Watts opposes Achebe’s accusation that Conrad marginalizes Africans and suggests that

they are given prominence when he describes, with telling vividness, the plight of the chain-gang and of the exploited workers dying in the grove. What the other Europeans choose to ignore, Marlow observes with sardonic indignation. Relegation, which is criticized, is a theme of the narrative. (“‘Heart of Darkness’” 56)

Moreover, South African writer Ezekiel Mphalele, for example, calls Conrad one of the few “outstanding white novelists who portray competently characters belonging to cultural groups outside their own” (125), while Sri Lankan D. C. R. A Goonetilleke, in his Developing Countries in British Fiction, claims that Conrad was part of “a distinguished minority of radical contemporary critics of imperialism such as Mark Twain, Roger Casement and E. D. Morel” (1). The latter is not hard to believe, as Joseph Conrad was connected with them through the Congo Reform Association. Proof of Conrad’s good intentions can be found in his correspondence with Casement, while Morel called Heart of Darkness “the most powerful thing ever written on the subject.”
3.7. Women

Another reading of Conrad’s work as reinforcing imperialism came out of a rather surprising corner: that of women's studies. Several feminist critics, such as Nina Pelikan Straus, Bette London, Johanna M. Smith, and Elaine Showalter, have read *Heart of Darkness* as being sexist and belittling to women, particularly “noting Marlow's patronizing and dismissive treatment of women” (Moore 12). Correspondingly, earlier psychological critics have claimed that one of Conrad’s few flaws as an author was his unconvincing portrayal of women, while Thomas Moser claimed that Conrad had problems with “‘the uncongenial subject’ of love” (qtd. in Moore 12). Therefore, such critics can be seen to conclude that it was perhaps better if Conrad did not attempt to portray women at all. In “The Exclusion of the Intended from Secret Sharing in Conrad’s ‘Heart of Darkness’”, Straus claims that Marlow and male critics are guilty of bringing “truth to men by virtue of . . . bringing falsehood to women” (130); Kurt's anonymous Intended is kept in the dark about the truth not out of “a heroic or gentlemanly desire to protect her” (Moore 12), but in order to fortify the dominant male position in society. Furthermore, Straus claims that

The woman reader . . . is in the position to insist that Marlow's cowardice consists of his inability to face the dangerous self that is the form of his own masculinist vulnerability: his own complicity in the racist, sexist, imperialist, and finally libidinally satisfying he has shared with Kurtz. (135)
In “Too Beautiful Altogether”, Smith correspondingly claims that *Heart of Darkness* "reveals the collusion of imperialism and patriarchy: Marlow's narrative aims to 'colonize' and 'pacify' both savage darkness and women” (180).

Smith's claim seems to be supported by Ania Loomba, who connects colonial discourse to gender and sexuality by pointing out how from the sixteenth century onwards, “sexual and colonial relationships become analogous to each other” (151). To illustrate this, she uses the example of how recently discovered or colonised continents were often allegorically portrayed by “naked or scantily clad” women, signifying that these continents were open to “plunder, possession, discovery and conquest” (Loomba 151). This was also the case with Africa, for example in these 16\textsuperscript{th} and 17\textsuperscript{th} century engravings by Adriaen Collaert (see fig. 2) and John Stafford (see fig. 3).

![Fig. 2. “Africa” by Adriaen Collaert](image1)

![Fig. 3. “Africa” by John Stafford](image2)

Loomba proposes that, in the same way, native women are often “described in terms of the promise and the fear of the colonial land” (151), and that this is also the case in
Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, for example when Marlow describes “a wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman”:

She walked with measured steps, draped in striped and fringed cloths, treading the earth proudly, with a slight jingle and flash of barbarous ornaments. She carried her head high; her hair was done in the shape of a helmet; she had brass leggings to her knees, brass wire gauntlets to the elbow, a crimson spot on her tawny neck; bizarre things, charms, gifts of witch-men, that hung about her, glittered and trembled at every step. She must have had the value of several elephant tusks upon her. She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress. And in the hush that had fallen suddenly upon the whole sorrowful land, the immense wilderness, the colossal body of the fecund and mysterious life seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul. (*HD* 79)

It cannot be denied that, especially in the last lines, the female body is used as a metaphor for “dark Africa”, the colonised land. The woman seems to be at the same time desirable, fearsome and mysterious. The promise of the colonial land is reflected in “superb”, “magnificent” and “stately”, while the fear is reflected in “wild-eyed”, “savage” and “ominous”. Moreover, the fact that the woman seems to be carrying “the value of several elephant tusks upon her” can be read as a reference to the ivory trade. If there was still some contestation, the last line establishes beyond doubt the woman as a metaphor for the colonised land.
However, Watts (‘“Heart of Darkness”’ 56) claims that the temporality of the tale can again offer some protection, also against these feminist accusations. He points out that Marlow’s apparent patronizing stance towards women is put into question by the text itself, and that feminist critics have overlooked many of the resulting ironies. Firstly, he proposes that Marlow’s dependence on his aunt for his job undermines his later statement that women “are out of touch with truth . . . in a world of their own”; since his aunt was ultimately the one to provide Marlow with a job, “her world is also his”, and probably vice versa (C. T. Watts, ““Heart of Darkness”” 56). Secondly, Watts points out that the notorious lie to the Intended is “presented in a debate-provoking way . . . so his own words expose a double standard by which woman are (a) culpably ignorant of truth, and (b) in need of falsehood supplied by males” (““Heart of Darkness”” 56). He concludes with the observation that the traditionally male activity of colonisation is “depicted by Marlow as virtually deranged in its destructive futility”, which could be interpreted in favour of women (C. T. Watts, ““Heart of Darkness”” 56).

3.8. Unnaturalness, Hypocrisy and “Pretty Fictions”

Another way in which Conrad criticizes imperialism, is by dramatizing “the unnaturalness of ‘the fantastic invasion’” (White 191), for example by drawing disturbing analogies. In Heart of Darkness, these analogies are sometimes stated explicitly:

Paths, paths, everywhere; a stamped-in network of paths spreading over an empty land, through long grass, through burnt grass, through thickets, down and up chilly ravines, up and down stony hills ablaze with heat; and a solitude, a solitude, nobody, not a hut. The population had cleared out a
long time ago. Well, if a lot of mysterious niggers armed with all kinds of fearful weapons suddenly took to travelling on the road between Deal and Gravesend, catching the yokels right and left to carry heavy loads for them, I fancy every farm and cottage thereabouts would get empty very soon. (HoD HD 23)

By casting the traditional colonisers in the role of the colonised, Conrad tries to evoke a feeling of empathy in his readers. This is also the case in The Inheritors: An Extravagant Story, where the protagonist meets a mysterious woman who claims that she is from the “Fourth Dimension”, and that her people will “inherit the earth”:

The Dimensionists were to come in swarms, to materialise, to devour like locusts, . . . They were to come like snow in the night: in the morning one would look out and find the world white; they were to come as the gray hairs come, to sap the strength of us as the years sap the strength of the muscles. As to methods, we should be treated as we ourselves treat the inferior races. (16)

The inheritors could stand as a symbol for the European coloniser in Africa for several reasons. As Brantlinger points out, “[f]ar from being meek, the inheritors are modern-day imperialists, satirically depicted as invaders from a spiritualist alternative world” (Rule of Darkness 258). Moreover, the inheritors are to come “like snow in the night,” an image which corresponds with the metaphorical light and dark rhetoric of Victorian colonial discourse. Finally, the image of physical deterioration, and more particularly the loss of muscular strength, also returns in depictions of the colonised in Heart of Darkness, for example when Marlow says about the cannibal crew that “they were big
powerful men, with not much capacity to weigh the consequences, with courage, with strength, even yet, though their skins were no longer glossy and their muscles no longer hard" (HD 52–3). Additionally, *The Inheritors* upholds “the satire upon imperialism . . . through the portrayal of the Duc de Mersch” (Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness* 258), a self-declared philanthropist who imposes a “System for the Regeneration of the Arctic Regions” (46) – casting Greenland as the “new” Congo - but “has the blacks murdered” (246–47) at the same time. Correspondingly, Kurtz, who is part of the “International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs” (HD 64), adds at the end of his pamphlet that they should “Exterminate all the brutes!” (HD 65). Since King Leopold II founded similarly named “International Association for the Civilisation of Central Africa,” the logical conclusion is that Conrad intended to accuse him of mass murder.

Back to the first excerpt, Conrad’s descriptions of the tragic solitude, the displacement and the unfair treatment of native people all contribute to this evocation of sympathy. In “An Outpost of Progress”, for example, the ten native men at the station have been displaced from their homes for over two years when they had only been engaged for six months. Partly because of listlessness and poor health as a result of malnutrition, and partly because of unhappiness at being separated from their families, these men appear to be wholly unproductive. Kayerts and Carlier, however, write this off as a kind of inefficiency or laziness that was supposedly inherent to native people, illustrating one of the many mistakes of imperialist beliefs. The cannibal crewmembers in *Heart of Darkness*, whose homes are “only eight hundred miles away” (HD 51) are treated in a similar way:
They had been engaged for six months (I don’t think a single one of them had any clear idea of time . . . ), and of course, as long as there was a piece of paper written over in accordance with some farcical law or other made down the river, it didn’t enter anybody’s head to trouble how they would live. (*HD* 51–2)

Van Reybrouck (108) argues that the colonised black man in the Congo often suffered a worse fate than that of a slave; whereas many slaves were necessarily looked after because they had a certain financial value to their owners, the same cannot be said for the colonised individual. Although it is difficult so say whether Conrad would have uniformly agreed, it is not difficult to see that he wanted to expose the colonisers’ particular hypocrisy in the light of the antislavery movement that was going on at the same time. This is especially apparent in the following excerpt:

“Slavery is an awful thing,” stammered out Kayerts in an unsteady voice.

“Frightful – the sufferings,” grunted Carlier, with conviction.

They believed their words. Everybody shows a respectful deference to certain sounds that he and his fellows can make. But about feelings people really know nothing. We talk with indignation or enthusiasm; we talk about oppression, cruelty, crime, devotion, self-sacrifice, virtue, and we know nothing real beyond the words. Nobody knows what suffering or sacrifice mean – except, perhaps the victims of the mysterious purpose of these illusions. ("OP" 32–3)
Conrad’s narrator accurately pinpoints the core of the problem; while condemning slavery, Kayerts and Carlier do not seem to realize or to recognize that they are guilty of a form of slavery and slave trade themselves. Firstly, they exploit “the Company’s men” beyond the time agreed upon and without seeming to offer them a proper reward for their work. Secondly, they can be held accountable – or at the very least complicit - for trading the men for ivory. Although it was their black associate Makola who arranged this trade, it can be argued that Kayerts and Carlier knew what he was doing, although they pretended not to know. Moreover, while they seem appalled when they first learn about the trade, they soon come round when they see the ivory, and eventually decide not to tell the director about it. In “Victorians and Africans: The Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent”, Patrick Brantlinger points out how this dichotomy was a common problem in Victorian society, and in this essay, he tries to answer the following “fundamental question” posed by Nancy Stepan in *The Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain, 1800-1960*:

A fundamental question about the history of racism in the first half of the nineteenth century is why it was that, just as the battle against slavery was being won by abolitionists, the war against racism was being lost. The Negro was legally freed by the Emancipation Act of 1833, but in the British mind he was still mentally, morally and physically a slave. (qtd. in Brantlinger, “Victorians and Africans” 45)

By exposing this colonial brutality and hypocrisy, Conrad attempted to combat the “invasion's absurd outrageousness, one ‘naturalized’ by the engravings in daily
illustrated newspapers of the inevitable string of black carriers accompanying white 'civilizers' through swamps and along jungle paths in ‘darkest Africa’” (White 191).

Furthermore, as Edward Garnett first noticed, Conrad unmasked the imperialist “necessity for ‘pretty fictions’ to conceal imperialism’s actual business” (qtd. in White 191). In fact, Brantlinger goes as far as claiming that “for Conrad, the worst feature of imperialism may have been not violence but the lying propaganda used to cover its bloody tracks” (Rule of Darkness 259). There certainly is some truth to this claim, as the following excerpt of The Inheritors proves:

There were revolting details of cruelty to the miserable, helpless, and defenceless; there were greed, and self-seeking, stripped naked; but more revolting to see without a mask was that falsehood which had been hiding under the words that for ages had spurred men to noble deeds, to self-sacrifice, to heroism. What was appalling was the sudden perception that all the traditional ideals of honour, glory, conscience, had been committed to the upholding of a gigantic and atrocious fraud. That falsehood had spread stealthily, had eaten into the very heart of creeds and convictions that we lean [sic] upon our passage between the past and the future. The old order of things had to live or perish with a lie. (282)

One of the most obvious pretty fictions is “the image of ‘the white man in the tropics’, described in official pronouncements and in the day’s abundant travel writing and adventure fiction”, the untruthfulness of which Conrad experienced first-hand when he travelled on the Vidar along the Malay archipelago and when visited the Congo a year later (White 184). The following excerpt of “An Outpost of Progress” - the title of which
is a pretty fiction in itself - illustrates how Kayerts and Carlier use one of these pretty fictions to fool themselves into believing that they are doing good work:

They had also found some old copies of a home paper. That print discussed what it was pleased to call “Our colonial Expansion” in high-flown language. It spoke much of the rights and duties of civilisation, of the sacredness of the civilising work, and extolled the merits of those who went about bringing light, and faith, and commerce to the dark places of the earth. Carlier and Kayerts read, wondered, and began to think better of themselves. Carlier said one evening, waving his hand about, “In a hundred years, there will be perhaps a town here. Quays, and warehouses, and barracks, and – and – billiard-rooms. Civilisation, my boy, and virtue – and all. And then, chaps will read that two good fellows, Kayerts and Carlier, were the first civilised men to live in this very spot!” Kayerts nodded, “Yes, it is a consolation to think of that. (“OP” 24)

Another one of these pretty fictions is Kurtz’s report for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs, the misleading effect of which is illustrated by Marlow:

The peroration was magnificent, though difficult to remember, you know. It gave me the notion of an exotic Immensity ruled by an august Benevolence. It made me tingle with enthusiasm. This was the unbounded power of eloquence – of words – of burning noble words. (HD 64)

Moreover, these pretty fictions were imposed to the extent that even the colonised were perpetuating them, and served to cover up the unnaturalness and absurdity of the colonisation process. Both Makola from “An Outpost of Progress” and the Accountant
from *Heart of Darkness* “put their neat handwriting and accurate record-keeping at the service of the bureaucratic obfuscation necessary to legitimizing burglary” (Hawthorn, qtd. in White). Because of Makola’s fictions, Kayert and Carlier are able to convince themselves that they are true “pioneers of trade and progress”. As White concludes, “that the ends so brutally justify the means had not been part of this discourse before and constitutes a serious critique of empire and its propagandizing rhetoric” (191)
4. Symbolism

Whereas the previous chapter has tried to present an overview of critical opinions, this chapter argues that it was indeed Conrad’s intention – although opinions may differ on its eventual execution – to criticise imperialism through his use of symbolism. This dissertation has already remarked upon Conrad’s ambiguity and paradoxes, but as Watts observes, “Conrad was able to voice his paradoxes not only through explicit statement but also through ambiguous images and many-faceted symbols” (“Heart of Darkness” 46–7). This claim also holds when applied to Conrad’s literary alter ego; Rita Bergenholtz notes that “in order to deal with people, places, and things Marlow must transform them into abstractions or symbols” (103). In Heart of Darkness, perhaps the most powerful of these ambiguous images and “many-faceted symbols” have to do with the contrast between light and dark. Some of these images can be found in “An Outpost of Progress” as well, albeit to a lesser extent.

4.1. Heart of Darkness

It is no exaggeration to call Conrad’s choice of title for this work masterful, as it acts on a number of different levels simultaneously. The most superficial layer of meaning refers to Marlow’s journey into the heart of darkness, the innermost part of the jungle explored so far. Then there are the more obvious connotations of “night, the unknown, the impenetrable, the primitive, the evil” (O’Prey 105), which were conflated with the African continent at the time. According to Watts, the darkness refers to “Kurtz’s corruption, to benighted London, and to innumerable kinds of darkness and obscurity, psychical, moral, and ontological” (C. T. Watts, “Heart of Darkness” 47). One of these
innumerable kinds of darkness, according to Spegele (334), is the meaning of the universe and human life; man is unable to breach this “impenetrable darkness”, and any effort to unlock this mystery will lead to his unhappiness.

4.2. On the Nellie

In his afterword to the Penguin English Library edition of Heart of Darkness, Paul O’Prey makes a number of compelling observations about the imagery of dark and light, and he proposes that this imagery and the “brilliant evocation of atmosphere” in the frame story prepare us for the major themes of the narrative (O’Prey 103). For example, Marlow begins to tell his story as the night falls, which can be seen as a symbolical foreshadowing of the moral darkness that is to come in his framed narrative (O’Prey 103). Moreover, as Edward Said points out, there is a circular movement in the narrative; at the ending we return to the deck of the Nellie, where complete darkness has set in (Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography 26). This circularity suggests a form of tidal and spatial connection that can be explained through the imagery used to describe the river Thames at nightfall. The falling darkness is accompanied by a kind of eerie stillness; “the old river . . . rested unruffled” (HD 2) as Marlow sat motionless in the “pose of a Buddha”, and the sails of the barges all “seemed to stand still”. Everything is quiet and still as the sun falls, its light changing over the “brooding gloom” of London. The Thames is described as spreading out “in the tranquillity of a waterway leading to the uttermost ends of earth” (HOD 2) and is said to evoke “the great spirit of the past” (HOD 2). This leads Marlow to the sudden realization that long ago, “this also . . . has been one of the dark places of the earth” (HOD 3). According to Moore (3), this sentence might hold the moral of the story, if there is one to be found. It suggests a connection to -
and even a sense of identification with - the “primitive” and “dark” peoples who are being brutally colonised in Africa; a connection that the colonisers were trying to deny. After this famous statement, “Marlow . . . proceeds to tell the entire story of Heart of Darkness in miniature” (Moore 3), of which the first few lines show a remarkable play with the imagery of light and dark:

I was thinking of very old times, when the Romans first came here, nineteen hundred years ago – the other day . . . Light came out of this river since – you say Knights? Yes; but it is like a running blaze on a plain, like a flash of lightning in the clouds. We live in the flicker – may it last as long as the old earth keeps rolling! But darkness was here yesterday. (HoD HD 4)

Darkness here seems to stand for eternity, the unknown, or simply “primitive” human nature. Conversely, light figures as a very fleeting concept, and apparently as the bringer of civilisation. The image “lightning” to signify civilisation returns later as well, when the Russian and Marlow are talking about Kurtz:

“Kurtz got the tribe to follow him, did he?” I suggested. He fidgeted a little. “They adored him,” he said. The tone of these words was so extraordinary that I looked at him searchingly. It was curious to see his mingled eagerness and reluctance to speak of Kurtz. The man filled his life, occupied his thoughts, swayed his emotions. “What can you expect? He burst out; “he came to them with thunder and lightning, you know – and they had never seen anything like it – and very terrible.” (HD 73)

Lightning is a very effective image for civilisation – or rather, the process of civilising - as both seem magnificent and terrible at the same time. A bit later, Marlow mentions “two
shot-guns, a heavy rifle, and a light revolver-carabine – the thunderbolts of that pitiful Jupiter” (HD 78), stressing the interwovenness of civilisation and violence. The Russian’s opinion is divided; while he clearly adores Kurtz, he is reluctant to tell Marlow about Kurtz’s exact methods. Similarly, Marlow seems to suffer from a “conflict of sympathies” (O’Prey 104). On the one hand, he sympathises with the colonisers, and he cannot help but feel sorry for the “decent young citizen in a toga ... coming out here ... to mend his fortune” (HoD HD 5), although he thinks “they were men enough to face the darkness” (HoD HD 5). On the other hand, he also seems to sympathise with the indigenous population, when he calls the colonisation process “robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind – as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness” (HoD 6). The novel’s final words seem to suggest that the entire modern world has been irrevocably contaminated by the darkness of imperialism, as “[t]he offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky – seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness” (HD 102). It seems that the moral darkness of colonisation cannot be contained in Africa and other colonised regions; it is infecting the world of the colonisers as well. By bringing “light” to Africa, they are bringing darkness to Europe. Correspondingly, Edward Said uses this passage as an example of “how a movement from the present into the past causes the gloom of the past to engulf the whole of the present” (Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography 101). Conrad’s inspiration for this evocation of a threatening comprehensive darkness came from Lord Kelvin’s Second Law of Thermodynamics, which suggested “that eventually, as the sun cooled in the heavens, life would become utterly extinct on this planet, which would be doomed to ultimate darkness” (Watts 46; Hawkins, “Congo Reform Movement” 76–7).
The opening scene certainly seems to reflect this, especially the line where “the sun sank low, and from glowing white changed to a dull red without rays and without heat, as if about to go out suddenly, stricken to death by the touch of that gloom brooding over that crowd of men” (HD 2). It is quite surprising that this particular scene, which has often been subjected to symbolical interpretation, must have felt like a very real and impending possibility to Conrad.

### 4.3. Victorian Hypocrisy: Light in the Darkness

Moore has expressed a hope “that scholars will seek to understand the ‘darkness’ of the tale not only on the Congo River but also in the well-trafficked waters of Victorian England” (10). He is right in this, because for the Victorian reader, *Heart of Darkness* would have referred almost unambiguously to the then-popular myth of the Dark Continent, and the title would be read as synonymous to “the dark heart of Africa”. Connotations of the African continent with darkness were omnipresent in Victorian society; note, for example, that one of Stanley’s most popular books was sold under the title of *In Darkest Africa*. In his essay “Victorians and Africans: The Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent”, Patrick Brantlinger goes into a detailed discussion of Victorian attitudes towards Africa in the context of abolitionism and humanitarianism. He concludes that by 1883, “the British tended to see Africa as a center of evil, a part of the world possessed by a demonic ‘darkness’ or barbarism, represented above all by slavery and cannibalism, which it was their duty to exorcise” (Brantlinger, “Victorians and Africans” 53). Moreover, the “Dark Continent” could only be converted – or rather, conquered - by the “light” of Christianity and Civilization. Many colonisers, explorers, and missionaries were therefore adored as light-bringing heroes; “the Promethean and .
. . . saintly bestower[s] of light” (Brantlinger, “Victorians and Africans” 55). One of the most legendary of these missionary explorers was Dr. David Livingstone, who despite his old age and bad health continued his search for the source of the Nile until his death in 1873. In this illustration from William Garden Blaikie's *The Personal Life of David Livingstone* (see fig. 1), he is portrayed “as a saint, carrying the light of Christianity into the Dark Continent” (Brantlinger, “Victorians and Africans” 55). However, many of these so-called philanthropic “bringers of light” turned out to have a “dark side” themselves, exploiting the colonies for self-profit. The glorification of colonisation through the use of rhetoric of light and dark, then, was merely a façade used to cover up the real motives behind colonisation.

In “An Outpost of Progress” and *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad accurately portrayed this Victorian colonial discourse, but simultaneously managed to undermine it by exposing its hypocrisy through the use of symbolism and ironical inversions of the traditional Victorian rhetoric. For example, when Marlow takes leave from his aunt, she calls him an “exceptional and gifted creature – a piece of good fortune for the Company” (Conrad, *HD* 13) and, more importantly, an “emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle” (*HoD* 13). However, Marlow retorts with a clear rejection of Victorian views about colonisation:
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. (HoD 13)

Meanwhile, Kayerts and Carlier see themselves as “bringing light, and faith, and commerce to the dark places of the earth” (“OP” 24), influenced by the same “rot” and “humbug” as Marlow’s aunt. Moreover, Kurtz’s “gift of expression” seems to represent Europe’s false claim at philanthropy, when Marlow tells us that

of all his gifts the one that stood out pre-eminently, that carried with it a sense of real presence, was his ability to talk, his words – the gift of expression, the bewildering, the illuminating, the most exalted and the most contemptible, the pulsating stream of light, or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness. (HD 60–1)

However, it would seem that not every coloniser fooled himself with illusions of bringing light to darkness. This is particularly apparent in the manager’s misgivings about Kurtz:

And the pestiferous absurdity of his talk,” continued the other; “he bothered me enough when he was here. ‘Each station should be like a beacon on the road towards better things, a centre for trade of course, but also for humanising, improving, instructing.’ Conceive you – that ass! And he wants to become manager! (HD 41)
The following excerpt also carries a poignant meaning when analysed in the same context:

Now when I was a little chap, I had a passion for maps. . . . At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all looked that) I would put my finger on it and say, When I grow up I will go there. . . . True, by this time it was not a blank space any more. It had got filled since my boyhood with rivers and lakes and names. It had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery – a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over. It had become a place of darkness. (HOD 7)

Of particular interest here is that a blank or white - and by connotation “good”, “innocent” or “pure” – place has been transformed into a place of darkness because of its colonisation. The colonisers have not only brought death and destruction, they have brought their judgement; in their eyes, the indigenous population is of a dark, primitive, wild, and even evil nature. As Brantlinger eloquently puts it, “Africa grew ‘dark’ as Victorian explorers, missionaries, and scientists flooded it with light, because the light was refracted through an imperialist ideology that urged the abolition of ‘savage customs’ in the name of civilization” ("Victorians and Africans" 43). There is also an inversion of the connotation of “mystery” in the previous excerpt; whereas things of a mysterious nature have traditionally been described as dark, the mysterious blank space on the pre-colonisation map was white.
4.4.  *Ave!* Old knitter of black wool

Arguably, Brantlinger’s claim about Africa growing dark in the process of colonisation can also be applied to Marlow’s description of the two knitting women in the waiting room of the Company offices:

‘I began to feel slightly uneasy. You know I am not used to such ceremonies, and there was something ominous in the atmosphere. It was just as though I had been let into some conspiracy – I don’t know – something not quite right; and I was glad to get out. In the outer room the two women knitted black wool feverishly. People were arriving, and the younger one was walking back and forth introducing them. The old one sat on her chair. Her flat cloth slippers were propped up on a foot-warmer, and a cat reposed on her lap. She wore a starched white affair on her head, had a wart on her cheek, and silver-rimmed spectacles hung on the tip of her nose. She glanced at me above the glasses. The swift and indifferent placidity of that look troubled me. Two youths with foolish and cheery countenances were being piloted over, and she threw at them the same quick glance of unconcerned wisdom. She seemed to know all about them and about me too. An eerie feeling came over me. She seemed uncanny and fateful. Often far away there I thought of these two, guarding the door of Darkness, knitting black wool as for a warm pall, one introducing, introducing continuously to the unknown, the other scrutinising the cheery and foolish faces with unconcerned old eyes. *Ave!* Old knitter of
black wool. *Morituri te salutant.* Not many of these she looked at ever saw her again – not half, by a long way.

The first few lines have been included in quote because they clearly refer to the hypocrisy of the colonial endeavour; after signing the contract, Marlow feels as if he has become part of some ominous conspiracy. The two knitting women, then, could be seen as symbols for the Western coloniser. One the one hand, they are an image of comfort and the kind of “immaculateness” that goes with civilisation; one of them is wearing a starched white cap, akin to the starched collar and white cuffs worn - absurdly - in the middle of the jungle by the Company chief’s accountant, whom Marlow calls “this miracle” (*HD* 20). However, the wart and the spectacles dangling off her nose connect the old lady to the traditional image of a witch, implying that she is not what she seems, perhaps even evil. Moreover, there seems to be something supernatural and fateful to her, connecting the knitting women to the Greek *Moirae* or *Fates*, who spin the fabric of life. Appropriately, the women, whom Marlow calls guardians of “the door of Darkness”, are “knitting black wool feverishly”, which could also be seen as a symbol for colonisation; they are quite literally creating darkness, and “feverishly” could even refer to fever-related diseases, such as dysentery, that killed many colonisers. Later, Marlow talks about names of trading places “that seemed to belong to some sordid farce acted in front of a sinister blackcloth” (*HoD* 15). This implies that the supposed philanthropic ideals behind colonisation is but “a sordid farce,” while the reality is concealed behind the “sinister blackcloth”, which could refer to the myth of the Dark Continent. Moreover, Hawkins claims that this excerpt refers to imperialism in general (“Congo Reform Movement” 77), which seems to correspond with the image of knitting black wool to symbolise colonisation.
4.5. **White Collars and the Grove of Death**

Marlow's encounter with a dying black man in what he calls the “grove of death” (*HD* 23), and what seems to him like “the gloomy circle of some Inferno” (*HD* 19), can also be interpreted in the same context:

> Then, glancing down, I saw a face near my hand. The black bones reclined at full length with one shoulder against a tree, and slowly the eyelids rose and the sunken eyes looked up at me, enormous and vacant, a kind of blind, white flicker in the depths of the orbs, which died out slowly. The man seemed young – almost a boy – but you know with them it’s hard to tell. I found nothing else to do but to offer him one of my good Swede’s ship’s biscuits I had in my pocket. The fingers closed slowly on it and held – there was no other movement and no other glance. He had tied a bit of white worsted round his neck – Why? Where did he get it? Was it a badge – an ornament – a charm – a propitiatory act? Was there any idea at all connected with it? It looked startling round his black neck, this bit of white thread from beyond the seas.

At first sight, the “kind of blind, white flicker” leaving the dying man’s eyes seems to conform to a traditional literary image of death “extinguishing the light of life,” with no further meaning to it. However, in the context of *Heart of Darkness*, it could be read as something more, namely as a reference to colonisation as the cause of death. After all, according to Derek Ogbourne, a specialist in the subject of optography, “[t]he idea that one’s eye preserves the very last moment of life held a very powerful hold on the Victorian imagination. In particular it was suggested that optograms might be obtained
from murder victims to help identify their assailant.” It is therefore not entirely implausible that the “blind, white flicker” is an image of the black man’s “murderer”. The claim that this image is symbolical of colonisation, or the civilisation process, is supported by the opening scenes of the novel, where Marlow describes the Roman colonisation of Britain as follows:

Light came out of this river since – you say Knights? Yes; but it is like a running blaze on a plain, like a flash of lightning in the clouds. We live in the flicker – may it last as long as the old earth keeps rolling! (HD 4)

Colonisation is here described as light coming out of a river, just as it is in the Congo region so many years later. However, Marlow then specifies this light as a flicker, a white flicker. Moreover, the flicker is blind, which could again refer to the hypocrisy of colonisation, or alternatively, to its ruthlessness, calling to mind the image of the Romans “going at it blind.” Moving on to a different part of the excerpt, the bit of white worsted tied round the black man’s neck is particularly symbolic; Conrad even invites the reader to try and fathom its meaning. Of course, as with many of Conrad’s symbols, this one holds several meanings on different levels. Firstly, it could indeed be interpreted as a kind of “charm” or as a “propitiatory act”. A mere two paragraphs later, we are introduced to the Company chief’s accountant, who presents “a sort of vision” (Conrad, HD 20) with his “high starched collar, white cuffs, a light alpaca jacket, snowy trousers, a clear silk necktie and varnished boots” (Conrad, HD 20). Marlow respected the fellow. Yes; I respected his collars, his vast cuffs, his brushed head. His appearance was certainly that of a hairdresser’s dummy; but in the great demoralisation of the land he kept up his appearance. That’s
backbone! His starched collars and got-up shirt-fronts were achievements of character. (*HD* 21)

Hopwood (165) argues that “[f]or the native people themselves, white man’s magic is concentrated into” clothing, so it is possible that this black man tried to copy white man’s clothing – in this case, the Chief accountant’s white collar - by tying a piece of white worsted around his neck. This can be read as an attempt transfer some of “white man’s magic” to himself, or rather, to inspire the same respect as the Chief accountant. The same is argued by Roger West:

“To the black man, this “bit of white thread” symbolizes the power and magic that the white man has used to enslave him and his people. In it are contained the powers of the white deities, powers the black man hopes to possess. But to Conrad, the white cloth is nothing more than the manacles worn around the neck of criminals that Marlow has seen on his trek to the station. It is a yoke that reduces the man to a beast of burden.” (2)

Ironically, the white collars worn by the colonisers function the other way around; they transform the animal into a civilized man, by presenting a façade (Brady 25). In any case, the piece of white cloth could certainly be called a charm, although West (2) points out that this is highly ironical, as the white collar does not contain any real power in itself. According to Marlow, it could also be a propitiatory act, in which the black man wears the piece of worsted as a sign of respect to the Chief accountant in order to appease him, or to establish a connection that could lead to identification and pity. This could be a tactic employed by the black man, although it is highly improbable that the white man would respond to it as wished. Secondly, it could be read as an attack on the
Company, exposing its deceitfulness and “the inadequacy of its ‘light’” (Brady 25). Thirdly, it could be linked to the discussion of the “blind, white flicker” and read as a direct accusation against British or even European imperialism in general. Hopwood, who identifies Carlyle’s pro-imperialistic Past and Present as a literary source for Heart of Darkness, claims that “[w]ith these seemingly casual references Conrad makes his comment on Carlyle’s rhapsody on cotton, the instrument by which English mill-owners were extracting wealth from their workers at home and from the colonial people abroad” (165). In short, the piece of white worsted cotton stands for the “debased form of European civilization, irrelevant to Africa, that is forced on the colonial people” (Hopwood 165). Finally, the fact that “this bit of white thread from beyond the seas” (HD 20) is tied around the black man’s neck calls to mind an image of strangulation; the black man is literally being strangled by imperialism.

4.6. Kurtz’s Sketch and the Intended

An often overlooked but highly significant symbolical image is that of the blindfolded woman in Kurtz’s sketch in oils. It can be said that this sketch, which Marlow comes across whilst visiting the Central Station, is the first thing to spark his interest about Kurtz:

Then I noticed a small sketch in oils, on a panel, representing a woman, draped and blindfolded, carrying a lighted torch. The background was sombre – almost black. The movement of the woman was stately, and the effect of the torchlight on her face was sinister.

‘It arrested me, and he stood by, civilly holding an empty half-pint champagne bottle (medical comforts) with the candle stuck in it. To my
question he said Mr Kurtz had painted this – in this very station more than a year ago – while waiting for means to go to his trading-post. “Tell me, pray,” said I, “who is this Mr Kurtz?” (Conrad, HD 30)

When analysed independently, this image can certainly be seen as a symbol for imperialism, and more specifically for its hypocritical nature. The woman, then, is a symbol for the idea behind imperialism, carrying “the light of Christianity and Civilisation” before her against a literal and figurative darkness. However, as she is blindfolded, she cannot or will not see the dark reality of imperialism; i.e. that the real motives behind colonisation are purely economical, and that its results are largely negative. In “The Duplicity of Symbolism in Heart of Darkness”, Stacy Atkins seems to agree with this idea, claiming that the sketch “emphasizes the disparity between civilization and brutality.” Somewhat later in the story, when Marlow is musing on Kurtz’s descent into madness, he stresses that it requires a tremendous amount of innate strength to resist the darkness, but he considers two other possibilities as well:

Of course you may be too much of a fool to go wrong – too dull even to know you are being assaulted by the powers of darkness. . . . Or you may be such a thunderingly exalted creature as to be altogether deaf and blind to anything but heavenly sights and sounds.” (HD 63)

It is possible that this refers back to the blindfolded figure in Kurtz’s sketch, supporting and expanding its interpretation above. Moving back to an interpretation of the sketch itself, the sinister effect of the torchlight on the woman’s face can be read as the negative reflection of horrors committed in the name of imperialism on the “enlightened” and “noble” idea behind imperialism. Additionally, the blindfolded woman can be seen as an
ironical reworking of Justitia, the female personification of justice, as there is such an apparent lack of justice in the colonial system.

In "Kurtz's Sketch in Oils: Its Significance to Heart of Darkness", Mark Sexton goes into a detailed analysis of the sketch’s possible symbolical meanings for Kurtz and Marlow, often linking them to other scenes that echo “this mysterious tableau” (387). Firstly, he relates it to Kurtz psychological evolution:

the paradoxical subject of the sketch suggests a mind that seeks to grasp and interpret experience. Kurtz depicts the sketch’s female figure in a highly ambiguous stance: offering light against darkness, but herself unable to see the light her action offers. A subject so conceived and executed implies, in Kurtz, a profound sense of life’s complexity, an awareness of the ultimate inadequacy of terms like “light” and “darkness” to describe reality: namely, that when we persist in perceiving life only in terms of stark contrasts, we ourselves can best be described blind. (Sexton 387–8)

If this is true, then Kurtz can be said to inhabit a “grey” area, being an enlightened individual revelling in darkness. The fact that Kurtz is often called a “Shadow” (e.g. HoD 78) corroborates this theory, because after all, there can be no shadow without light. In the same way, there would be no Kurtz without civilisation. Sexton (388) proposes that Kurtz's abandonment of the sketch should be read in the same light as the sudden addition of “Exterminate all the brutes!” (HD 65) to his otherwise “enlightened” treatise for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs. Whether the sketch represents “an element of hope against the more general darkness of despair” or “an
ironic sense of life’s ultimate futility”, its abandonment “suggests a movement from a point close to despair to one beyond it” (Sexton 388). Secondly, Sexton claims that the sketch is important for Marlow’s narration of the story, echoing it on several occasions, particularly during the deathbed scene and Marlow’s meeting with Kurtz’s Intended. About Kurtz’s death, Marlow recounts the following:

One evening coming in with a candle I was startled to hear him say a little tremulously, “I am lying here in the dark waiting for death.” The light was within a foot of his eyes. I forced myself to murmur, “Oh, nonsense!” and stood over him as if transfixed. *(HD 91)*

... 

This is the reason why I affirm that Kurtz was a remarkable man. He had something to say. He said it. Since I had peeped over the edge myself, I understand better the meaning of his stare, that could not see the flame of the candle, but was wide enough to embrace the whole universe, piercing enough to penetrate all the hearts that beat in the darkness. He had summed up – he had judged. “The horror!” He was a remarkable man. *(HD 92)*

According to Sexton, Marlow here mirrors the figure in Kurtz’s sketch by holding a light in the dark, while he sees “the blinded Kurtz as an emblem analogous in paradoxical significance of the sketched figure to Kurtz” (389). True enough, it seems as if Kurtz suddenly conforms to the classical trope of “the Blind Seer”, gaining wisdom by being blinded. This is entirely opposed to the figure in his sketch, who is blind to the truth. Sexton then goes on to link Kurtz’s sketch to Marlow’s narration of his meeting with the
Intended, who seems to mirror the blindfolded woman in the sketch, particularly through the use of light and dark imagery apparent in this selection of excerpts:

Thus I was left at last with a slim packet of letters and the girl’s portrait. She struck me as beautiful – I mean she had a beautiful expression. I know that the sunlight can be made to lie too, yet one felt that no manipulation of light and pose could have conveyed the delicate shade of truthfulness upon those features. *(HD 95)*

She came forward, all in black, with a pale head, floating towards me in the dusk. . . . The room seemed to have grown darker, as if all the sad light of the cloudy evening had taken refuge on her forehead. This fair hair, this pale visage, this pure brow, seemed surrounded by an ashy halo from which the dark eyes looked out at me. *(HD 97)*

“You knew him best,” I repeated. And perhaps she did. But with every word spoken the room was growing darker, and only her forehead, smooth and white, remained illuminated by the inextinguishable light of belief and love. *(HD 98)*

“Yes, I know,” I said with something like despair in my heart, but bowing my head before the faith that was in her, before that great and saving illusion that shone with an unearthly glow in the darkness, in the triumphant darkness from which I could not have defended her – from which I could not even defend myself. *(HD 99)*
However, this representation of the Intended seems to send a positive message when compared to the blindfolded woman in Kurtz's sketch:

Like the veiled woman of Kurtz’s sketch, the Intended’s vision is unmistakably blindfolded, her knowledge pitifully inaccurate and inadequate for grasping reality. In her supreme lack of awareness she comes close to eliciting Marlow's scorn. Yet, as Marlow's narrative makes clear, she also comes to represent an “idea” of light worthy of respect – not as a human embodiment of that light, but as a reflection, for Marlow, of true light. (Sexton 390)

Sexton (391) goes on to argue that, for Marlow, the Intended becomes a symbol for his belief in the “redemptive idea” behind imperialism, “something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to” (HD 6), and telling her the dark truth would entail casting both himself and the Intended into darkness. Tying everything together, Sexton (392) concludes that:

In drafting and then discarding his sketch, Kurtz turns away from the very “idea” of light. Marlow, by deliberately casting his accounts of Kurtz’s death and of his interview with the Intended in terms that recall the image of the sketch, reclaims that idea. Having seen through Kurtz's eyes the reality of utter darkness, Marlow manages to restore himself and his listeners that portion of light signified by both the torch and the Intended: the “idea” of light.

More importantly, Sexton (392) proposes that it was Conrad's intention to have Heart of Darkness function as a torchlight offering illumination to the reader, just as it was
Marlow’s intention to illuminate his listeners. Whether Conrad believed in the “idea” behind imperialism or not, it is beyond doubt that used *Heart of Darkness* to show to the Victorian reader that their unfailing belief in it justified a series of crimes of such darkness, that many chose to remain blind to the truth.

4.7. **Ivory and Sunshine**

Light, as already established, is not free from moral darkness either. Besides the imagery of the “flicker” of civilisation and white fabrics, there is also the white of ivory, “the beautiful luxury of civilized man which is the root of all evil in the darkness” (O’Prey 105), and all of the horrors - committed by white man - that go with it. Ivory often goes together with a kind of deceitful sunshine; Marlow has already asserted that “the sunlight can be made to lie too” (*HD* 95). The image of ivory sneaks into the first scene in the form of a game of dominoes, the pieces of which are traditionally made from ebony and ivory, both colonial products. William Rogers (44) claims that “the dominoes . . . suggest that the exploitative colonialism in Africa serves at least in part to provide the diversions of a civilization whose surface appearance is of order and culture, but whose deeper reality may well be horrific.” Atkins (3) adds that this seemingly trivial game can at once be seen as a direct product of colonisation, and one of the reasons behind it – namely, the European need for luxuries. It is supposedly because Marlow is aware of the darkness connected to the dominoes that he refuses to play the game and starts to tell his story instead, in an attempt to enlighten his fellow passengers (Atkins 3). Moreover, Brady (25) claims that over the course of the story, both Marlow and the reader “will learn that the darkness and the ivory are not two distinct and different images or
symbols but merely two components of the same entity.” The game of dominoes is the literal embodiment of such an entity.

Conrad seems to deliver a particularly harsh criticism on the so-called “Christian bringers of light” as described by Brantlinger, in the following excerpt:

I’ve seen the devil of violence, and the devil of greed, and the devil of hot desire; but, by all the stars! these were strong, lusty, red-eyed devils, that swayed and drove men – men, I tell you. But as I stood on this 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 pitiless folly. (HD 18)

The “blinding sunshine” probably refers to the splendid façade of the “light of Christianity and Civilisation” used to obscure the “rapacious and pitiless folly” of colonisation. This “flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil” can be none other than King Leopold II, ironically called a devil, a creature of darkness, while he presumed to be a saint, a bringer of light. However, the colonisers are not always called devils; Conrad also uses the traditional Victorian image of colonisers as pilgrims or saints:

‘I went to work the next day, turning, so to speak, my back on that station. In that way only it seemed to me I could keep my hold on the redeeming facts of life. Still, one must look about sometimes; and then I saw this station, these men strolling aimlessly about in the sunshine of the yard. I asked myself sometimes what it all meant. They wandered here and there with their absurd long staves in their hands, like a lot of faithless pilgrims bewitched inside a rotten fence. 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. *(HD 27–8)*

These colonisers are strolling around in the sunshine, which can again be seen as a symbol of imperialism. More importantly, they are described “like a lot of faithless pilgrims”, because they appear to be praying to the word “ivory” instead of God, making a mockery of Christianity. Whereas they should be “spreading the light of Christianity”, they turn the pursuit of ivory into their very own kind of twisted religion, or, as Brantlinger suggests, “all ideals transform into idols” and “Conrad universalizes ‘darkness’ in part by universalizing fetishism” *(Rule of Darkness 262)*. The sunshine image returns later, when Marlow says that “there was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine”, again suggesting the discrepancy between the philanthropic pretences of imperialism and its dark reality. A bit further, Marlow literally puts this sentiment into words:

> It was as unreal as everything else – as the philanthropic pretence of the whole concern, as their talk, as their talk, as their government, as their show of work. The only real feeling was a desire to get appointed to a trading-post where ivory was to be had, so that they could earn percentages. *(Conrad, HD 29)*
Kurtz, then, can be seen as the epitome of corruption as a direct result of the relentless pursuit of ivory:

The wilderness had patted him on the head, and, behold, it was like a ball – an ivory ball; it had caressed him, and – lo! – he had withered; it had taken him, loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation. He was its spoiled and papered favourite. Ivory? I should think so. Heaps of it, stacks of it. The old mud shanty was bursting with it. You would think there was not a single tusk left either above or below ground in the whole country. “Mostly fossil,” the manager had remarked disparagingly. It was no more fossil than I am; but they call it fossil when it is dug up. It appears these niggers do bury the tusks sometimes – but evidently they couldn’t bury this parcel deep enough to save the gifted Mr Kurtz from his fate. (HD 62)

In the end, he even comes to resemble his precious ivory; “It was as though an animated image of death carved out of old ivory had been shaking its hand with menaces at a motionless crowd of men made out of dark and glittering bronze” (HD 78).

4.8. Tombs

When Marlow finds himself in an unnamed town - that we can safely assume to be Brussels - to sign the contract, he remarks that it is “a city that always makes [him] think of a whited sepulchre. Prejudice no doubt” (HOD 9). Interestingly, when analysed, this seemingly casual or unimportant remark can be seen to foreshadow the main narrative, and even to summarize Conrad’s critique on imperialism. Namely, this “whited
sepulchre” has several negative connotations. Firstly, a sepulchre is a burial place or a tomb. Thus, by describing the city as a whited sepulchre, Marlow sees it as a place of death that is disguised as a place of beauty, a whitewashed place of darkness. According to Laura Chrisman, “[t]he ‘deathliness’ that pervades the ‘sepulchral city’ is product equally of the living dead – the inhabitants of Brussels – and of the dead Africans killed by the Company in the Congo” (36). This seems to correspond with Marion Brady’s assertion that the image of whited sepulchre is a symbolical for the two analogous themes of the story, “informed by ‘deception’ at the public level and ‘self-deception’ at the personal level” (24). Secondly, this “whited sepulchre” can be directly linked to an excerpt from the Bible, in which Jesus says, “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men’s bones, and of all uncleanness” (Matthew 23:28). This transforms Brussels as a “whited sepulchre” into a metaphor for the hypocritical nature of imperialism; King Leopold II and other colonisers are revealed as people who hide their corrupt intentions behind a mask of virtuousness. Moreover, Leopold II commissioned a number of prestigious projects and buildings to serve as an example of Belgium’s imperial power, so these new buildings are quite literally “full of dead men’s bones”. All of Leopold’s profit came out of places where “the merry dance of death and trade goes on in a still and earthy atmosphere as of an overheated catacomb” (HD 16), an image which is directly linked to the “whited sepulchre” of Brussels. When Marlow finally realizes the truth about Kurtz and imperialism in general, he says the following:

I had turned to the wilderness really, not to Mr. Kurtz, who, I was ready to admit, was as good as buried in a vast grave full of unspeakable secrets. I
felt an intolerable weight oppressing my breast, the smell of the damp
earth, the unseen presence of victorious corruption, the darkness of an
impenetrable night... *(HD 81)*

Obviously, the vast grave full of unspeakable secrets stands for the “dark” side – or
rather, the reality - of imperialism. Kurtz has succumbed to it, and Marlow feels
threatened as well; he feels buried alive by the knowledge of the horrible truth. Marlow
seems unable to shake this image, even more so when he returns to Brussels:

> I found myself back in the sepulchral city resenting the sight of people
> hurrying through the streets... they trespassed upon my thoughts. They
> were intruders whose knowledge of life was to me an irritating pretence,
> because I felt so sure they could not possibly know the things I knew. *(HD
> 93)*

Finally, during his visit to Kurtz’s Intended, Marlow is haunted by echoes of the whited
sepulchre and its deceitful light:

> The dusk was falling. I had to wait in a lofty drawing-room with three long
> windows from floor to ceiling that were like three luminous and bedraped
> columns. The bent gilt legs and backs of the furniture shone in indistinct
curves. The tall marble fireplace had a cold and monumental whiteness. A
> grand piano stood massively in a corner, with dark gleams on the flat
> surfaces like a sombre and polished sarcophagus. *(HD 97)*
5. Conclusion

As the Criticism chapter has shown, the critics have come to widely divergent conclusions, with critics who believe that Conrad delivered a critique of imperialism radically opposed to critics who believe that Conrad actually perpetuated imperialism, whether this was his intention or not. One problem in trying to find an answer is that Conrad apparently changed his views on imperialism, as he grew older. Moreover, the fact that Heart of Darkness seems to imply that there is a difference between Roman, British and Belgian imperialism, has complicated the matter, especially because Conrad’s use of irony makes it very difficult to assert whether or not he thought there was any real difference. Similarly, it is fairly difficult to determine with absolute certainty the degree of Conrad’s personal commitment to the views represented by Marlow, his semi-autobiographical double. Then there is the theme of “going native”, which can be considered somewhat of an academic minefield. One the one hand, it can imply that the coloniser is negatively influenced by the “Dark Continent” and its “primitive” inhabitants, ultimately resulting in moral decay, madness, or death. As a few third world writers have pointed out, this would imply inexcusable racism on Conrad’s part. On the other hand, this “going native” could simply mean that man reverts back to his “primitive nature” – i. e. the Freudian principle of pleasure seeking - when civilisation “lets him out of its sight” long enough. This does not necessarily mean that natives are evil - merely that all men are similar at their core. Other arguments for Conrad’s supposed racism are, for example, his flippant depiction of natives, or even the fact that the main focus of the story is on the white characters. However, it seems that
for every scholar arguing that Conrad was racist and therefore imperialist, there has been a scholar arguing that Conrad was not. A main argument here is the temporality of the tale, although many claim that seeing Conrad as “a victim of a time” is not a valid excuse. Furthermore, Conrad has been accused of sexism as well. Some feminists, who have investigated the connection between patriarchy and empire, have noted an apparent link between the female body and the conquered land in *Heart of Darkness*. A final topic summarised here is what seems to be Conrad’s desire to expose the hypocrisy and unnaturalness of the colonial adventure, mainly by drawing “uncomfortable” parallels and exposing “pretty fictions”.

This last point happens to tie in almost seamlessly with the conclusions that can be drawn from the *Symbolism* chapter. Many of these images, such as Kurtz’s sketch, the white collars and the whited sepulchre, and recurring images of “blinding light”, seem to be directly employed in the revealing of this hypocrisy. What is more, it can be argued that Conrad consciously and actively employed the Victorian colonial rhetoric in order to make it undermine itself. Marlow ironically applies images of light to horrible situations, showing the mechanics of colonial propaganda at work, and although the darkness is evil and situated in Africa, it appears to be created by the colonisers themselves, for example by the “knitters of black wool”. Therefore, I propose that it must at least have been Conrad’s *intention* to criticise imperialism through his use of symbolism, whatever some critics may think about his about its execution.


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