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Course Title: The Theme of Colonialism in *Heart of Darkness*

### **Colonialism in *Heart of Darkness***

Conrad wrote later in his life that the colonization of the Congo was “the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience”.

However, he is neither a reformer with a political message nor a historian who record facts objectively. He is first an artist who transformed his personal experience into a multi-levelled, multi-faceted narrative in which form is as important as content. He is writing a 20<sup>th</sup>-century experimental novel in which the implications are individual, social, political and even metaphysical; a symbolic Modernist novel.

Today we are concerned with the most obvious aspect of *Heart of Darkness*, its most outstanding theme – colonialism – which cannot be missed even at a first reading of the novel.

So, on one level at least, *Heart of Darkness* is an inquiry into the nature of imperialism and a severe denunciation of its evils. At the same time, it questions the value of western civilization and the worth of transplanting it into so-called primitive or savage countries.

Colonialism has existed since the earliest times of human history as Marlow suggests in his reference to the conquest of Britain by the Romans

An important aspect of colonialism treated in *Heart of Darkness* is that Conrad does not present it as a political and economic enterprise but as a consequence of the individual's lust for power and possessiveness and even as an epitome of man's capacity for evil.

Several approaches to colonialism are presented to the reader as the novel proceeds:

- the anonymous narrator sees it as a “glorious adventure”. English conquerors are “hunters for gold and pursuers of fame”. Two symbols of that enterprise are given: “the sword and the torch” which can have opposite meanings and thus in spite of him referring to brutal force and negation of native culture by the so-called light of civilization (painting of a white woman dressed in black, blind-folded, carrying a torch)
- a view wide-spread at that time
- Marlow's aunt also has an idealistic view of colonialism. she is pleased to help send Marlow to Africa as “one of the Workers” with a capital w, “an emissary of light”, a “lower sort of apostle”, “weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways” (wean is painful but necessary for a child to start eating meat and food) metaphor for savages considered as babies
- like Rudyard Kipling's “The White Man's Burden”

Marlow's encounter with colonialism begins in Brussels which is not named, a “whited sepulchre” (phrase used by Christ to denounce the hypocrisy of the Pharisees in the Bible). It is also a “city of the dead”, “dead silence” in the company headquarters where he meets 2 women “knitting black wool introducing people to the unknown” “guarding the door of Darkness”. He would recall them once in Africa

(association of ideas) “*Ave, morituri te salutant*” those who are about to die salute you, he feels ill at ease, bad omen about his trip when he signs his contract.

He also sees the doctor who asks for permission to measure his skull, telling him “the changes take place inside” (absurdity, hinting at the second theme of the novel as a journey into the self, subconscious level)

Marlow’s first contact with the Africans occurs on the coast, as he sees a boat paddled by “black fellows”, with a “wild vitality”, “intense energy of movement” “a great comfort to look at”, anticipating the descriptions of other natives in the colony. They are out at sea, away from land, symbolically outside colonialism and are healthy and fully alive.

Marlow then watches a man-of-war shelling the bush “firing at enemies”, insanity no one is to be seen, just destruction.

**The Outer Station** exposes the reality of colonialism as witnessed by Marlow. “I would become acquainted with a flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly”

As he arrives, he hears an explosion “an objectless blasting”. “They were building a railway, the cliff was not in the way”. Yet it was destroyed, recalling the image of the sun “stricken to death by a gloom over a crowd of men”, reinforcing the idea that civilization and technology are merely destroying the land and nature rather than bringing any improvement.

“A slight clinking behind me made me turn my head. Six black men advanced in a file, toiling up the path. They walked erect and slow, balancing small baskets full of earth on their heads, and the clink kept time with their footsteps. Black rags were wound round their loins, and the short ends behind wagged to and fro like tails. 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 whose bights swung between them, rhythmically clinking. Another report from the cliff made me think suddenly of that ship of war I had seen firing into a continent. It was the same kind of ominous voice; but these men could by no stretch of imagination be called enemies. They were called criminals”... “raw matter”

Then in the grove of death

“They were dying slowly -- it was very 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.

shapes were free as air -- and nearly as thin two more bundles of acute angles sat with their legs drawn up phantom . 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,

When near the buildings I met a white man, in such an unexpected elegance of getup that in the first moment I took him for a sort of vision. I saw a high starched collar, white cuffs, a light alpaca jacket, snowy trousers, a clean necktie, and varnished boots. No hat. Hair parted, brushed, oiled, under a green-lined parasol held in a big white hand. He was amazing, and had a penholder behind his ear.

“I shook hands with this miracle, and I learned he was the Company's chief accountant, and that all the bookkeeping was done at this station. He had come out for a moment, he said, to get a breath of fresh air.”

The white representative of colonialism breathes the air of the dying natives. He in-takes the fluid of life among the dying and he does not even see them

The Accountant represents Western civilization, heartless, reducing natives to slavery then left to die like animals. The negative image of Africans is in fact an indictment of colonialism and its so-called civilizing mission which only brought exploitation, death and destruction to Africa.

Marlow also hears of Kurtz for the first time in the outer station.

**The Central Station** represents another stage in the implied criticism of colonialism through the characters found in it. The manager who is a hollow man, stupid but remains in charge because he is never ill (having no bowels). “He had no learning, and no intelligence. His position had come to him -- why? Perhaps because he was never ill”. ‘Men who come out here should have no en- trails.’ His agents were described as “faithless pilgrim” by Marlow on account of their worship of ivory: “The word 'ivory' rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed. You would think they were praying to it. A taint of imbecile rapacity blew through it all, like a whiff from some corpse”. One of these agents who is the manager’s spy on the others tried to win Marlow’s sympathy for his own advancement, having heard that Marlow had connections in Brussels. “this **papier-maché Mephistopheles**” “if I tried I could poke my forefinger through him, and would find nothing inside but a **little loose dirt**, maybe”. The real motive for their presence in Africa had nothing to do with a civilizing mission as pretended earlier in the novel. They have “come to make money” and were intriguing and backbiting to get rid of potential rivals like Kurtz who brought in more ivory than all the others together. The Manager’s uncle arrived with more agents, members of “the Eldorado Exploring Expedition” (mythical South American city made of gold). “Long afterwards the news came that all the donkeys were dead. I know nothing as to the fate of the **less valuable animals**.”

Because the ship was sunk with its bottom torn on the rocks by the manager, Marlow is anxious to meet Kurtz before it is too late. Everybody was full of him, even those who hated him and wished him dead as Marlow overheard in a conversation between the manager and his uncle.

Kurtz is an idealist, a scientist and artist equipped with moral ideas, “an emissary of pity, science and progress”, the perfect man to serve the civilizing cause of Europe. All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz; his mother half English, his father half French and he is a German. He therefore embodies all European colonialism. He was asked to write a report that he gave to Marlow later for “humanizing, improving, instructing”, full of “**burning noble words**”. But the postscript which he added as a conclusion shows the reality of colonialism: “**Exterminate all the brutes!**” hinting at the discrepancy between the whites’ words and their actions.

When approaching **the Inner Station** where Kurtz lived, Marlow encounters a Russian sailor whose patched clothes make him look like “a Harlequin” and who tells Marlow that Kurtz “has enlarged his mind” but he keeps repeating “I don’t understand”. It is Kurtz who has ordered the attack on the boat but he embarks on the ship without resistance. As he approaches the station, Marlow is horrified to see through his binoculars that Kurtz’s house was surrounded by poles on which were “dried human heads”. This is clearly uncivilized behaviour, as is his “taking part in unspeakable rites”. He is even ready to kill the Harlequin who had saved his life twice just for a little ivory. He symbolizes the failure of Western civilization to put its ideals into practice and the moral bankruptcy of Europe. The white man’s sense of superiority is exposed as sham, Kurtz considered himself as a god, making the natives worship him and using them to raid the country for ivory. He is an utter idealist turned into an absolute materialist, the embodiment of greed, the personification of

evil, a universal genius turned into a blood-thirsty brute, more savage than the so-called savages he came to civilize.

Conrad thus implicitly condemns colonial enterprise by showing its true nature, “grabbing for ivory”, a mere ruthless exploitation and merciless annihilation of the natives.

He also links it to the myth of evil and man’s capacity for evil: “the horror! the horror!” (see other themes lecture).