

# The Prevalence of Imperial Ideologies in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

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## Abstract

*Heart of Darkness* is a novel written in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Joseph Conrad. It recounts the details of Charlie Marlowe's expedition into the African prairie tracing the European mission there. In his trip, Marlowe registers his observations of how the white Europeans through coercion and violence are taking advantage of the black Africans, eventually making them into lifelong slaves. The novel could be read as a disparaging work for the white European imperial and dehumanizing practices against black Africans. However, the current paper argues that Conrad in his novel has contributed to the promotion and perpetuation of the Western's established and ideologically propagated stereotypes and images of black Africans. It is worth mentioning to note that throughout the novel, black African continue to be represented as inferiors, savages, and primitive who deserve to be colonized and exploited. The way Conrad depicts black people in the novel corresponds closely with the official European attitude and propagated European imperial ideologies towards Africans at the time. Therefore, analyzing the novel from "an imperial and ideological perspectives will make us able to locate the novel in the complex system of power relations and cultural representations which form the discourse of colonialism," (Branningan: 153, 1998).

**Key Words: Ideology, Literature, Imperial Ideologies, Prevalence and Promotion**

## 1. Introduction

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* novel, by and large, revolves around the experiences and observations of a white European in Africa named Charlie Marlowe who is the main character in the novel. He registers his encounters with Kurtz—the prime European colonizing figure in Africa—and the native Africans. Upon his arrival, Marlowe gets shocked to see that Africans are normal human beings; not savages, not wild, and most definitely not cannibals. Disillusioned of his European perceived ideological fantasies of superiority and difference, Marlowe shows little sympathy with the African natives; but nonetheless adheres with prejudice

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to his European origins. He, in the course of events, suggests that European imperialism in Africa is a good deed for the Africans themselves. This is quite a clear indication that the Europeans came to Africa as a dominant imperial power in which "Africa is merely the fictional projection of a European fantasy in which Europe is the only truth," (ibid., 144). The perception of black Africans as inferiors to Europeans is depicted in the novel as a common truth.

### **2. Ideology and Literature**

In literature, a literary work is expected to be defined in association with an expression of ideology. In fact, Simpson affirms that "no academic study, and certainly no description of the language of texts, can be neutral and objective, for the sociocultural positioning of the analyst will mean that the description is unavoidably political. (Simpson: ix, 1993). Yet, ideology is so elusive and tricking to trace. It is usually viewed as "the most elusive concept in the whole of the social sciences", and "an essentially contested concept," (Barbara: 340, 2010). Nonetheless, when it comes to a literary work, ideology is deemed to have a deep and close relationship to that literary production. That relation, emphasizes Singh, "goes back to the origins of human history and thought and to the religious practices which have grown into and defined themselves as philosophies and transmitted themselves through literary forms like the fable or the parable, or even the sermon," (Singh: 11, 1998).

The reason behind that assumption is that language is "one of the crucial social practices influenced by ideologies ..., which in turn also influences how we acquire, learn or change ideologies," (Dijk: 9, 2003). And literature is nothing more than a celebration of language and ideas, so to speak. English literature, of which Joseph Conrad is a representative voice, is no exception to ideology interference and sway. Moreover, English literature is said to be established on ideological and prejudiced grounds, according to Eagleton. He further argues that English literature was motivated, in part, by and rooted in "a nationalistic animosity against the German philology after the First World War," (qtd. in Green: 2, 2005). Eagleton continues: "the main purpose of literature is to produce, sustain and nourish subjectivity especially among the elite class(es) of any given society through filtering and directing the cerebral potentials which in turn will preserve and uphold the dominance of class relationships in and for that particular society," (ibid 2). Taking Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as an example, it could be argued that through employing ideology in his novel he could "express his political position on and perspective of European

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imperial ideologies” as it will be discussed herein in this paper, (Green: 2, 2005).

In that order, ideology and aesthetics are assumed to be interconnected, postmodern literary theory asserts, for instance. It is thus argued that a literary work in its paradoxes asserts the assumption that ideology is there, and not some but almost all people fall victims to it. In the theories and practices of literary theory, it is proposed that in life people live, act, and use language in the context of political, social, ideological, and other discursive conditions of the society. In that vein, ideology not only constructs, but also gets constructed in literature through the ways and techniques characters in a novel, for example, present the narrative events. This mutual inter-reflection between ideology and works of literature eventually leads to the representation of that ideological process in art and literature. Hence, this kind of representation of the ideological in literature seems to us and is perceived by us, nonetheless, as commonsensical and ordinarily natural due to the fact that it has been accepted in our consciousness as obvious and familiar, and thus above and beyond criticism.

Therefore, all the norms practiced by people in a social collectivity as natural and common sense, such as the European imperial ideology of their claimed superiority, exist by and in ideology, as it is argued to be represented in *Heart of Darkness*. Respectively, the notion of ideology comes very close to mean that in any particular or given society the manner or the way in which what we say, how we act, live; and what we believe in relates to the existing relations and the structure of power of that particular society. Literature or esthetics in general have been regarded as an entangling maze with ideology. Even more, some critics have gone to the limits of considering them one and the same: “Organizing permeable connotative fields rather than a single denotative binary”, for which “Hicks and Matthiessen”, for example, “presented ideology and aesthetics as the tangled threads of a single spool. Given such a knotted partnership, it follows that they held no nostalgia or utopian dreams for a golden theory of pure literary evaluation,” (Caton: 47, 2008). Those critics further assume that literary works have taken different forms which were “conditioned by a combination of history, ideology, and aesthetics,” (Brook: 161, 2006).

According to Slavoj Zizek, even though such an ideology is usually a fantasy, it is not just the fantasy of what people believe, but rather a sense of false consciousness. Additionally, Lacan and Althusser assert that ideology is to be found in the people’s imaginary relations to their real conditions of existence, (qtd. in Kim: 9, 2009). In his turn, Zizek argues

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that ideology is not merely this fantasy relationship to reality; rather, the ideology itself is the idea that social reality depends on a fantasy: “The fundamental level of ideology, however, is not of an illusion masking the real state of things but that of an (unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality itself,” (Zizek: 33, 2008). The ideological fancy is that ideology can be alienated from reality, while ideology is not only what people ‘think’ or ‘know’ but also, what they do. Belief, Zizek states, is not simply an individual or merely a mental condition; rather, it is “always materialized in our social reality: beliefs support the fantasy which regulates social reality,” (ibid: 36). In view of that, the current paper argues that *Heart of Darkness* represents and promotes certain European colonial and imperial ideologies of superiority, difference, and the right to colonize and exploit that have long been promoted and accepted as gospel truths.

### **3. Prevalence and Promotion of Imperial Ideologies**

Conrad is a British novelist and citizen who could be said to have written his novel *Heart of Darkness* with a deep consciousness of being an imperial English citizen. Therefore, the novel is closely observed to celebrate loads of imperial ideologies that were popular at that time such as the superiority of Europeans in comparison to other races. By contrast, it could be argued that Conrad disfavors and condemns the European exploitation of black Africans due to the fact that Conrad has been on a trip to Congo and learned about the Africans’ ordeal firsthand. That experience has assumingly left its mark on Conrad leading him to denounce these immoral acts against black Africans. However, it could also be argued that trading with Africans as slaves was a common practice at the time; not only in Africa, but also across the European continent. Respectively, people at the time were fully aware of, and familiar with that fact, and Conrad was no exception. Therefore, Conrad could have modelled his denunciation for this practice without the need to go to Congo because the slave trade was almost about everywhere. Moreover, the basic argument enclosed in the current paper—supported by reasonably narrative, ideological, and theoretical evidence—refutes that assumption. This analysis will, thus, show the imperial deeds of the colonizing Europeans in Africa along with their self-made and deceptive ideologies.

Notwithstanding, the current paper is not intended to investigate whether Conrad has denounced or embraced those European colonial and imperial ideologies and practices against black Africans. Rather, it will critically examine how those imperial ideologies and deeds imposed on black Africans by Europeans are portrayed in the novel in ways that perpetuate them, with or without intention. In that vein, there are

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inarguably certain logical and irrefutable assumptions to be done on the novel. It is obviously observed, for instance, that the novel “deals with issues such as imperialism, capitalism, race, and gender that were very much at the forefront of the turn-of-the century European mind,” (Booker: 217, 1996). Therefore, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* has affirmatively dealt with those celebrated ideologies of imperialism, colonialism, race, color, and the like.

In that order, it is argued that Conrad has provided a description of the African victims that matches the one offered by their colonizers. In the least, it could be argued that Conrad has been “ambivalent,” in his “treatment of these issues,” which is “extremely representative of the way they were treated in any number of European discourses of the time,” (ibid: 217). The idea that black people are necessarily inherently different from white people is long celebrated by Europeans. Black people have always been considered mentally and morally inferior to white Europeans. That ideological perception of black people, in general, and Africans, in particular, is arguably prevalent in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. In the *Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness*, Chinua Achebe argues that Conrad's novel “projects the image of Africa as ‘the other world’, the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality,” (Achebe: 338, 2006).

Despite the fact that some critics would suggest, as mentioned earlier, that Conrad has, to a little extent, exposed imperialism and its ideologies in *Heart of Darkness*; nonetheless, depicting Africans as mentally and morally inferior to white Europeans is nothing but a celebration of a long established imperial ideology. Besides, European imperialism is explicitly proposed in the novel to be a good thing for the colonized Africans. Likewise, the assumption that there is a superior race—that is the white European race—and many other inferior races has accompanied imperialism as one of its fundamental ideology in order to subjugate and exploit other weaker races. In that vein, such superiority-inferiority imperial ideology was “based on the colonizers' assumption of their own superiority, which they contrasted with the alleged inferiority of native (indigenous) peoples, the original inhabitants of the lands they invaded,” (Tyson: 419, 2006). Therefore, the novel in its association of black Africans inferiority with their superior European colonizers goes in accordance with that imperial ideology stated in the assumption above.

Imperial ideology of superiority assigns an exceedingly more cultured, more civilized, and more sophisticated position for white

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colonizers over their subjects. Thus, the colonizers deem themselves a lot superior, worthier, and more capable than the colonized. Such imperial ideology gets perpetuated and sustained by the colonizers so that their agenda to subjugate, exploit, and control over the colonized continues without disruptions or resistance. Consequently, the colonizers attempted to convey to the natives the idea that it was legitimate for the whites to colonize the blacks. They then think that they have the full right to colonize, subjugate, and exploit, those weaker supposedly inferior races. In addition, through the establishment and consolidation of such an ideology, the colonizers go to the limits of envisaging themselves setting an example those inferior races should proudly follow. And that is why the world based on their perception is divided into 'us', the civilized; and 'them', "the others or savages", (ibid: 420). *Heart of Darkness* evidently and abundantly presents such dual, twofold ideological perceptions.

In the novel, it could be observed that Conrad's perceptions and ideas over imperialism and its ideologies are represented through Marlowe, who in turn is shown to be unwilling or indifferent to these practices against black Africans. He has paid no effort to criticize or object to them. And the only thing he attempts to do in that regard is to conceal them from others. In that regard, Marlowe before coming to Africa has fully been saturated with that imperial ideology that black Africans are savage, barbaric, strange creatures; different, and therefore, "inferior to the point of being less than fully human," (ibid. 420). Therefore, the feeling of curiosity and day vision over how Africans would look like grown bigger and more urging within him. Respectively, when Marlowe meets those Africans for the first time, they "represent the interruption of European fantasy for a moment, that is, they are real and a shock for Marlowe," (Branningan: 145, 1998).

Upon his arrival in Africa, Marlowe finds out Africans to be normally simple human beings who have been underprivileged by time, circumstance, and possibly geography. Nevertheless, Marlowe still speaks of them as 'black shadows of disease and starvation', 'moribund', and 'sickened'. He even accepts the process of trading them by the colonizing Europeans describing it as 'the legality of time contracts'. Marlowe states in the novel: "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," (19).

In a different instance in the novel, Marlowe sympathetically relates an incident of a violent mauling by a white European against a black African. Still, the way he refers to that poor African without a name or a

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title calling him 'a nigger', promotes an established imperial ideology of superiority and difference. Moreover, the African man, while writhing in pain as a result of the severe beating he has received, is likened by Marlowe to a rowing beast: 'what a row that brute makes'. Additionally, Marlowe is offering a reason and an excuse for those dehumanizing and degrading practices against black Africans by their colonizers. It is obviously stated in the novel through Marlowe that the colonizing Europeans exercise some violent acts against black Africans, not because the colonizing white Europeans are racists and suppressors; but because those black Africans are uncontrollably trouble makers, and violent. Thus, white Europeans are inflicting no violent torments upon black Africans; they are merely retaliating to the violent acts directed at them by those inferior natives. More to the point, Marlowe approves of the white Europeans' response to the assumed violence of Africans to frustrate such occurrences in the future:

Black figures strolled about listlessly, pouring water on the glow, whence proceeded a sound of hissing; steam ascended in the moonlight, the beaten nigger groaned somewhere. 'What a row the brute makes!' said the indefatigable man with the moustaches, appearing near us. 'Serve him right. Transgression—punishment—bang! (ibid., 30)

Adding to that, Marlowe is assuming that cruelty and violence are mutually reciprocated by both sides. Those acts of violence and cruelty are not originated in one side directed to the other. The white Europeans, according to the novel, demonstrate a justifiably valid and spontaneous reaction to an initiating act of violence rather than embarking upon an act of an unacceptably unfounded aggression. The most feasible outcome to be perceived out of that implication is an unreasonably unmerited, unwarranted, and biased parallel between the torturer and the victim, between the colonizer and the colonized. And that, without a doubt, helps promote, prolong, and sustain an imperial ideology of false hypotheses. History as well as geography, according to the novel's account, is assumed to be behind the Africans' backwardness and inferiority. Such an account does consolidate the imperial ideology of the colonizers as "civilized, enlightened, at a more advanced state of intelligence and ability than the Africans," (Branningan: 146, 1998).

In the novel and through its main character, Marlowe, Africans are not called by their names. They are degraded and diminished down to the equivalent of an object. Marlowe himself, as mentioned earlier, calls them

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'Nigers', 'black shadows', and 'moribund' creatures. Furthermore, in an accidental encounter with Africans, Marlowe describes them in a way that is most obviously associated with wild beasts and dangerous animals: "Catch 'im,' he snapped, with a bloodshot widening of his eyes and a flash of sharp teeth," (50). They are depicted to have a thirst for blood shown through their red eyes 'bloodshot'. Their teeth are not normal human teeth like any other; rather, they are sharp cutting teeth, indicating their likeness and affinity to predatory animals.

That kind of association of Africans with wild animals in the novel paves the way for celebrating another imperial ideology which is the Europeans' perception of Africans as cannibals, and not as normal human beings. Against all odds, Marlowe demonstrates his acceptance of that ludicrous and false concept of cannibalism even after approaching Africans, knowing them up close, and dealing with them first hand. Still, his immediate experience with Africans could not thwart him from expressing his 'self-consciousness' of his allegedly higher humanely civilized origin in opposition to their low animal-like nature, and their different 'otherness', that necessarily entails estrangement, barbarism, and inferiority. Thus, in that river encounter between Marlowe and Africans, they exchange some words in which an African man is ordering his fellow men to catch someone. And when Marlowe inquires about their intentions behind that catch, the African man replies: 'to eat im', supposedly scaring Marlowe and leading him to realize that they are man-eating creatures. Despite the fact that neither Conrad, his main character Marlowe, nor any other human being depicted in the novel—or for that matter in the real world—has ever encountered cannibals or been through that experience. Marlowe still fears that Africans could be cannibals: "I asked; 'what would you do with them?', 'Eat 'im!' he said curtly, and, leaning his elbow on the rail, looked out into the fog in a dignified and profoundly pensive attitude. I would no doubt have been properly horrified, had it not occurred to me that he and his chaps must be very hungry," (ibid 50). Marlowe's fear has thus no grounds except for a European imperial illusion that has long stamped Africans with cannibalism.

In that order, the novel provides a couple of confirmations to the existence of cannibalism in Africa. Marlowe has not seen any acts of cannibalism according to the narrative of the novel; yet, the novel advances forward some assumed facts to the existence of cannibalism in its presentation of events, without providing any concrete examples or evidence. Then, since neither Conrad nor his main character, Marlowe, knows for certain that Africans can by no means be cannibals, and that



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cannibalism is a fictitious flight of the imagination; the question would be why has Conrad provided confirmations of cannibalism in the novel and depicted Africans as cannibals? To that question, the most adequate answer would thus be, according to Booker, to “make the European loss of life ‘civilizing’ the continent seem worthwhile, while at the same time it justified European rule of Africa by demonstrating the superiority of Europeans to their primitive African counterparts,” (Booker: 223, 1996). So, depicting Africans as cannibals is considered a European imperial ideology among others that is employed as a rationalization for their imperialism and colonial exploitation. In the same vein, Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* is unarguably viewed to be promoting imperialistic and colonial ideologies “which in the closing years of the nineteenth century seemed to be at the same time an aesthetic,” (Said: 24, 1994).

By contrast, Kurtz—who is the supreme officer and the symbol of European imperialism—is presented with an admirable appealing image. Kurtz represents the archetype image of a colonizing European. In the novel, Kurtz is depicted as the European symbol of order in Africa. He is responsible for the ivory trade there reaping fortunes out of it. The ivory trade Kurtz is running and responsible for is conducted in brutal atrocious ways though. His strategies of dealing with Africans are also characterized by violence, brutality, and sick sadism. He has committed acts of carnages and pogrom in a ruthlessly consistent manner against Africans. In his residence, Kurtz surrounds it with piles of human skulls. Those skulls are for Africans who supposedly have disobeyed him or fallen short in executing his orders. His purpose behind this bloody and violent act of total barbarity is to intimidate native Africans into obeying him and being submissive. Even when his life and career nears its end, he shows no signs of compunction or remorsefulness; “exterminate all the brutes” Kurtz asserts in one of his reports for future policy with Africans, (63).

Nevertheless, when Marlowe approaches Kurtz's residence and recognizes that the post-like images encircling the place are nothing but human skulls for Africans, Marlowe passes over that horrendous scene with cold, indifferent, and unsympathetic conscience. Moreover, he even pretends to face perplexity figuring out the true nature of these shapes, or rather symbols. According to him, “Now I had suddenly a nearer view, and its first result was to make me throw my head back as if before a blow. Then I went carefully from post to post with my glass, and I saw my mistake. These round knobs were not ornamental but symbolic,” (74). However, Marlowe offers a detailed depiction of Kurtz's physical appearance, greed, and exploitation:

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I had a vision of him on the stretcher, opening his mouth voraciously, as if to devour all the earth with all its mankind. He lived then before me; he lived as much as he had ever lived—a shadow insatiable of splendid appearances, of frightful realities. (ibid 95)

Additionally, in the quote above, the language Marlowe uses to describe Kurtz is for the most part extolling Kurtz rather than scolding him. Words like 'splendid appearances', 'draped nobly', and 'gorgeous eloquence' indicate to us the fact that Conrad holds Kurtz in high esteem and much admiration as a representative of European colonization. The argument, then, is that what is expressed by Conrad through Marlowe designates their approval and promotion of the imperial ideology of European superiority, privilege, and right to colonize and exploit.

What's more, Kurtz is also proposed in the novel to be a philanthropist and a generous contributor. That is to say, he is not only depicted as a symbol of order and discipline, but also morally promoted forward as a source of knowledge and enlightenment. He is, according to the novel, responsible for schooling and enlightening Africans. Therefore, besides failing to notice or mention—let alone condemn and hold accountable for—the horrendous acts of murder and carnage committed by Kurtz against the native blacks, Kurtz is being redecorated as a loving humanitarian who cares about the welfare of his subjects and considers their development as his responsibility: "Each station should be like a beacon on the road towards better things, a center for trade of course, but also for humanizing, improving, instructing," (ibid: 40). Accordingly, this narrative canon of giving a face-lift to the colonizer instead of criminalizing and exposing them is most definitely recognized as an imperial ideology justifying the Europeans' purposes of colonization and exploitation.

Throughout the novel, Kurtz as the prime representative, officer of the colonizing power in Africa inflicts Africans with all sorts of violence, torture, degradation, dehumanization, and eventually killing with cold blood. Marlowe himself gets subjected to some of Kurtz's cruelty, humiliation, and bad treatment in a number of instances. Yet, what is conveyed to the audience about Kurtz is no more than reflecting his stiff, unyielding appearance, and formidable character. Still, Marlowe has to be exposed to some of Kurtz's debasing and shameful deeds to bashfully report some comments on him:

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I had to deal with a being to which I could not appeal in the name of anything high or low. I had, even like the niggers, to invoke himself - his own exalted and incredible degradation. There was nothing either above or below him, and I knew it. He had kicked himself loose of the earth. Confound the man. (ibid: 85)

In fact, Kurtz has neither educated native Africans, improved their state of living, cared about them; nor has he spared them his excruciatingly crushing practices. Kurtz is not even a civilized, and cultivated European. All Kurtz cares about is the ivory trade that he thinks in Africa is “more productive than in any other region,” (Branningan: 137, 1998). In addition, he is reported to be spending most of his time and therefore most of his lifetime in the cruel world—which is the African jungle—so that he would be able to make more profits out of his favorite profession; the ivory trade. No one is holding Kurtz answerable for anything. No authority that he would stand before for liability and reform. There even are no family obligations, no friends, and no acquaintances to relate to. Thus, Kurtz himself is turning into a real savage. But even then, even when he becomes a savage, it is assumed that he has done that so as to be accepted among other savages. Therefore, that reversal for Kurtz is described as “the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite,” (Bhabha: 122, 2004).

Moreover, Kurtz is not to be blamed for turning into a savage, uncivilized human being. In other words, the novelist dispels doubts of whether or not Africans are savages, as it is affirming Africans' savage nature. The novel in its narration about Marlowe, Kurtz, and the Africans more emphatically aligns itself with a prolonged and celebrated imperial ideology that Africans in their totality are savages. According to the novel, they are naturally inherent savages. Besides, they are to be blamed for Kurtz's savagery because “a civilized man can change to savagery when there is no restriction,” (Moore: 127, 1992). In contrast, it is Kurtz who is a symbol of savagery and who should be accountable for it. Eventually, it is Kurtz and the colonizing Europeans exploited and subjected it and its peoples; and not the other way round. Consequently, Kurtz “can be considered as corruption brought to Africa from Europe,” (Booker: 223, 1996). Whereas some consider Kurtz's image as a sedition from European imperialism, the fact is that Kurtz's greed, brutality, and savagery, is a perfect portrait and a representative demonstration of European

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imperialism and what it is capable of: "voracious", and willing "to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the men" in its path, (77).

### **4. Conclusion**

To conclude, it has been critically examined that Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, through its main character Marlowe, relates his observations and experiences of the European imperial practices and deeds embodied by Kurtz upon black Africans. In the sequence of events, it could be noted that Marlowe, who has also been affected by Kurtz as an imperial figure, is promoting those imperial ideologies that are materialized in Kurtz's deeds. Marlowe has as well been investigated and shown to even be looking for justifications for them as a result of his absorption of ideological fantasies. It has also been argued how Conrad through Marlowe is depicting European imperialism in Africa—despite its brutality, exploitation, and degradation—as a blessing for the natives. In the novel, European colonizers are depicted to have come for the sake of Africans; to educate, civilize, and improve their wellbeing. The overall assessment of the novel obviously shows how, through narrative representations, it celebrates and promotes an abundance of European imperial ideologies of superiority, difference, and the right to colonize and exploit.

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