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**THE TYPE OF COLONIALISM DESCRIBED IN JOSEPH CONRAD'S  
*HEART OF DARKNESS*  
BA thesis**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on the aspects of colonization in the novel *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad. Colonialism still remains a large issue today due to its ramifications on colonized lands and *Heart of Darkness* is to this day seen as a vivid account of colonization from over a century ago.

The introduction shows what will be analysed and what literature is used to support said analysis. The first chapter is a literature overview, showcasing overall the literature that has been written on the *Heart of Darkness* beforehand along with literature that specifically focuses on the colonization aspect of it. The second core chapter starts off with an analysis of the location and colony that inspired the novel to find out the likeliest colony where the story of *Heart of Darkness* takes place and what kind of colony it is. After this, it moves onto discussing Marlow's experiences of the colony and how Conrad portrayed it for his audience.

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## INTRODUCTION

The author of *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad, was a Polish-British writer during the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His novels mainly focused on novels with attention towards the human psyche in an overall uncaring world. Conrad is considered an early Modernist and his works had enough influence to still be relevant today.

The *Heart of Darkness* is a novel written in the flashback style where the character Marlow recounts what he witnessed on his expedition to Africa, directly inspired by Joseph Conrad's own experiences in the Belgian Congo.

There has been a lot of discussion about the novel, but not very much about what type of colony Conrad portrays in the novel that in large part enabled him to inspire horror and disgust in his audience and possibly even rouse them into action.

The main objective of this thesis is to analyse the novel *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad and see how Conrad portrays the colony in it. Since colonialism still remains a major issue and topic of discussion due to the effects that formerly colonized nations still feel due to it, it is important to take a look at one of the earliest pieces of literature that looked past the romanticized aspects of colonialism and instead showcased the true effects of colonialism to the public. It helped the general public understand what was really going on in the colonies they supported from home, even though the colony usually brought them great wealth.

Firstly, the thesis attempts to pinpoint where exactly the story takes place, because the novel itself is ambiguous about locations, only directly referencing Africa. There were many different colonies on the continent, and all of them had different administrations,

goals and their geography at least partly defined the capabilities and aims of a colony. The only obvious clues in the story itself are the long winding river surrounded by a massive jungle, along with a few tiny colonial settlements sparsely dotting the landscape. Finding out which colony inspired *Heart of Darkness* might help with understanding how Conrad portrayed the colony.

Secondly, the thesis analyses the colonization aspects of the novel in order to find out exactly what Marlow experiences in *Heart of Darkness* and how it is described. To support the analysis, the thesis uses literature that has discussed the colonialism of the novel before, such as comparing it to historical accounts and other colonies. It also uses literature that attempts to define what a colony is, and categorize it for the first chapter of the analysis. Since the book almost entirely takes place in one single colony, it shows quite a bit of the colony itself from the viewpoint of the main character and the events that occur during his time there. The thesis will look at the events that occur in the novel, the people and to an extent their attitudes, how the colony seems to operate and its infrastructure. It pays attention to how the natives are treated by the colonists as well and attempts to pinpoint what the colonists' goals are in the colony. All this together will help distinguish what type of colony the one in the novel relates to the most.

## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Due to the time of *Heart of Darkness*' first publication, the subject matter and the manner in which it describes the rampant colonialism, exploitation and racism in Africa, the book has been reviewed many times and it has been used as a springboard for numerous discussions about colonialism along with its short- and longterm consequences for the past century. However, the articles that discuss these are among many others that instead take a closer look at the nature of humanity, the political views of the author, the long-term consequences of the actions taken in Colonial Africa and whether or not Conrad himself was an irredeemable racist, even for his own time.

### 1.1 General Overview

This book, along with the subject of colonialism, are so popular and thoroughly investigated that there are entire separate books dedicated to taking a single line from *Heart of Darkness* and unwrapping and analysing it. One such book is Sven Lindqvist's *The Dead do Not Die "Exterminate All the Brutes" and Terra Nullius*, where the author prefaces his work by saying that he seeks to understand why Kurtz ended his report on civilizing Africa with the words "Exterminate all the brutes!" (Conrad 2018: 50) (Lindqvist et al 2014: 9). Similarly, there have been many journals, articles and essays published on both of these topics, and *Heart of Darkness* is often used as a lens to analyze and criticize colonialism and imperialism as a whole.

While there is a veritable treasure trove of books and journals analysing *Heart of Darkness*, literary critics tend to throw out the aspect of the book that criticizes colonialism, its effects on the people at the receiving end of the process and completely focus on what appears to be a commentary on the nature of the human condition. Taking

out this integral part which is essentially a first-hand account of the Belgian Congo gives them leave to perform wildly different interpretations of the book (Raskin 1967: 113). This does not seem right, since *Heart of Darkness* was definitely meant as a criticism of the inefficiency, selfishness and criminality that took place in colonial Africa, since the author himself said as much to his publisher (Raskin 1967: 113). There is a divide between people who do focus on the colonialism aspect of the book, some saying that the colonialism Conrad described is different and not comparable to the neo-colonialism after 1945, while others claim that West Africa had more or less stayed the same after Conrad's time (Raskin 1967: 115). It is important to keep in mind the colonialism aspect of the story, since it and the characters in it can be related to historical events, and Conrad thought that the novelist can also double as a historian who preserves a piece of history in their story (Raskin 1967: 115).

*Heart of Darkness* has also been used to argue that even though it is a critique of imperialism, it and its author are both full of racism. Chinua Achebe states that this can be seen through the African natives the book portrays. They are considered as men inhabiting a landscape completely unknowable to the European, perpetually savage, frenzied and cannibalistic, their speech consisting of nothing but incomprehensible grunting and occasional broken English (Achebe 1977: 2-5). In this way, Africa and its people are also just backdrops for a European story of horror and moral degeneration (Achebe 1977: 6). At the opposite end, it can be argued that since the novel is based on the experiences of a European at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the way Africans are described can be seen as simply realistic from such a viewpoint (Watts 1983: 199). While many of the Africans on Marlow's steamboat seem to be cannibals, Marlow is also surprised at their restraint, being at the same time disgusted at Kurtz' lack thereof, since it is implied Kurtz took part in cannibalistic rituals (Watts 1983: 201). Kurtz is a character in the novel who controls a

colony outpost and whom Marlow eventually meets. In the same vein, the novel also seems to imply that European civilization may just be “a hypocritical sophistication of savagery” (Watts 1983: 203), and when Marlow returns from the Congo, he sees the people back home as ignorant and complacent (Watts 1983: 203).

It is possible to see the novel as a piece of political theory. As Conrad himself was a sceptic, he would have had a problem with communicating his own experiences to the reader in any manner, since sceptics generally believe that one's own experiences are at best subjective. Marlow seems to have been created for this purpose, to remove the author himself from the foreground and to serve as a narrator in the story, and he occasionally even questions his own recounting of all the events, asking if any of what he is saying makes sense (Spegele 1972: 322-323). Through this, looking at the political aspect of *Heart of Darkness*, one can learn from Marlow that politics rise to prominence when a person is faced with the conflict between what they believe should exist, and the reality of the situation. As a consequence of a society based on political thinking, a person removes themselves from being able to realize themselves since such a life requires restraint and rules. Kurtz used his immense charisma to convince the tribal natives to abandon their own ideals and follow his word instead, which shows that a society that could in theory be true to itself is undermined by the possibility of charismatic people convincing others to change themselves on what is almost a whim. Due to this, constant bargaining and compromising is necessary with one's own ideals (Spegele 1972: 324). Kurtz does not even have to say anything truly meaningful. Simply the right tone and amount of belief in his own words is enough to sway others to his view, not matter how absurd they may be in retrospect (Spegele 1972: 330-331). Due to this, Marlow has to discover the base of a political existence, since only by seeing a man act on pure instinct can he realize how ideals on their own cannot hold up a life based on politics. (Spegele 1972: 327). As Marlow journeys into



Africa, he sees how, paradoxically, the humanitarian ideals of European colonizers cause them to exercise nothing but brutality and wanton violence against the natives inhabiting the land (Spegele 1972: 327). What truly helps him understand the basis of his own society and its pretences is seeing Africa itself as a primordial land inhabited by people in the earliest stages of civilization. In the civilized world, instinct and passion are kept in check by deluding oneself into believing that they can shape institutions as they see fit, while in the uncivilized world, instinct and passion are restrained by dedicating oneself to a single pursuit, which is work in Marlow's case (Spegele 1972: 327-328).

## 1.2 The Colonialism Aspect

Since Conrad never explicitly stated where exactly Marlow went in his novel, a difficulty arises in identifying exactly where, what kind of colonialism and possible exploitation occurred and the reasoning behind them due to the term “imperialism“. There are authors who lump in colonialism with imperialism, using it as a catch-all term, assuming that simply saying “imperialism” is sufficient enough to describe what happens in the story. If someone were to read such an article without reading *Heart of Darkness* as well, it would result in a huge misinterpretation since imperialism is only a general term, leaving out the intricacies of each colonial system, the colonizers and the aims of the colony (Hawkins 1979: 287-288). *Heart of Darkness* uses the efficiency and “idea” concepts to judge imperialism. The colony the story takes place in is described from the viewpoint of a resident who lived in a country that had entirely different colonial territories with different edicts governing them than the territory described in the novel, but Conrad wrote it in such a manner as to appeal to the general audience and bring the horrors of the Belgian Congo to light for the whole world, not just to the British audience (Hawkins 1979: 288), which may have helped cause the first outcries against colonial policies by the

public. Efficiency was used as a criterion because during Conrad's time, the talk of efficiency was extremely widespread. Efficiency was considered by social darwinism, a popular concept at the time, as one of the key components of a nation's continued survival, and it used this to justify imperialism as a whole. Even Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* states that efficiency is an essential key to survival (Hawkins 1979: 288). The criterion of "idea" is harder to define since it is never as explicitly stated as efficiency is by Marlow. From Marlow's point of view, he was at first seeking out Kurtz due to his apparent moral ideas concerning the colony and its native inhabitants. From the accounts gathered from other characters and in his written report of the area, Kurtz seems to endorse the idea of a kind of a "civilizing mission" for the colony, which was a popular idea used by people to endorse further colonization. Conrad seems to have used the concepts of "idea" and imperialism since they were both widespread values at the time and could be used to show the public what the Congo was really like (Hawkins 1979: 288-289). However, at the same time, Conrad criticizes the uses of both efficiency and the "civil mission", seeing both as thinly veiled excuses for rapid power grabs, using Germany conquering Poland as an example (Hawkins 1979: 295).

It seems that for some time, the definition of colonialism was at best ambiguous, even though it was a very widely discussed topic, and there are often strong emotions attached to the very idea. Colonialism has, along with imperialism, been used to either praise world powers, citing praiseworthy reasons, or condemned in a similar manner (Horvath 1972: 45). There seem to be four main reasons why the continued ambiguity has never been properly clarified. The first being that without having a perspective of multiple cultures, one tends to generalise colonialism as a trait of a particular civilization, often Western. This does not exactly work since all nations from all civilizations have sought to extend their own power throughout the surrounding world (Horvath 1972: 46). The second

reason is that many authors discussing this topic lack perspective on the theoretical aspect. A large chunk of discussion on colonialism comes from humanities, where some seem to be using an idiographic approach to this topic (ibid.). The third is that people define colonialism too rigidly, leaving no room for any future information being discovered (ibid.). The last and fourth being an extremely conservative attitude towards meanings. Colonialism was often defined following the path of a single empire, excluding all others (ibid.). A newer term, “neocolonialism”, arose in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, which described newly independent nations that were in reality only partially so, and still relied on the economic prowess of their former colonizers. This shows how the constant appearance of new terms only muddled the meaning of “colonialism” itself (Horvath 1972: 46). It seems that at least it is generally agreed upon that colonialism describes control over a territory by an outside group. The main difference between imperialism and colonialism seems to be the difference in the number of settlers. In the case of colonialism, permanent settlers often relocate to the newly controlled territory, while in the case of imperialism, there generally is no large movement to newly claimed territories (Horvath 1972: 46-47). By the criteria of connecting colonialism and imperialism with the general relationships the colonizers had with the colonized, there appear to be six different types of colonies. The number rises to twelve if the distinction of formal and informal relationships is introduced, and if variables from the political stage are used, this number would go up to twenty-four (Horvath 1972: 47-49).

More recent and contemporary journal articles indicate that there seem to be more concrete terms for colonialism. Steinmetz in his article shows that the term colonization originates from the Latin word *colere*, which means “to inhabit, till, cultivate.” This means the term colonization has always had a connection to the Roman Empire. Due to this original meaning, colonization has sometimes been used to point to an emigration to a

different region, without further clarification. This falls short of the modern understanding of colonialism (Steinmetz 2014: 79). Nowadays, the definition of colonialism encompasses the conquest of a foreign land and the creation of a local government meant to oversee the territory and its native inhabitants. This means that imperialism is a wider term, since it can also mean remote control over a territory which does not always necessitate direct conquest (ibid.). One other thing that falls under colonialism is the separation of the natives from the colonizers, usually by painting them as inferior through legal means, or finding biological differences to do so. This allows the controlling empire to exert more control over the area (Steinmetz 2014: 80). This, however, applies only partly sometimes, since in some colonies there was more emphasis on cultural integration and religious conversion while still keeping the native population from gaining the same legal rights as their rulers (ibid.).

From Steinmetz it comes out that today it is customary to differentiate between various types of colonialism and they are more distinctly defined. One such is settler colonialism, in which large amounts of foreigners migrate to the newly conquered or colonized territory and replace the native population over time. In such cases, the natives are usually treated more unfairly than average, stripping them of rights and removing them from the scene as much as possible, either through assimilation, extermination or putting them in reservations. In a settler colony, native land is often taken over with the pretext of putting that land to better use than the natives could have. Politically speaking, there is a difference between the colonizers, which is usually the local government in charge and the settlers themselves. Most of the time, even if the settlers outnumber the colonizers, the colonizers are still more powerful when it comes to policy, capable of banning settlement in some regions altogether (Steinmetz 2014: 84). Life in settler colonies was usually as similar to the settlers' original home as possible and the settlers were attracted to the colony by the promise of private land and the possibility of getting rich through free trade

(Acemoglu et al 2001: 1374). In some cases, the settlers themselves rebelled against the sovereign country, often because they lacked the same rights that residents in their home country had. One such example is Australia, where ex-convicts lacked any legal rights and were at the mercy of landowners' whims (Acemoglu et al 2001: 1374).

A type of colonialism that is an extension of settler colonialism is internal colonialism. Such a colony is comprised of the native population who is forced to live under foreign rule, often in reservations designated by the ruling government. There is an amount of ambiguity to this, since after a number of generations, the settlers can eventually become indigenous themselves (Steinmetz 2014: 84).

Exploitative, or resource colonialism, has very few settlers, and is usually focused entirely on acquiring economic power through the colony. Most of the colonialists are usually traders extracting and selling whatever resource is available in their region, often exploiting native people to achieve this. The most extreme case of such a colony was the Belgian Congo under Leopold II (Acemoglu et al 2001: 1375). In exploitation-focused colonies, the colonizing power has almost absolute power over the territory and it limits the liberties of natives as much as possible. Even after the dissolution of such a colony, many of the old regulations and institutions created for exploitation remain in place in the newly independent nation, most commonly forced labor (Acemoglu et al 2001: 1375-1376). One reason colonies purely based on exploitation existed was that European empires could no longer gain high profits by investing inside their own saturated economies, so they used their colonies for resources, as new markets and as investment targets (Hawkins 1979: 289).

In the next chapter, which is the analysis, this information will be used to analyse the colonialism aspect of *Heart of Darkness* to find out what type of colonialism is

described in the novel. Historical records will be looked at to determine if the colony in *Heart of Darkness* is based on of a real colony that existed along with journal articles that focus on Joseph Conrad's travel diaries and experiences. Journal articles that analyse what he likely took inspiration from to write the novel will also be used with some supplementary journal articles that bring out certain statistics, events or facts relevant to the analysis.

## **2. ANALYSIS OF COLONIALISM IN *HEART OF DARKNESS***

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* revolves around colonialism. The narrator relates the story to the readers as Marlow tells it to him and their other friends aboard a boat. Marlow, who experienced it, seems resigned to simply tell the story to a few friends, while the narrator is implied to have been roused to action by the horrors of the colony that Marlow describes (Katkin, Katkin 2004: 586). Summarized, the story follows a character called Marlow who eagerly signs up for a steamboat expedition into the African jungle via a large river. After hearing quite a few exceptional things about a man named Kurtz, he takes it upon himself to eventually meet him. However, the farther down the river he goes, the more he understands just how much the untamed wilds of the African jungle differ from his own civilization. Marlow sees his own fellow men commit acts of cruelty against the natives while scrambling for resources and power. Near the end, when he finally meets Kurtz who was praised by others, Marlow only sees a charismatic lunatic who has given in to his instinct and desires while only barely clinging to life. Marlow leaves the jungle with Kurtz' possessions and returns to his own civilized world, where he discovers he himself has changed as well and now despises the sheep-like behaviour and complacency of the people around him.

### **2.1 Determining the Type of Colony**

This chapter is an analysis of what type of colonialism is exactly described in the novel. As there are multiple types of colonialism and colonies ruled by different countries had their own policies, such as differences in policies of treatment and status of natives (Steinmetz 2014: 80), finding out what colony Conrad took inspiration from would be helpful in analysing how he describes that colony in *Heart of Darkness*.

A problem that immediately arises with attempting to figure out what kind of colonialism took place in *Heart of Darkness* is that the location where the story takes place is never explicitly stated. The closest it comes is somewhere in Africa, away from the coastline. Raskin brings out that it is known from Conrad's travel diaries that he spent some time in the Belgian Congo in 1890. However, according to his diary he never ventured far into the jungle and the area he was staying at was organized, it had companies and factories (Raskin 1967: 117), unlike what Marlow finds in the novel, where the closest he finds to this is wooden structures in an unnamed company's station (Conrad 2018: 16).

The novel does have a few clues tied to history that show where Marlow went in Africa. When Marlow reaches the first Company station he finds a landfill with decaying machinery and rusted rails in it. People nearby are blasting a cliff and from this Marlow guesses that they are building a railway (Conrad 2018: 16). In the Belgian Congo, where Conrad stayed, there was railway construction going on which was meant to provide easier access and resource transport through the Congo landscape between two stations. It was the only major improvement attempted for the Belgian Congo (Hawkins 1979: 290). What is important here is that due to previously drawn colonial borders, the railway had to be directed through a mountain, hence the cliff blasting in the novel (Hawkins 1979: 291). Marlow had to board a smaller steamer to go further downriver to his destination, which correlates to Leopold II, the direct owner of the Belgian Congo, not having enough finances to dredge the river and making it impossible for larger ships to go further in (Hawkins 1979: 291). Marlow comments on how the colonists are paid in brass wire pieces for their work with which they were advised to use in trade with natives (Conrad 2018: 41). The Congo at some point had up to seven different currencies, one of which was brass wire pieces, mainly used at the upper river in the Congo (Hawkins 1979: 291).

A smaller clue is the militia Marlow sees herding natives around in chains (Conrad



2018: 17). When Conrad was in the Congo, there was no forced labor yet, however the railway company had been given permission to form a militia in 1892 (Hawkins 1979: 292). Another small clue is when Marlow notices in the Central Station that the colonists there constantly slander each other (Conrad 2018: 25), which is similar to what Conrad noted in his diary about how the largest part of social life in the colony was people talking ill of each other (Raskin 1967: 117). In the Central Station Marlow also meets the Eldorado Exploration Expedition, who he assumes are there to simply uncover more resources in the jungle (Conrad 2018: 30-31). This may be a reference to the Katanga Expedition of 1890-1893, who were sent to mark borders for the southeast Congo (Hawkins 1979: 292). A manager who Marlow meets in the novel comments on a non-Belgian trader in the region, saying that “we will not be free from unfair competition until one of these fellows is hanged” (Conrad 2018: 33), which might be another reference to Charles Stokes, an Englishman hanged in the Belgian Congo for selling firearms. (Hawkins 1979: 293).

This information put together shows that while Conrad never went deeper into the jungle and only spent a year there, he did have a large amount of knowledge on the events and policies of the Belgian Congo. In the novel he shows multiple landmarks such as the railway and references various things the colonists had to deal with, such as the strange brass wire currency.

The colony in the novel itself shows quite a bit of how the colony works and what the people in it are doing. For example the colony exploits the natives living in the Congo a fair bit. All the manual labor in the railway construction is being performed by them, some of them being held in chains (Conrad 2018: 17). Marlow is not exempt from this either, using mostly natives as crew for the steamer he was assigned, sometimes making them move the steamer around by hand through some of the more treacherous areas of the river (Conrad 2018: 35). Another character named Kurtz, who is in charge of the Inner Station,

uses the native tribes around the area for their knowledge of the landscape and also uses them for labor to seek as much ivory as they could which he would send back upriver to the Company whenever possible (Conrad 2018: 55). The natives who were too weak or sick to work any longer were left on their own to starve (Conrad 2018: 18).

Marlow meets very few colonists around the colony, while he sees a lot of natives around. The first settlement he comes across is the Company station, where he only meets two actual colonists – the chief accountant and a sick agent scheduled to move back home. For the time he is there, he sees only equipment and other supplies being moved into the colony, while only ivory comes out (Conrad 2018: 19-20). The Central Station is similar, inhabited only by a few administrators and managers along with a couple of natives (Conrad 2018: 21-22). This reflects state the historical Belgian Congo was in, where in a 1943 population census around 35,000 white people were counted out of a total of ten million. The majority of the white people were administrators, missionaries and highly skilled workers. Most of them saw the Congo as a place to earn money, and had no long term plans of settling down anywhere in the area (Harris 1946: 411).

The only colonists Marlow meets are very small number of administrators and highly skilled workers. The natives are at best only seen as a free and cheap labor force who are exploited until they are physically incapable of working. The few settlements that exist in the colony are small and there are almost no resources or manpower moving into the colony while a constant stream of ivory comes out. With all this, it can be assumed that the colony in *Heart of Darkness* is an extraction, or exploitation colony, where the main purpose is to gain as much wealth as possible for the sovereign nation.

## 2.2 The Colony Shown Through Marlow's Eyes

At the beginning of the story, Marlow sets up a comparison between British colonial policy and the Belgian Congo by comparing the British and the Romans. He asserts that the Romans invaded Britain purely for the conquest of it, exercising pure brutality in taking land and extracting resources for their own usage. Marlow calls their actions pure robbery, mass murder and men just blindly going into it (Conrad 2018: 8). He also says that taking land from others because they have a different complexion is not a very pretty thing if one thinks about it too much (Conrad 2018: 8-9). The civilized Roman on the British Isles had to deal with a foreign environment, local savages, rampant disease and death. This all repeats in a very similar manner, except now it takes place in the Congo, just with different civilizers and savages (Raskin 1967: 118). “What saves us is efficiency – the devotion to efficiency” (Conrad 2018: 8), is what Marlow claims is one of the main differences between the two colonization efforts. Hawkins tells us that in this particular context, efficiency was a highly held value in social darwinism during Conrad's time and contrasting the efficiency of British imperial rule with the inefficiencies of Belgium's was a way to appeal to the values of his audience. However, it seems that Conrad, and by extension, Marlow gave up on efficiency and began to measure the colonization from a more moral standpoint instead (Hawkins 1979: 295).

The first things Marlow sees when he arrives at the colony is discarded machinery everywhere, from boilers and railway trucks to stacks of rusty rails. Nearby there is a group of workers blasting a cliff for no apparent reason (Conrad 2018: 16). This sight so early on is exactly what goes against one of the main ideas – efficiency, and it is foreshadowing the general state of the entire colony Marlow is heading into. This also already shows how the Belgian Congo was owned by a single man, unlike other colonies,

and as such was subject to extreme maladministration because one man could not have hoped to provide enough financial aid to build up a decent infrastructure for the colony (Hawkins 1979: 289). The first people in the colony he meets are not the colonizers, but the natives, who are also chained up and led somewhere in a straight line (Conrad 2018: 16-17).

In the Company station itself he meets just two colonists, the chief accountant and an ill person transported here from deeper in the colony. Marlow sees the accountant as a miracle in such an environment, since he is the only one there who seems to essentially hold himself with any amount of elegance (Conrad 2018: 19). The buildings in the station are shoddy at best, wooden with gaps large enough for the sun to shine in. Marlow has to wait for over a week to get deeper into the colony, and while doing so notices that not much of anything goes deeper into the colony, but a steady stream of ivory is coming out (ibid.). At one point, the accountant mentions he does not like to write letters to others in the colony, since he does not know who might get a hold of his letters, showing that there seems to be some amount of distrust between the colonists themselves (Conrad 2018: 20). Once he does get on the road deeper into the colony, there is not much of a road there – just an occasional stomped in path through the grass (ibid.). The condition of the Central Station is more or less the same as the other one, with a rickety fence and a hole where the gate should be (Conrad 2018: 21). As the next display of complete inefficiency, Marlow finds out the steamer he was supposed to take charge of had sunk (Conrad 2018: 22). This is a sign that, according to Hawkins, the colony's owner, Leopold, did not have the funds to dredge the river. This, in the background, adds even more to the general inefficiencies of the colony, because it meant that larger ships could not enter the river, so everything being transported had to be moved between ships. Materials had to be handled more than should have been necessary and it would also leave them open to the elements, resulting in

equipment breaking and spoiled resources (Hawkins 1979: 291). By the efficiency metric, this would have most likely been appalling for Conrad's contemporary readers, since it meant that the river that was the colony's main method of transportation had not been made safe for boats to traverse. This issue is shown again later when Marlow has to use the natives to move the boat through more treacherous areas of the river by hand (Conrad 2018: 35). What makes this even worse is that Marlow has to wait for almost a month for materials to come so the steamer could be repaired (Conrad 2018: 30).

While waiting, Marlow also discovers why the chief accountant from earlier did not show much trust in the other colonists – the people in the Central Station constantly slander each other and there is almost an air of intrigue in the air, however no one in reality follows through with whatever plan they might have against others. The only real desire seems to be the opportunity to get assigned to a trading post with ivory, but at the same time nobody does anything to perform the work they were assigned at the Central Station (Conrad 2018: 25). This, mentioned earlier, now also shows inefficiency purely from the human side. Conrad experienced it in the Congo himself, as he wrote in his travel diary that the main characteristic of social life was people speaking ill of each other (Raskin 1967: 117). There seems to be a significant breakdown of communications as well, because the manager of the Central Station tells Marlow that there have been constant delays and he does not even know who is still alive in the stations deeper in the colony (Conrad 2018: 23). Marlow also sees an influx of people, a group he calls an invasion and an infliction. This is the Eldorado Exploration Expedition, who apparently make an attempt at secrecy, however Marlow manages to pick out a few words from conversations insinuating that their entire reason for being in the Congo is to ransack the land for any resources they can find. Marlow sees them as simple burglars who have no more moral reason than to simply take whatever they can find (Conrad 2018: 30-31). This, as mentioned earlier, is most

likely referring to the Katanga Expedition and as Conrad describes them, he probably appealed to the British sense of jealousy and virtue at the same time with this (Hawkins 1979: 292). At one point in the Central Station, Marlow overhears a few of the other colonists speaking about Kurtz, who is apparently too efficient at bringing out ivory, since they find his success annoying (Conrad 2018: 32-33), showing even more of that general dislike the colonists seem to have against each other.

Once Marlow gets the steamer working and begins moving further into the colony, his crew's food situation becomes quite dire a few months in. At some point, a few of them have to subsist on rotten hippo meat, and Marlow remarks it is difficult not to go mad when he smells it every single day (Conrad 2018: 40-41). He also mentions how the salary around there is paid out in brass wire pieces, which they were advised to use in trading with natives around the area. This advice turned out to be quite useless, since there were either no villages or the villagers were at best unfriendly to the colonists (Conrad 2018: 41). Conrad uses this as well to bring out the inefficiency of what is technically a colony, but lacks even a standard currency for trading when resource extraction is the main policy (Hawkins 1979: 291-292). At one point, the steamer is attacked by a group of natives, and the crew generally erupts into chaos, the main emotion being confusion. The helmsman loses all composure and forgets to steer the steamer, so Marlow has to take over. Meanwhile, the original helmsman throws open a shutter even though Marlow tells him to keep low and quiet, and attempts to shoot at the attacking natives while the rest of the crew is doing the same. This fills the air with smoke and prevents Marlow from seeing ahead along the river (Conrad 2018: 44-45). This may be another appeal to the British audience and to their ideal of efficiency, since a ship crew losing their heads while being attacked would likely disgust the audience.

After this, Marlow finally reaches the Inner Station, where Mr. Kurtz is stationed,

but is greeted by the sight of a decaying house with large holes in the roof (Conrad 2018: 51). In the Station, he meets a Russian man (Conrad 2018: 52-52) whom Kurtz apparently threatened to shoot unless he gave Kurtz all the ivory he had (Conrad 2018: 55-56). Seeing the Station for themselves, the manager says that Kurtz' methods of administration have ruined the entire district, and while Marlow does not comment on that, he does say that there could not be anything profitable in the native heads on sticks he found around Kurtz' house (Conrad 2018: 57).

At the beginning of the novel, another concept that Marlow refers to is the “idea” of it: a selfless idea that you are willing to bow down to and make sacrifices for (Conrad 2018: 9). The “idea” in this context, much like how efficiency was valued, was also a popular value tied to colonialism and it referred to improving the natives in a way that the colonizers considered as “improvement” (Hawkins 1979: 288). Conrad and Marlow both rejected the “idea” later on, since Marlow finds that there is not an idea in the world that could provide enough restraint to prevent oneself from giving in and exploiting the natives (Hawkins 1979: 295).

Just like with efficiency, Marlow also compares this “idea” between the British and Romans at the beginning. He says that the Romans blindly took what they could from Britain with brute force and did not care about civilizing the British natives at all. Meanwhile according to him, European colonists restrain themselves instead of wildly taking and destroying everything (Conrad 2018: 8-9). This also brings in the idea of the “civilizing mission”, or civilizing and improving the natives through colonizing them (Hawkins 1979: 288).

When Marlow first arrives at the colony, among the earlier mentioned discarded machinery and rails he sees a group of chained up natives being led somewhere, and at the same time he also notices that the natives are the only ones performing any work around

there, such as the cliff blasting (Conrad 2018: 16-17). Marlow here pays quite a bit of attention to the appearance of the chained natives, who are only wearing rags for clothing and he can see each and every one of their bones (Conrad 2018: 17). Immediately after, he seeks some shade from the sun under a small grove of trees, however as soon as he makes it there, he remarks “it seemed to me I had stepped into the gloomy circle of some Inferno” (Conrad 2018: 18). Marlow sees multiple natives sitting around the grove, seemingly too weak to even move anymore. To him, disease and starvation have taken such a toll on them that they do not even seem earthly any longer and he surmises they were all brought there from the coastline under time contracts. He offers a biscuit to one of the nearer ones and the man takes it, but makes no effort to actually eat it. Marlow compares the sight to a massacre and admits he is horrified (Ibid.). Immediately after this, he meets the chief accountant at the Station, who seems to be well taken care of and shows no signs of going through difficult times whatsoever (Conrad 2018: 19). When Marlow leaves for the Central Station later, he does so with a large group of other people, where all natives are forced to carry a sixty lbs. load at all times (Conrad 2018: 21). At the Central Station, the general manager has a native servant who served all the white men in the Station's mess hall (Conrad 2018: 23). At one point in the Station, a shed catches fire, and a native is beaten for arson, even though from Marlow's point of view, there is no evidence the man had actually done anything (Conrad 2018: 24). All the suffering Marlow sees brings up a human rights issue. The novel paints a clear and descriptive picture of what happened in the Congo for the audience. In relation to this, Birgit Maier-Katkin and Daniel Marier-Katkin bring up a rather telling statistic that the famine, forced labour, torture and mass murder in the colony resulted in around ten million dead Africans, all of which eventually brought the first modern human rights organization into existence – the Congo Reform Association. Journalist accounts and photographic evidence from the Congo showed hands



cut off murdered natives by soldiers to show their commanders that ammunition was not wasted, for example (Katkin, Katkin, 2004: 591-593).

During the Victorian era it was said quite often that railroads are the best and most efficient method of spreading civilization in colonies, saying that railroads can go deep into Africa. One example of this was an unsigned article in *The Quarterly Review* in 1898 (Raskin 1967: 123). It seems that the people were kept in the dark on how exactly these railroads were built, as Marlow sees only natives, likely forced labourers, performing the railroad construction in the colony (Conrad 2018: 16). Conrad here showed that the railroad was not a tool for civilization, but rather a tool for more efficient exploitation. For Conrad, it was a “struggle between the white man and nature which slowly destroys Africa” (Raskin 1967: 123) (Raskin 1967: 123-124).

One of Marlow's greatest desires in the colony is to meet Kurtz, the chief of the Inner Station, who is said to be competent, wise and morally just by other colonists Marlow meets, such as the brickmaker at the Central Station (Conrad 2018: 26). However, once he reaches the Inner Station and meets another man from Europe claiming to be a follower of Kurtz, even after apparently being threatened to get shot by Kurtz if he did not hand over all of his ivory to him (Conrad 2018: 55-56), Marlow quickly becomes disillusioned during Kurtz' follower's rant on how great Kurtz is (Conrad 2018: 54-58). Marlow finds out Kurtz has been constantly raiding the countryside for ivory using the natives as manpower, after he either charmed or intimidated them into following him (Conrad 2018: 55). At this point, Marlow calls Kurtz mad and realizes that Kurtz' ambitions to scrounge up as much ivory as possible overshadows any other plan or belief he might have had (Conrad 2018: 56). Once Conrad approaches Kurtz' dwelling at the Station, he sees that Kurtz' house is surrounded by heads on poles, and remarks that there is nothing really profitable about such an action or sight, and that Kurtz has absolutely no

restraint about fulfilling his own desires (Conrad 2018: 56-57). Marlow seems to be noticeably unnerved at this point, as when Kurtz' follower describes how Kurtz has the natives come to his house and makes the chiefs crawl, Marlow cuts him off by shouting (Conrad 2018: 57). The impression Marlow has of Kurtz becomes especially clear when he finally meets the man, ravaged by disease and as bony as the natives he saw at the grove earlier. When Kurtz opens his mouth, Marlow likens him to something voracious that wants to swallow everything in its path (Conrad 2018: 59). It seems that Kurtz came with ideas of civilizing the natives, but abandoned those ideas soon after, instead focusing on bringing them under his control to scrounge for ivory instead. Hawkins notes that all imperialist countries colonizing lands focused on detribalization, attempting to force the natives out of the way of life they had known their entire lives. Marlow also sneers at the few attempts to “redeem” the natives and bring them into society, calling one of them “an improved specimen”, who had been trained to be a fireman. In the end, colonization displaced both natives and colonizers, forcing them all to rely more on instinct than anything else (Hawkins 1979: 295-296). It can be seen through Kurtz' actions just how terribly the civilizing mission failed. It was meant to control exploitation and bring the natives into modern society, however it ended up being an attempt at destroying their cultures instead.

Writers such as G.P. Hooch and Benjamin Kidd (Raskin 1967: 128) have noted that when a person leaves the comforts of their own civilization for a colony and are confronted with savagery and a lawless, unsupervised environment, they seem to become savage themselves. When they are in a place where they can do whatever they want, people would often choose to do their worst rather than their best. It was also said that instead of helping to help and civilize tribal areas, Europe turned to a sort of social cannibalism, destroying those tribes (Raskin 1967: 128-129).

Marlow throughout the colony witnesses the general attitude of other colonists and the crippling inefficiencies, all of which in the end hold the colony back in its purpose of exploitation. At the same time, the graphics descriptions of everything he sees happening to the natives shows that no amount of good will existed towards the natives, and that the civilizing idea has failed quite spectacularly. Conrad sought to bring out the horrors of colonization in the Congo, and from the events that happened soon after and the fact that his novel is still being widely discussed shows that he succeeded in that respect.

Conrad himself spent some time in the Congo and the colony in *Heart of Darkness* has multiple parallels with the Congo, such as the railway, Eldorado Exploration Expedition, strange brass wire currency, the undredged river Marlow has to sail through and the general ill will between the colonists along with hostility toward foreigners. There are very few real colonists, most of the people seen are natives, who are at best seen as free labour by the colonists. It seems that instead of attempting to help natives, the only real desire the colonists have is gaining wealth and the entire colony is geared towards exploitation of land and resources, which is shown especially well with Kurtz, who abandoned whatever ideals he may have had and used the natives to find as much ivory as possible. All this put together, it seems that the colony is an extraction colony.

## CONCLUSION

The thesis first paid attention to what colony *Heart of Darkness* most likely took inspiration from, consequently where it takes place and then the thesis focuses on what type of colony it shows and how that colony was portrayed by Conrad.

Due to the large amount of similarities, *Heart of Darkness* was inspired by the Belgian Congo, where it also took place in. Conrad spent time in the Congo himself and had extensive knowledge about the events and operation of the colony. The cliff blasting for the railway in the novel directly comes from the Congo railway, which had to be built in a similar manner due to earlier drawn borders. The narrow, undredged and treacherous river the main character has to sail through comes from the fact that the sole owner of the colony, Leopold II, had no funds to maintain the colony properly. Smaller clues contribute to this as well, such as the brass wire currency, the railway militia, attitude towards foreigners along with the general ill will between the colonists, which Conrad saw in the Congo constantly, and the treatment of natives.

To determine that the colony in *Heart of Darkness* is an extraction, or exploitation colony, the analysis is essentially split in two using the values Conrad, and by extension his main character, Marlow judged the colony by.

The first value is efficiency, a popular idea of social darwinism, especially during Conrad's time. The first sight in the colony is copious amounts discarded equipment along with seemingly objectless cliff blasting and dying natives, likely discarded due to them being too weak to work any longer. The infrastructure is crippling the colony because it is nearly non-existent. Buildings are shoddy at best and roads are simply stamped in paths. The river, which is the main method of transportation, has not been dredged, resulting in resources and equipment being handled more times than should be necessary, which in turn

results in spoilage and breakage. The colonists are distrustful towards each other, and prefer plotting to performing the jobs they were assigned and communication between colony stations is spotty at best, with people often not knowing someone is still alive at other stations. Little to no resources go into the colony while a constant stream of ivory is always coming out. All of this shows that the colony was demonstrably geared towards exploitation of land and resources, but it also shows how Conrad was appealing to the ideal of efficiency to inspire disgust in his audience towards the extreme inefficiencies of the Belgian Congo.

The second value is the “idea”, or willingness to sacrifice oneself to a belief. This was also a popular value during Conrad's time, and was tied to improving the natives through civilizing them. One of the first sights seen in the colony of the novel is a descriptive sight of natives slowly dying to starvation and disease after being thrown to the side by colonists. Throughout *Heart of Darkness* it can be seen how natives are forced into labour, carrying the colonists' equipment and also serving the colonists. Punishments are brutal, ranging from beatings to simply being shot. The railroad is shown to be a tool of exploitation instead of a tool for bringing civilization. A character named Kurtz, who was praised by others in the novel for being efficient and morally just, ends up being a tyrant who charmed or intimidated natives into service. The more telling aspects of this are him forcing them to scrounge as much ivory as possible for him and putting native heads on poles for all to see. All this shows how the native population was treated in an exploitative colony and how Conrad wanted to bring out feelings of horror in his audience and disillusion them from the belief that colonies were meant to help natives towards a better life.

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## RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL

ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

**Lennard Laas**

**The Type of Colonialism Described in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness***

**Kolonialismitüüp, mida Joseph Conradi *Heart of Darkness* kirjeldab**

bakalaureusetöö

2020

Lehekülgede arv: 31

Käesoleva bakalaureusetöö eesmärk on analüüsida Joseph Conradi novelli *Heart of Darkness* ning välja selgitada, mis tüüpi kolonialismi täpselt see raamat kirjeldab ja kuidas Conrad seda kujutab.

Töö üleschitus algab sissejuhatusega, kus peamine küsimus ning analüüsieesmärk on välja toodud. Esimene peatükk on kirjanduse ülevaade, mis on kaheks alapeatükiks jagatud. Esimene alapeatükk käsitleb üldist kirjandust, mis on olemas *Heart of Darkness* kohta ning teine alapeatükk keskendub kirjandusele, mis kolonialismi puudutab. Teine peatükk ka jaguneb kaheks alapeatükiks, kus esimene alapeatükk fokuseerib kolooniatüübi tuvastamisele, kus võetakse arvesse Conradi reis Belgia Congosse ning võrreldakse juhtumid novellis Belgia Congo ajalooa. Teine alapeatükk keskendub sellele, kuidas Conrad näitas seda kolooniat oma novellis jagades selle alapeatüki veel kaheks, kus ühes osas vaatab töö novelli kolooniat efektiivsuse vaatepunktist, mis oli Conradi ajal populaarne väärtus ühiskonnas. Teises osas vaatab töö seda sama "idee" vaatepunktist, mis tähendas ideed, mille nimel inimene oleks võimeline ennast ohverdama, mis oli ka populaarne Conradi ajal. Need kaks kriteeriumit on valitud, kuna Conrad ise kasutas neid koloonia hindamisel oma novellis. Töö viimane osa on kokkuvõtte, mis võtab kokku terve analüüsi ning toob kõik analüüsis leitud koos välja.

Analüüsist tuleb välja, et kolooniatüüp novellis on eksploatatsiooni koloonia. Conrad kirjeldas kolooniat oma loos sellisel viisil, mis tooks lugejatelt välja tülgestus- ja õudustunnet tänu piiramatule koloonia ja kohalike ärakasutamisele ning ülimalt madala efektiivsuse pärast.

Märksõnad: Inglise kirjandus, ajalooline kirjandus, kolonialism, Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness



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