

Lecture 13:
Heart of Darkness: Themes

Colonialism and Imperialism

Perhaps the central theme in *Heart of Darkness* is colonialism and imperialism. ❖

When Marlow sets off on his adventure in Brussels, the colonization of the Congo is presented as a humanitarian project whose purpose is to help the Africans live in the modern world. This assertion is presented on the Nellie at the opening of the novel and by Marlow's aunt and seems to be the culture of the company in Brussels. ❖

From Belgium to the Congo, and from the Outer Station to the Central Station and finally up the river to the Inner Station, Marlow encounters scenes of torture, cruelty, forced labor, large-scale exploitation and mass-murder. ❖

The novel exposes the hypocrisy of colonialism and imperialism. The men who work for the Company describe what they do as "trade," and their treatment of native Africans is part of a benevolent project of "civilization." ❖

"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." ❖

Heart of Darkness (Part 1, Section 4)

Kurtz Vs. The Company

But the novel also sets against the hypocrisy of the company and the Europeans in general, the model of Kurtz, and Marlow (and Joseph Conrad through him) prefer Kurtz's honesty to the Company's and the Europeans' hypocrisy. ❖

Kurtz, at least, is open about the fact that he does not trade but rather takes ivory by force, and he describes his own treatment of the natives with the words "suppression" and "extermination": he does not hide the fact that he rules through violence and intimidation. ❖

Unlike the other Europeans, Kurtz does not claim to be in Africa to "help" the Africans. He is frank about the fact that he is there to steal and plunder ivory. ❖

Kurtz' perverse honesty leads to the success of the Company because he brings them a lot of ivory, but his honesty also brings his downfall, because his honesty exposes the evil practices behind European activity in Africa. ❖

The Africans

However, for Marlow as much as for Kurtz or for the Company, Africans in the novel are mostly objects: Marlow refers to his helmsman as a piece of machinery, and Kurtz's African mistress is at best a piece of statuary. ❖

African are also often described in zoological terms (ants, animals, insects, etc) and it ❖
can be argued that *Heart of Darkness* participates in the dehumanization of the
Africans. Notice that no African is allowed to speak in the novel, and they are often
portrayed as sub-humans and primitives. They just make primitive sounds, but they
never talk.

“It was unearthly, and the men were—No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, ❖
that was the worst of it—the suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come
slowly 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?”

Heart of Darkness