



Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

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Learning Objective

- 1) To illustrate the complex critique of colonialism as part of the Modernist movement
- Marlowe is shocked by the brutality of Western colonialism
- He sees the raw greed and materialism that transforms the land and people into objects
- Kurtz represents the rejection of Western values and the embrace of the 'savage'
- Yet, the same dichotomy of Civilized and Savage, Black and White, constructs the narrative

Joseph Conrad (1857-1924)

- Jozef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski, Polish
- Parents were political activists against Russian occupation; exiled to Siberia; died when Joseph was young; Uncle
- Abandoned formal education at 17
- French Merchant Navy; British trading ships
- 1886, British citizenship
- 1890; trip up the Belgian Congo as Steamship captain
- 1894: Name changed to Joseph Conrad; writer
- 1898: Began *Heart of Darkness*

Historical Background

- Transitional period between Victorian Era and Modern Era
- Traditional idea of Heroism
- Women are not prominent and appear to play the traditional role of home and hearth
- Modern in the following ways:
 - **critique of Imperialism** (in contrast to Rudyard Kipling's "The White Man's Burden")
 - **critique of capitalism**
 - represents the **modern "alienation"**
 - **moral complexity** or relativity

Theme of Civilization

- Opening scene on Thames river; reminiscence of Roman occupation of England
- Imperialism operated under the pretext of “civilizing” the natives: “Hunter for gold or pursuers of fame, they all had gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire. What greatness had not floated in the mystery of an unknown earth!...The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires.”
- Compares the European colonists to Africa with the Roman colonists to Britain.

Violence that underlies Empire

- Speaking of the Romans in Britain: “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....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 the 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.”

Money is the real motive of Imperialism

- When he is saying goodbye to his aunt who got him the commission:
- “I was one of the Workers, with a capital—you know. Something like an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle...She talked about ‘weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways,’ til upon my word, she made me quite uncomfortable. I ventured to hint that the Company was run for profit.”

First Sight of Africa: Senseless War

- “we came upon a man-of-war anchored off the coast. There wasn’t even a shed there, and she was shelling the bush. The French had one of their wars going on thereabouts...Pop would go one of the eight inch guns; a small flame would dart and vanish, a little white smoke would disappear, a tiny projectile would give a feeble screech—and nothing happened. Nothing could happen. There was a touch of insanity in the proceeding..and it was not dissipated by somebody on board assuring me earnestly there was a camp of natives—he called them enemies!—hidden out of sight somewhere.”

Chain Gang: Senseless degradation of humans

- “A slight clinking behind me made me turn my head. Six black men advanced in a file, toiling up the path....I could see every rib, the joints of their limbs were like knots in a rope; each had an iron collar on his neck, and all were connected together with a chain...”
- Digging a hole with no apparent purpose
- “It wasn’t a quarry or a sandpit, anyhow. It was just a hole...I discovered that a lot of imported drainage-pipes for the settlement had tumbled in there. There wasn’t one that was not broken. It was a wanton smash-up.”

Dying Servants: like discarded objects

- Alienation
- “The work was going on. The work! And this was the place where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die.
- They were dying slowly—it was clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now—nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. Brought from all recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest.”

Contrast with White Accountant

- “I saw a high starched collar, white cuffs, a light alpaca jacket, snowy trousers, a clear silk necktie, and varnished boots. No hat. Hair parted brushed, oiled, under a green-lined parasol held in a big white hand.
- I shook hands with this miracle, and I learned he was the Company’s chief accountant,...His starched collars and got-up shirt-fronts were achievements of character.”
- He had trained a native woman
- Everything else in the station was in a muddle...”

Journey to Inner Station: Marlowe loses “humanity”—Western civilization

- “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...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?”

Kurtz as Ideal European Colonizer: Gone Native

- First report is that Kurtz is “the best agent...and exceptional man”
- Russian trader: he raided the country for ivory, leading a tribe
- “He hated all this, and somehow he couldn’t get away. When I had a chance I begged him to try and leave while there was time...he would say yes, and then he would remain; go off on another ivory hunt; disappear for weeks; forget himself amongst these people—forget himself—you know.”

Kurtz gone Native

- He has taken a native woman as a mistress
- He rules the tribe as a king
- He keeps the ivory for himself and doesn't want to send it back to the Company
- The sunken heads that surround the camp mark his transformation as savage
- But we are left wondering how this life is any more savage than that of the Camp where the natives are treated like slaves.

The Intended

- Marlowe visits the fiancé of Kurtz; She asks him what Kurtz' last words were
- He had said: "Exterminate all the brutes"
- But he lies and tells her it was her name.
- Is this the lie we tell to ourselves about the colonial enterprise?

Conclusion

- Marlowe as a narrator stands between the Company men—men who can only see profit and material things; and, Kurtz, who rejects the Company and Western civilization.
- He sees the pointlessness and futility of the Western attempts to colonize Africa, but, at the end we see him sitting among the Company's board of directors.
- Darkness as a symbol of “savage,” Africa, of Nature, of Kurtz's “madness,” and of the brutality at the heart of Western colonialism.
- We see in the Intended the way that we deceive ourselves about our actions in other countries.