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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## Subverting the Civilising Mission in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

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**ABSTRACT**

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) is often presented as one of the harshest indictments of the colonial enterprise in Africa. Yet, a large number of critics consider that it perpetuates the colonial discourse in several ways. The aim of this paper is to critically look at the colonial discourse in Conrad's novella from a postcolonial and Marxist standpoint. To be specific, we demonstrate the limitations and contradictions of the theory of the civilising mission, which portrays Africa as the "heart of darkness" and Africans as uncivilised individuals who need to be enlightened by Europeans. The analysis concludes that, above their moral corruption, the colonists, through the atrocity of their actions and their greed, are a perfect reflection of a Western civilisation corrupted by the capitalist spirit that underpins it. In this sense, they are proof that the theory of the civilising mission is a fallacy. The real savages are those who think that they bear the light of civilisation. Black people are savages only in the Western imagination. In reality, they are the victims of the savagery, the darkness inherent in Western materialistic culture.

**KEYWORDS**

Conrad, Heart of Darkness, civilisation, barbarism, colonisation, light, darkness

**ARTICLE INFORMATION**

**ACCEPTED:** 25 October 2023

**PUBLISHED:** 07 November 2023

**DOI:** 10.32996/ijels.2023.5.4.9

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**1. Introduction**

On the ship called the Nelly that is moored on the River Thames in London, Charlie Marlow, the main narrator of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), recounts his experience in the Congo River in Africa as a British sailor working for a Belgium colonial company. The society claims to send its employees to Africa to civilise the barbarous Africans. But Marlow's mission is to find out and bring back to civilisation the ivory-trader and paramount agent of the colonial company, Mr Krutz. In fact, in the jungle of the River Congo, Kurtz ends up losing all codes of conduct and morality and becomes a savage. Marlow's narrative takes us deep into the "heart of darkness" (Africa), where he observes what the colonial system is really about.

*Heart of Darkness* by the English novelist of Polish descent, whose work spans the period between the Victorian era and the beginning of literary modernism, is interpreted in a different number and often contradictory ways. However, it is most often seen as "the most powerful indictment of colonialism ever written" (Hansson 1). While acknowledging the anti-imperialist dimension of Conrad's novel, a number of critics note that Conrad does not question the ideological basis of colonisation. All he does is to decry the profound moral corruption of the colonists in Africa who have distorted the civilising mission. Murfun (99), for example, views *Heart of Darkness* as an "analysis of the deterioration of the white man's morale, when he is let loose from European restraint and to make trade profits out of the subject races" (Murfun 99). Conrad seems to confirm this interpretation when he declares that the idea behind the novella was "the criminality of inefficiency and pure selfishness when tackling the civilising work in Africa" (Murfun 100). In other words, while Conrad criticises the immoral behaviour of the colonists, he also perpetuates the colonial ideology that sees black Africans as savages to be civilised by white men. This is also the opinion of Hawkins (287), who believes that "Conrad condemned "exploitative conquerors" like Al- mayer in *Almayer's Folly*, Willems in *An Out- cast of the Islands*, and Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* but approved of "colonists" like Tom Lingard in his trilogy and Jim in *Lord Jim*". Unlike Achebe, who accuses the author of *Heart of Darkness* of racism, Edward Said believes that the English writer could not find an alternative to the imperialist vision

given the ideological context of his time: "Independence was for whites and Europeans; the lesser or subject peoples were to be ruled; science, learning, history emanated from the West" (Said 24).

On the other hand, it seems to us that *Heart of Darkness*, while carrying the colonialist ideology of its time and place, contains enough elements that totally dismantle the validity of this colonial doctrine. This is the issue that interests us here. We will try to show that Marlow's story blurs the line between the light of civilisation and the darkness of barbarism. Better still, it reveals that those who believe to be entrusted with the mission of civilising others embody true barbarism. We therefore hypothesise that Conrad's novella is a subversion of the civilising mission. This subversion is achieved in a different number of ways that we wish to demonstrate through a postcolonial and Marxist approach. The postcolonial theory will help us examine critically and debunk the images used by Marlow to represent the civilised centre (Europe) and the non-civilised periphery (Africa). Thanks to the literary theory drawn from Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' economic and political thought, we will see how the economic determinants help to grasp the inhuman behavior of white men, which proves the deceitful nature of the civilisation mission. We will first examine the theory of the civilising mission as it presents itself in the work. We will then see how the narration calls into question the hierarchy between the two worlds before demonstrating finally all the barbarism hidden in the settler's humanitarian discourse.

## **2. The Light of the Civilising Mission and the Darkness of barbarism**

From the outset of his narrative, the protagonist of *Heart of Darkness*, Charlie Marlow, gives the chief reason for the successful "conquest of the earth" (31) by Western colonisers: "What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish idea – something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice..." (32). Marlow alludes here to the great achievements of the Roman Empire that once conquered a large number of territories in Europe, western Asia and North Africa before collapsing in 476, at least in the West. However, recalling this fact in the context of narration of his life experience - as a British sailor in Africa in a period of colonial rule - is not fortuitous. Indeed, Marlow implies that nineteenth-century Western powers like France, Belgium, the UK, and Portugal based their colonial success in Africa on the same principle (the belief in the idea).

Seen from the Eurocentric perspective that underpins Marlow's story, the idea behind the project of the conquest of Africa is essentially a philanthropic one. Europeans claimed to be endowed with the responsibility of civilising Africa. Following the title of a poem by the British imperialist writer Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936), this self-imposed responsibility of Westerners to conquer and civilise other nations is commonly known as "the white man's burden". In Conrad's novella, Marlow refers to it as the "noble cause" (34). Kurtz, an emblematic and enigmatic colonial figure in search of whom Marlow set out, is rightly in charge of this humanitarian responsibility on the Congo River in Africa. Actually, "the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs had entrusted him with making of a report, for his future guidance" (87).

The idea of the civilising mission is itself based on another one, commonly held to be an unchallengeable truth. In fact, associating scientific progress with civilisation, westerners claimed to have reached the best form of culture on earth thanks to their major scientific achievements, mainly boosted by their rationalist ideology. They viewed other peoples, specifically Africans, as being at the margin of history who, therefore, needed to be ushered in the era of science, progress, and Christianity. From the beginning of his report, as revealed to us by Marlow, Kurtz evokes the Western superiority that is the basic postulate of the civilising mission: "He began with the argument that we Whites from the point of development we had arrived at, must necessarily appear to them (savages) in the nature of supernatural beings – we approach them with the might as of a deity...by the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power" (86). A good deal of the novella is actually a discourse on this supposed superiority of Western culture. Such a perspective implies a binary presentation that opposes 'civilised' Europe to 'barbaric' Africa. Hansson (7) contends that "Conrad's irony is built on contrasts between [...] white and black, between so-called civilization and so-called barbarism". The foregrounding of the contrast between these two worlds is achieved through mainly the use of figurative language, characteristics of Conrad's style in which the deep meaning of things lies beneath appearances. Like Marlow, for whom "the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside" (30), the reader is supposed to extract meaning from the numerous images contained in the least details of the narration.

The above-mentioned dualistic vision, for example, is expressed through different images, the most common of which is that of light and darkness. In the popular Western conception shaped by great myths, philosophical texts and mainly Christianity, light represents God, knowledge, truth, holiness, redemption, power, progress, etc., while "darkness is night, the unknown, the impenetrable, the primitive, the evil" (9). Obviously, Europe and its civilisation are associated with light and Africa with darkness and all evils pertaining to it.

It is then unsurprising that Marlow opposes the dark atmosphere of the Congo River in Africa, where there is "no joy in the brilliance of the sunshine" (66), to the "luminous space" (27) of the Thames River in London. By beginning the novel (a colonial story) with the glorious description of this historic and symbolic part of England, the Thames River, Conrad seems to pose as a starting axiom of the superiority of European civilisation. "The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires" (29); the

Thames is a symbol of British supremacy as the world's biggest colonial power. In fact, it is from this river that the British maritime fleet set sail to conquer the world. "What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth" (29), exclaims the anonymous narrator. He also joyfully thinks of the famous British explorers, these "great spirits of the past" (28), who remarkably managed to plant the British flag all over the world. The Thames itself is light, and the only fact of being near it is enough to enlighten anyone's mind. This is what the narrator suggests by magnifying "the august light of abiding memories" (28). The light above the Thames is coupled with that of the river waters to better express the feeling of pride that the greatness of the Empire inspires the narrator, who is representative of all British and Western citizens. Besides the sky and the sea, the weather too is remarkable for its gentleness, for "the wind was nearly calm" (27). All this results in a sort of ecstasy perfectly translated by this romantic image largely drawn from nature:

The day was ending in a serenity of still and exquisite brilliance. The water shone pacifically; the sky, without a speck, was a benign immensity of unstained light; the very mist on the Essex marshes was like a gauzy and radiant fabric, hung from the wooded rises inland and draping the low shores in diaphanous folds (28)

As we can observe, the anonymous narrator magnifies Western civilisation using natural elements such as the light of the sun, the brilliance of the river, the benignity of the weather, and the beauty of the end of the day. He, therefore, implies that the superiority of Western culture, like the laws of nature, is part of the natural order of things. As such, it can neither be changed nor doubted. In the same way, the cultural backwardness of Africa is established as an undisputable truth through images drawn from nature.

Marlow and his friend seaman resort, therefore, to a game of contrast whose tone is set from the first lines of the novel. Indeed, after rejoicing at the brightness of the environment around the Thames, the unknown narrator underscores the gloomy atmosphere prevailing in the other part: "The air was dark above Gravesend, and farther back still seemed condensed into a mournful gloom, brooding motionless over the biggest, and greatest, town on earth" (27). This indicates that everything beyond London (Europe) is in darkness. Besides, both the anonymous narrator and Marlow describe the Thames as the waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth (28) into the gloom of overshadowed distances (66). The "end of the world" or the overshadowed distances" refer specifically here to Africa, a place that is in dire need of receiving the light of civilisation.

This is precisely the mission assigned to the boats on the Thames. They are bearers of light, of civilisation, as the following image reflects: "Lights of ships moved in the fairway – a great stir of light going up and down" (29). In a supposed benevolent impulse, the Western ships are expected to move out of their luminous space in the "greatest town on earth" to dive into the darkest parts of the world in order to enlighten them. The narrator's words of praise about the Thames are illustrative of this point: "It had borne all the ships whose names are like jewels flashing in the night of time" (29). The trip to Africa is then a journey backwards, a return to the dark, primitive times of humanity that Africa is the obvious representative of. It is at least the conviction of Marlow, for whom "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. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest" (66).

As the ship carrying Marlow moves away from the light of civilisation in London and nears the shores of Africa, the mood of the narration changes. The sense of pride conveyed by the splendid description of the Thames and its surroundings is now succeeded by a feeling of uncertainty, anguish, and fear aroused by the narrator's negative interpretation of the African environment in which the missionaries gradually engulf themselves. The earth, the sky, and the water whose distinguished beauty is stressed on the Thames seem to have strangely acquired new characteristics in Africa. In the eyes of Marlow, they are now awfully immense and incomprehensible (41). As opposed to the magnificent Thames, famous for its tranquil dignity and good services done to humanity (28), the River Congo is described in a terrifying way. It looks like "an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country, and its tail lost in the depths of the land" (33). The "very antithesis of the Thames" (Achebe 15), the unknown River Congo embodies all the mystery and danger of Africa. Even its stillness that reminds one of the magnified calmness of the Thames is, for Marlow, threatening. He observes: "and this stillness of an impeccable force brooding over an inscrutable intention. It looked at you with a vengeful aspect" (66).

The Western idea that Africa is a "tenebrous land (110), "a place of darkness" (32) or "the dark continent"<sup>1</sup> is illustrated through natural elements like the darkness, the primitive vegetation, the big trees, the impenetrable forest, the terrifying silence, the snake-like river, the immense river, sky and earth, the foggy environment. It is also expressed through its inhabitants, whom Marlow refers to as the natives. Though he feels sympathy for them and refuses the name of "enemies" that the colonists of the central station give them, Marlow looks upon the natives as pre-historical people who still belong to the beginnings of time (74). This idea about black people is a commonly shared one in colonialist Europe that viewed the black race as less than human. In this respect, Chinua

<sup>1</sup> In reference to *Through the Dark Continent* (1878) by Henry Morton Stanley, an explorer who set out an expedition into the jungle of central Africa in the mid 70s.

Achebe (15) asserts that "*Heart of Darkness* projects the image of Africa as "the other world," the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilisation, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality".

At the Outer Station, blacks are presented collectively in their naked state and are compared to ants as if to prove that they had not yet received any form of culture that would raise them above the level of animals. They are somehow invisible, "hidden out of sight" (41), described as mere "black shapes" or "shadows", and are not almost allowed to speak. The very rare words they utter are not comprehensible by white men. The latter do not even consider these words to be human language. For Marlow, "they shouted periodically together strings of amazing words that resemble no sounds of human language" (108-109). Their language, like the Congo River, is associated with the devil, as we can observe through this comment of Marlow: "and the deep murmurs of the crowd, interrupted suddenly, like the responses of some satanic litany" (109). Marlow uses various derogatory terms to qualify indigenous people since they do not consider them to be fully human. Some of these terms refer to parts of the human body, such as "black bones" (44), "sixty pairs of bare feet" (48), "a burst of yell, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling" (68), etc. The other qualifiers belong to the lexical field of animalism, as we can realize in this sentence: "While I stood horror-struck, one of these creatures rose to his hands and knees, and went off on all-fours towards the river to drink. He lapped out of his hand, then sat up in the sunlight, crossing his shins in front of him" (45).

What is true is that black people are seen by colonialists as mere savages. The term is besides the most commonly used one in *Heart of Darkness* to refer to them. Marlow's following debasing portrayal is likely meant to convince the reader of the savage nature of the black folks: "All their meagre breasts panted together, the violently dilated nostrils quivered, the eyes stared stonily uphill! They passed me within six inches, without a glance, with that complete, deathlike indifference of unhappy savages" (43). Another feature that strengthens the idea that blacks are savages is what Westerners call their "unexpected, wild, and violent" (75) nature. The animal men, "these savage creatures" described by Marlow are the total opposite of the white men. The latter, at the image of the chief accountant of the Outer Station whose elegance Marlow marvels at, are the symbol of an accomplished civilisation.

Black people are in the image of the environment they evolve in. They both stand for the darkness and its implications, such as ignorance, violence, sin, disorder, dirtiness, and ugliness. Contrastingly, Europe and Europeans are the embodiment of light and progress on whom rests the responsibility to civilise the barbarians. This Western view is the starting point of *Heart of Darkness*, accounting hence for the colonialist and racist dimension<sup>2</sup> often attributed to the novella. Nevertheless, Marlow's testimonies indirectly subvert all the founding beliefs of the supposed colonial humanitarian goal. As such, *Heart of Darkness* can be analysed, to a large extent, as a counter-discourse of the civilisation mission theory.

### **3. Blurring the lines between light and darkness**

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is somehow an ambiguous novella insofar as it conveys an idea and its opposite. In fact, as specified above, a good deal of the novella is a presentation of the Eurocentric vision of colonisation in which Westerners view their culture as the light that is supposed to get Africa out of the darkness of barbarism. However, as we move further in the narration, we simply realise that Marlow tacitly challenges this dogmatic idea, as if he were anticipating postmodern relativism. In a peculiar approach reminiscent of Derrida's deconstruction project, the narration of Marlow subverts the hierarchical relation between the light of civilisation and the darkness of barbarism.

He begins by showing the intrinsic link between the idea of light and that of darkness. For example, the "luminous space" that surrounds the Thames can be conceived only if it is compared to "dark air above". The evocation of light immediately followed by that of darkness is a recurrent image in the novel and has the main effect of blurring the classic semantic boundary between the two signifiers. "From a postcolonial perspective, though, the fact that the borderlines between centre and periphery, between civilisation and barbarism are blurred contributes to making the book less dogmatic" (Hansson 4). The connection between light and darkness sounds like a refutation of the racist discourse of the settlers. In fact, the praised luminous culture is not very far from the barbarism of the other peoples that it decries. It is this paradox that a good part of Conrad's text attempts to show by highlighting the contradictions of the colonial discourse through many evocative images.

One of these images is that of the sun sinking low and changing from glowing white to a dull red without rays and without heat (28). Following the logic according to which the West is associated with light and its derivatives, we can thus deduce that this retreating sun without heat or light is a much ironic reference to the Western claim to be the light that must repel the darkness of barbarism. The light of civilisation that exists only in theory is being swallowed up by the reality of darkness. When discourse gives way to reality, the masks fall, and the real faces are revealed. This is the sense of the more and more invading darkness that seems to follow the white missionaries as they get closer to the African coasts. Even though the white explorers continue to link the

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Chinua Achebe in his essay, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*", sustains the idea that Conrad exposes in his novella a racist vision of Africa.

gloomy atmosphere to the African land they have reached, the informed reader can easily realise that these self-proclaimed "emissaries of light" are paradoxically the bearers of darkness.

The first thing that their encounter with Africa discloses is the limit of their knowledge. Like the blue sea, whose glitter is blurred by the creeping mist (28), the vision of Europeans is now affected by what they call the darkness of Africa, preventing them from seeing and understanding even the most basic things. They feel lost in the face of the immense African jungle with its millions of trees and the giant Congo River. Marlow confesses: "You lost your way on that river as you would in a desert, and butted all day long against shoals, trying to find the channel, till you thought yourself bewildered and cut off for everything you had known once – somewhere far away – in another existence perhaps" (66).

The feeling of loss engenders that of fear, a kind of existential fear, since what one is feared of is not precise. It is this form of anxiety that invades Marlow. He attempts to express it by talking about the general sense of vague and oppressive wonder that grew upon him like a weary pilgrimage among hints for nightmares (41). Lost in the heart of the Congolese jungle, the explorers see the threat everywhere: in the stillness of the river, in the silence that envelops them, in the fog, in the unknown native they meet, in the millions of trees that overhang them. Everything is a source of fear for them.

Just as ignorance breeds fear, so fear accentuates ignorance. This dialectic link between ignorance and fear is stressed particularly through the existential crisis that white imperialists experience in the jungle of Africa. Grippled by fear, they see everything upside down. As Marlow acknowledges, "the earth seemed unearthly" (69). They are caught up in a kind of delirium that more and more disconnects them from reality and reduces them to the state of "phantoms". "We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings" (68), Marlow admits. It is, hence, contradictory that after having recognized that the inner truth of things is hidden from them (67), they pass judgment on the African environment. They assert that they "were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet" (68). There is no need to specify that their situation of bewilderment immediately discredits their idea about Africa and gives their judgment a purely racist character.

In addition, in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), one of the most influential modern philosophers, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), argues that the human subject cannot have exact knowledge of the world but just a representation of it. In this respect, the ideas that these white foreigners put forward about Africa are the mere result of their subjective perceptions that do not and cannot correspond to reality. It is all the more true as their perception is determined by their European worldview that they mistakenly think to be the universal norm. They consider all that is beyond their rational knowledge to belong to prehistory. Truth being relative, as the postmodernists affirm, interpreting African reality with European paradigms only leads to false viewpoints. This is besides one of the main criticisms that postcolonial theorists address to the Western discourse that they try to decentralize in order to restore the African truth expressed by Africans.

It is the ability of white people to grasp reality that is put to the test in Africa. Instead of revealing the truth about Africa, the opinions they express become, therefore, barometers of their own ignorance. Their multiple and contradictory interpretations of the meaning of drums they hear "behind the curtain of trees" (68) are additional proof of their lack of knowledge concerning African realities. They do not know "whether it meant war, peace, or prayer" (68). Europeans "cannot fit in the reality of Congo, as well as its cultural elements" (Güven, F 259). Their presence in the immense Congolese forest makes them aware of all their limits as human beings. Marlow recognizes that it makes them feel very small (68).

In the heart of the darkness of Africa rises, as if by magic, a light which reveals the hidden darkness (ignorance) and smallness of those who thought to be the enlightened and greatest creatures on earth. However, they subtly deny this obvious fact. They divert their attention from their limits as thinking subjects and project it onto the natural African environment, whose opacity, they believe, is the cause of their blindness. Marlow explains: "We could not understand because we were too far and could not remember, because we were travelling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign – and no memories" (69). In the same logic of inversion, of denial of reality, they transform their weaknesses into successes, at least in theory. Marlow can boast: "We could have fancied ourselves the first of men taking possession of an accursed inheritance, to be subdued at the cost of profound anguish and of excessive toil" (68).

Despite their denial attitude, the Western adventurers cannot entirely hide their helplessness in Africa. There is every reason to believe that they are being pursued by evil, or at least that they are reflections and bearers of the evil that they attribute to Africa. Even their ship, with its famous lights that were first viewed as a means of the civilising mission, has become a symbol of darkness. In fact, most of those on it are dying of fever at so alarming a rate (three a day) that Marlow refers to the ship as the "dance of death and trade" (41). Another irony is that the bearers of light are not able to stand the light of the sun in Africa. Some of them commit suicide, probably as the result of the sun or the land that seems to be too much for them (42), as Marlow conjectures.

Those who prided themselves on holding the light of knowledge to save others from the darkness of ignorance are now trapped in the heart of darkness. The bearers of light are entirely blinded in Africa and, therefore, have become the living sign of the

darkness (ignorance) they wanted to drive out. This reversal of the situation tells us more about the satirical nature of Conrad's novella. The image that best expresses this paradoxical situation is the painting of Kurtz that Marlow discovers in the Brick maker's room at the central station. The painting depicts a blindfolded woman carrying a lighted torch. This blindfolded woman with the torch represents the white missionary who, though being blind (ignorant and weak), strangely assumes the huge responsibility of bringing light to others. The image refers us directly to the parable of Jesus in the Gospel of Saint Luke, chapter 6, verse 39, according to which a blind man cannot lead a blind man lest both fall into a pit. The missionaries' ignorance of their own darkness is what makes their situation as tragic as that of the natives over whom they cruelly exercise their power. Their cruelty towards the indigenous population is one more proof of the darkness of the messengers of civilisation.

#### **4. The barbarism of the civilising mission**

Though Marlow expressed belief in the idea of colonialism and was enthusiastic about the idea of setting out for Africa, he was a bit suspicious of his true mission on this continent. "It was just as though I had been let into some conspiracy – I don't know – something not quite right" (36), he says, just after signing the contract with his employer. The location of the Company's offices in Brussels, a city that has always made him think of a "whited sepulchre"<sup>3</sup> (35), lends weight to his feeling of distrust. His arrival in Congo confirms his sense that he was let into something that was "not quite right". The apprehensiveness of this reality, the totality of which he has not yet seen, makes him feel like an impostor (39). He discovers the hideous face of what was said to be a humanitarian mission. The civilising mission has turned out to be the expression of barbarism that gradually unfolds through the observations of Marlow as he journeys into the heart of the "dark continent". This savagery manifests itself in the different stations in Congo of the Belgian unnamed colonial enterprise from where Marlow reports the deeds of the missionaries. While each station was expected to be "like a beacon on the road towards better things, a centre for trade of course, but also for humanizing, improving, instructing" (65), they prove to be centres of disorder, lies, competitions, illness, violence, death, in short, centres of barbarism and dehumanisation.

Disorder is one of the evils that, in the collective imagination of the rationalist settler, is associated with Africa. Yet, it is an obvious reality that Marlow notices on his arrival in the Outer Station. The environment of the station, which is supposed to be a source of light from which dark Africa will be enlightened, is in total mess, lugubrious, and dirty. It is full of useless things like "a boiler wallowing in the grass [...] an undersized railway truck lying there on its back with its wheels in the air [...] more pieces of decaying machinery, a stack of rusty rails. (42). The mess that prevails here just reflects the chaos that the colonial enterprise introduces in Africa. A large number of natives, because of the threatening presence of white intruders, have abandoned their villages to venture into the bush. A lot of dwellings were dismantled (71), and the families scattered.

There is a parallel between the mess of the environment and the useless things that the settlers do, which reminds us much of the scientists in the Academy of Lagado in Jonathan Swift's satirical novel, *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). Whereas they are supposed to do research so as to alleviate the poverty of the population, the so-called scientists indulge in very useless and idiotic works like trying to change human excrement back to food or detecting political conspiracies by examining the excrement of suspicious individuals. Like these strange men, the white missionaries in *Heart of Darkness* are involved in futile activities. Marlow talks about a French warship that fires pointlessly at an invisible enemy. He also sees at the central station some Europeans who meaninglessly attempt to extinguish a burning grass hut and another one trying to carry water in a bucket that has a large hole.

These meaningless activities reveal the enormous gap that exists between the ideals of the mission and the reality on the ground. The explorers are totally devoid of the required qualities to take up the challenge of their supposed "humanitarian" mission. For example, the manager of the station "had no genius for organizing or initiative, or for order even. That was evident in such things as the deplorable state of the station. He had no learning, and no intelligence" (50). In consequence, it is clear that they cannot bring any added social value to the lives of barbarians. On the contrary, they contribute to dehumanising them through much futile work, like having them dig vast artificial work without any definite purpose (44). Marlow makes the irony more striking when he observes that the hole digging "might have been connected with the philanthropic desire of giving the criminals something to do" (44).

The charitable desire to help the natives, "the uncivilised" and "the criminals", has changed into extreme violence exercised on them by the self-proclaimed benefactors. The violence to which they are submitted is so merciless that the narrator "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...(43). However, the most horrible scenes of violence towards black people are observed at the Inner Station with Kurtz, "the most influential medium of European colonization" (Guyen, S. 87). The latter has a very cruel approach to imperialism. For this god-like figure who does not hesitate to kill for ivory, blacks are brutes that must be all exterminated (83). As if to put words into action, his place is surrounded by severed heads of "brutes" that he has killed. Only his love for ivory can compete with

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<sup>3</sup> "in biblical language used as a figure for a hypocrite or for someone or somewhere whose outward righteousness and pleasantness conceals an inner corruption" (*Heart of Darkness* 35)

his horrendous cruelty. In this respect, Marlow conceives him as the very personification of death in its most hideous form: "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 [...] I saw him open his mouth wide – it gave him a weirdly voracious aspect, as though he had wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the men before him" (99). His insatiable love for ivory finally leads to his death. Marlow cannot help but see through this dying figure "lying in the dark" the perfect incarnation of darkness itself. "I saw on that ivory face the expression of sombre pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror – of an intense and hopeless despair..." "He was an impenetrable darkness. I looked at him as you peer down at a man who is lying at the bottom of a precipice where the sun never shines" (110).

Based on all these unnameable cruelties exercised on blacks, the futility of some of the settlers' actions, the dirt and disorder in the Outer Station, and the immorality of the voracious white men engaged in an unethical competition that yields to jealousy, slandering, lies, hatred and wickedness between them; colonisation can no longer be viewed positively. According to Güven F. (255), *Heart of Darkness* "portrays imperialism not as a giver of light, but as a harbinger of chaos, disorder, and dehumanization". Marlow admits that colonisation is the living sign of evil, an evil he now has seen with his own eyes, and that contradicts the positive image he had of the work of settlers in Africa. He expresses his shocking discovery as follows:

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 in the 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 (43).

Even the ruthless Kurtz confesses just before dying that colonisation was a "horror". What makes Marlow even more stunned by this revelation is that he cannot stand lies, and colonization, with its "philanthropic pretence" (54), is an outright lie. He declares: "You know I hate, detest and can't bear a lie, not because I am straighter than the rest of us, but simply because it appals me. [...] It makes me miserable and sick, like biting something rotten would do" (57). It is probably because of his aversion to lying that Marlow admires Kurtz. In effect, in contrast to others, Kurtz is honest. He does not hide the motive of his violence (the quest for ivory). He is the embodiment of colonialism's true nature. For revealing the "unspeakable secret" of colonization, the company which sent him to the Congo seeks to bring him back to civilisation. This culture is actually a world of lies. Just as Kurtz's amazing eloquence conceals the darkness of his heart (110), the inhuman project of colonisation is hidden in an attractive philanthropic discourse and a semblance of cultural morality.

Though Marlow has discovered the lie of colonisation, he has a limited understanding of the intricate nature of the colonial system. In fact, he still cannot establish the obvious connection between the brutality displayed by the colonisers and their European culture. He represents the European civilisation, conveying its ideas of a society of settled hierarchies. The indigenous peoples, in his view, are ignorant and totally identified with their own landscape (Hansson 3). For him, colonizers, who came "equipped with moral ideas" (62), are going through a kind of cultural depression in Congo (Güven, F. 260). Circumstances have changed them into "greedy phantoms", resembling the dark environment they were supposed to civilize. Marlow seems to regret this closeness: "I accept this unforeseen partnership, this choice of nightmares forced upon me in the tenebrous land invaded by these mean and greedy phantoms" (110).

By suggesting that the brutal European colonisers and mainly Kurtz are pathological cases, Marlow merely points out an anomaly of colonisation but does not fundamentally question the validity of the colonial discourse. Many critics<sup>4</sup> of *Heart of Darkness* fall into the trap of Marlow's Eurocentric view, as they repeat the simplistic idea that the story of Kurtz is "about how a civilised man can change to savagery when there is no restriction" (Moore 127). This standpoint relativises the savagery of Kurtz. "The inference suggested is that every human being subjected to such an extreme exposition, with no existential and social anchorage, might turn into a Kurtz figure" (Hansson 7).

Kurtz's corruption reveals more than a mere transformation due to long exposure to the wilderness. It does not either simply express the dark reality of an individual's inmost existence, as Marlow thinks. His burning desire to gain wealth and power is a manifestation of the culture of appropriation and accumulation, which, from a Marxist point of view, is that of 19<sup>th</sup>-century capitalist Europe. Kurtz is the flag bearer of this capitalist culture since Marlow admits that "all Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz" (86). The European spirit of accumulation was never more evident than during the colonization of Africa. Europe considered Africa to be its exclusive property. At the time of publication of *Heart of Darkness*, "the Berlin conference of 1885 recognized the Congo Free State as the personal property of King Leopold II of Belgium and gave him full control of an area 80 times as big as the mother country" (Hansson 6). Kurtz expresses the same capitalist spirit. According to Marlow, he thinks that everything belongs to him: "You should have heard him say: 'My ivory'. Oh yes, I heard him. 'My Intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my -- Everything belonged to him" (85). The unbridled pursuit of profit leads to what Novak (13) calls the moral downside or moral weakness of capitalism, even if he links this moral problem not to a question of profit but to the creativity, inventiveness, and questioning spirit that makes the



system dynamic. Kurtz is certainly concerned with making his wealth-creation system more efficient in order to face up to the tough competition and satisfy the capitalist society that hired him. He has chosen extreme violence as his method of wealth acquisition. This method seems to be in line with the capitalist philosophy of which Marx and Engels say that it produces, among others, two chief moral evils, namely the exploitation and alienation of workers (Storr 2). Kurtz bases his strength on these two evils. The more he exploits and alienates the natives, the richer and more powerful he becomes. His position as the best colonial agent of the capitalist company based in Brussels is no coincidence, as he collects more ivory than all his competitors combined. He is regarded as a genius, a model settler, and the ideal capitalist. Kurtz's triumph lies in his violent method unknown to the public. His method consists of liberating himself from the false rhetoric of civilisation so as to be himself, a professional ivory exploiter, a genuine capitalist and coloniser who is also a bloodsucker. He is "unable to cope with the forces of savagery and malevolence within him which the wilderness brings out" (*Heart of Darkness* 17). These savage forces that appear in broad daylight reflect the cannibalistic nature of colonisation when stripped of its moral artifices. It is this awful image that Marlow attaches to the group of white explorers called the Eldorado Exploring Expedition when he says that "to 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 burglar breaking into a safe" (61).

Kurtz has much in common with Jack in Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, a much anarchic boy who leads a tribe known as the "hunters". Marooned on an uninhabited island and freed from social shackles, these Victorian English boys quickly fall into savagery. They engage in deadly conflict and destroy beautiful nature mainly due to power and economic motives. Like the savage tribe in Golding's novel, Kurtz and all the other white settlers in *Heart of Darkness* are the product of a corrupt, materialistic civilisation that makes the individual the slave of material goods, which brings out all his savage nature. Savagery, therefore, seems to be the seed of capitalist culture, which appears in all its ugliness when the circumstances lend themselves to it. The degeneracy of Kurtz, the "representative of the entire Western civilization" (Hansson 7), is not then circumstantial but inherent in his capitalist culture. He is a living example of the savage nature of colonisation, one of the worst forms of capitalism.

The extreme viciousness shown by Europeans in Africa has finally invalidated the theory of the civilising mission. The colonists turn out to be the savages, as evidenced by their dreadful actions that speak louder than their humanitarian ideals. Marlow insistently rejects the description of black people as criminals: "But these men could by no stretch of imagination be called enemies (42). "It was very clear. They were not enemies; they were not criminals" (44). On the contrary, they are the victims of white criminals, the true criminals whom Marlow refers now to as the invading "insoluble mystery from the sea" (42). It is no wonder the Africans they have instructed, their products, have become models of violence, as shown by the following example: "behind this raw matter one of the reclaimed, the product of the new forces at work, strolled despondently, carrying a rifle by its middle. He had a uniform jacket with one button off, and seeing a white man on the path, hoisted his weapon to his shoulder with alacrity" (43). The tribe of natives that Kurtz employs to initiate raids on neighbouring regions is another proof that whites have introduced a civilisation of violence in Africa. Settlers' violence transforms natives in another way. By torturing and starving the blacks, the whites distorted the image of the latter, who, in their miserable state, resemble extraterrestrial creatures. Therefore, we can also conclude that the savage acts perpetrated against black individuals also resulted in their societal portrayal as savages.

From all this, we deduce that the idea of the savagery of blacks is only a colonial representation. Brannigan postulates that "Africa is merely the fictional projection of a European fantasy in which Europe is the only truth" (144). In a more precise way, Achebe explains why the colonial discourse is a fallacy. He argues that it is a "desire in Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest" (15).

## **5. Conclusion**

As argued by Said, *Heart of Darkness* reflects the ideological discourse of its time. Despite its criticism of the brutal colonial practices in Africa, Conrad's novella does not overtly challenge the fundamental principles of colonial philosophy, such as the civilising mission theory. The purpose of this study was precisely to establish that while reproducing the imperialist dogma of its period, *Heart of Darkness* can also be interpreted as an anti-imperialist work. By adopting a postcolonial stance, we have been able to highlight the inaccuracy of the Western binary vision by showing that there is no boundary between the light of civilisation and the darkness of barbarism. As Marlow's narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that the light of civilisation, the postulate of *Heart of Darkness* that we have already illustrated in the first part, is gradually fading. Paradoxically, the heart of darkness (Africa) enlightens the darkness hidden in the alleged light. Once in Africa, the colonisers reveal the falsehood of the benevolent colonial theory. Using literary Marxism, we have shown that the savagery shown by white people towards indigenous people is intrinsically linked to the capitalist culture of the West. What Marlow and Conrad see as pathological cases and certainly an abnormality that needs to be corrected for a successful civilisation mission is actually the true face of colonisation and the culture of the colonisers. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* highlights the savagery of the culture of exploitation and alienation. From this point of view, it totally subverts the discourse of the civilising mission and stands as an implicitly anti-colonial novel.



**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

**Publisher's Note:** All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

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