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*“The Horror” of Silence: Gendered and Racial
Absences in Joseph Conrad’s “Heart of Darkness”*

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Introduction

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* has occupied a central position in the literary canon for a long time. Praised for its modernist style, psychological intensity, and layered narrative form, the novella has also been a source of critical controversy. It is a product of the imperial period and thus presents the readers with unsettling portrayals of European colonialism in Africa. Yet the narrative's relationship to imperial ideology is marked by contradiction and ambiguity. It is not easy to decide whether it depicts the harsh criticism of the imperial system or is complicit in the racial and gendered hierarchies it portrays. The narrative's decision to render Africans and women silent enhances this ambiguity, blurring the boundary between complicity and critique. These questions have been a significant part of both scholarly and classroom interpretations of Conrad's work for decades, and they remain central to this thesis.

The reason behind the critical tensions around *Heart of Darkness* is its instability. While on the surface, the novella seems to challenge the ideals of civilization and progress that are central to the colonial and imperial discourse by depicting the colonial agents as morally corrupt, violent, inefficient, and brutal, the story is nonetheless built on language and structure that rely on racialized and gendered binaries. Instead of being shown as a real place with its histories and cultures, Africa is represented as more of an abstract backdrop, a "dark" space for the white men to measure their crises against. Its female characters are either silent or only speak to reinforce the patriarchal ideals men created for them. These contradictions have created many contrasting interpretations, for example, Chinua Achebe's critique is very important for this thesis as it draws attention to the political consequences of literary erasure. However, I also use the works of Edward Said and Cedric Watts to examine how the novella's ambiguity and internal tensions reveal the contradictions within the imperial ideology.

In this thesis, I argue that *Heart of Darkness* can function as both a critique and a reproduction of imperial ideology. Instead of being resolved, in Conrad's text, this contradiction is used to reveal the logic of empire through absences, narrative deferrals, and gendered and racial silences. At the same time, it fails to fully escape the ideological frameworks it tries to expose. My approach draws on postcolonial theory, interpreted here as the critical examination of the ways in which colonial power is represented and reproduced through language, narrative, and culture. In addition, it incorporates gender criticism to explore how the difference in the novella is constructed not only through what it portrays, but also through what it obscures.

My argument is shaped by critics such as Achebe, Said, Brantlinger, Roberts, and Paraskeva, who have critically examined the imperial foundations of literary production and educational institutions and explore the persistence of colonial ideologies in pedagogical practices and curricula, especially considering the canonical texts. Additionally, I analyzed feminist thinkers like Straus, Spencer-Woods, and Stone to inform my approach to the gendered aspect of imperial discourse. I used close readings of the text, contextual analysis of the imperial discourse, and critical engagement of the novella's reception. By moving between the symbolic content of the novella and its afterlife in critical scholarship and education, I aim to highlight the ideological work it performs both within and beyond its narrative.

This thesis is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the ideological framework of the thesis. It focuses on the historical constructions of race, civilization, and gender that underpinned European imperialism and shaped the cultural narrative of the late nineteenth century. It examines the rhetorical justifications for colonial expansion and how it was culturally reinforced through binaries that positioned the native people as backward, primitive, and feminized.

The main focus of Chapter 2 is Joseph Conrad himself and the context of *Heart of Darkness*'s publication. It considers how his life as a Polish subject, a seaman, and a writer in English, shaped his views regarding the imperial ideology. In particular, this chapter pays attention to the exile of his family under Russian occupation and his childhood in Ukraine, placing him both within and on the margins of the imperial system he wrote about. It also examines the context of the novella's first release, including the conditions of its production and its initial reception.

Chapter 3 offers a close reading of *Heart of Darkness*, particularly focusing on how the racial differences are constructed in the text. It argues that by denying the African characters voice and subjectivity, the novella participates in a logic of symbolic silencing. However, the narrative also reveals unease with these constructions. Its fragmented form, layered narration, and tone of irony point to the instability of the presented colonial worldview.

In Chapter 4, this analysis expands to focus on gendered dimensions of imperial power. Drawing on the works of Andrew Michael Roberts, Nina Pelikan Straus, Suzanne Spencer-Woods, and other feminist theorists, this chapter examines the construction of masculinity in the novella as a legitimizing force of the empire. Moreover, it investigates the symbolic functions of the female characters as not only the silenced other but also as a necessary foil to imperial male subjectivity. The chapter concludes that the text both reinforces and critiques the gendered logic of the empire, positioning masculinity as both the condition and a symptom of imperial collapse.

The final chapter addresses the critical afterlife of *Heart of Darkness*. It analyses how the novella has been read, criticized, challenged, and taught, especially in the light of postcolonial critique. In particular, it revisits Chinua Achebe's landmark critique of Conrad's approach to the marginalized people, as well as Edward Said's view on the novella's ideological contradiction and ambivalence. It also considers Patrick Brantlinger's argument

that the text remains complicit while offering a satirical portrayal of imperial violence. Instead of repeating these analyses, Chapter 5 reflects on the literary interpretation itself. It also engages with educational theorists like Paraskeva to question the didactic functions of the novella in the Eurocentric curricula. The chapter concludes by considering how *Heart of Darkness* might be taught in ways that confront the colonial histories it depicts.

To conclude, this thesis is not simply a reassessment of this canonical text. It attempts to present a critical inquiry into how literature participates in the ideological making of the empire, and how narrative forms encode the structures of domination. By reading *Heart of Darkness* through the interconnected lenses of race, gender, and ideology, I aim to point out the ways in which Conrad's narrative manages to capture both the instability and the ongoing persistence of colonial ideology. It is this ambivalence, I argue, that has ensured the novella's lasting prominence and placed it at a focal point of critical and pedagogical contestation.

Chapter 1. The Historical Context and Ideological Foundation of European Imperialisms

1.1 “Civilization”, Progress, and Power

The concept of “civilization” within the colonial framework of the 19th-century European empires included the narratives that justified their expansion, their policies of conquest, and domination over other groups of people. This justification was the crucial part of the explanation and moral authorization of their actions to themselves and their people. The “civilizing mission” provided a much-needed cover for their economic and military ambitions, allowing the colonizers to present themselves as agents of rationality, enlightenment, and progress. By the late nineteenth century, the European powers, especially Britain and France, had fully embraced the concept of civilizing mission as both the justification of the expansion to their own people and legitimizing their rule over the colonized territories (Pomeranz, 2005, pp. 35-36). The Enlightenment ideals were reframed as the driving reasons for colonialism, because if we consider reason and liberty to be the universal values, then the “less civilized” peoples must be subjugated and guided by the more Enlightened states.

This kind of logic regarding civilization was inherently deeply racialized. One of the most influential critiques on this issue comes from Edward Said, a Palestinian-American critic and political activist, whose work titled *Orientalism* (1979) significantly contributed to the discussions on colonialism and the binaries of European/Other, modern/traditional, rational/superstitious, industrious/idle. He states that imperial powers were not exclusively upheld by political domination and military conquests, but also by claiming that “the Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, “different”; thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, “normal” (Said, 1979, p. 40). These binaries, in turn, were projected onto the existing racial hierarchies, positioning the European populations as the epitome of progress and

development, while various African, Asian, and other indigenous groups were placed lower in the hierarchy depending on their perceived “development”. The discourse of opposites deliberately amplified the ideas of natural European superiority through institutions controlled by Western countries: “The Oriental is depicted as something one judges (as in a court of law), something one studies and depicts (as in a curriculum), something one disciplines (as in a school or prison), something one illustrates (as in a zoological manual)” (Said, 1979, p.40). Therefore, the imperial representations and portrayals of the colonized got embedded into all levels of education, culture, and science. Said points out that “the Orient and Orientals (are considered by Orientalism] as an "object" of study, stamped with an otherness - as all that is different, whether it be "subject" or "object" - but of a constitutive otherness, of an essentialist character” (Said, 1979, p. 97).

Michael Adas (2004) provides an additional input of Said’s insights into Victorian imperial ideology. He highlights the ways in which the symbolic oppositions became part of the everyday life of the empire. According to Adas, for instance, Nineteenth-century Europeans saw themselves as “scientific, energetic, disciplined, progressive, and punctual, while Africans and Asians were dismissed as superstitious, indolent, reactionary, out of control, and oblivious to time” (Adas, 2004, pp. 33-34). These racial hierarchies allowed the creation of a certain sense of moral obligation falling on the white people to bring up the less advanced peoples. Adas notes that there were two dimensions of this framework: moral and scientific, as on the one hand, it used evolutionary theory and industrial metrics, but on the other, it utilized religious paternalism to uphold and justify European dominance.

This is especially true when it comes to British imperial liberalism, which created a unique blend of conquest and morality. According to Sartori (2006, pp. 624-625), the nineteenth-century liberal British thinkers such as Jeremy Bentham, James Mill, and Thomas Macaulay managed to merge the empire with the idea of freedom itself by claiming that

civilization is a developmental trajectory. This allowed the British to rebrand their colonialism as benevolent domination, where the colonized people are to be ruled and have no rights or agency simply because they are not yet “mature” enough to be able to rule their own countries. Sartori compares this approach to the one used by John Locke regarding children: “Just as for Locke, children were not yet political subjects, so too in nineteenth-century liberalism, the nonwhite colonies had not yet reached their maturity and so required paternal rather than consensual governance” (Sartori, 2006, p. 625). This way, they could assert that imperialism not only fits the declared liberal values but is an inherent part of them and a logical extension of their rational thinking processes. The British would mainly view their colonial subjects as children, with the empire guiding them towards progress until they eventually became civilized and, therefore, able to participate in politics or even gain their autonomy fully.

The concept of the civilizing mission has also found a lot of support in popular, literary, and political discourse. One of the most prominent examples of this worldview is Rudyard Kipling’s 1899 poem “The White Man’s Burden,” with the main goal behind its creation being the expression of the author’s support and encouragement for the United States to annex the Philippines after the Spanish-American War. In it, Kipling frames the imperial expansion as a moral duty to uplift the races he considers inferior: “Take up the White Man’s burden — /Send forth the best ye breed — /Go bind your sons to exile/ To serve your captives’ need...” The colonized people are degraded to the level of “half-devil and half-child,” which further promotes the paternalistic and racialized approach. This poem became a template for the representation of imperialism as a noble sacrifice, as a way to defend it.

Almost three decades later, the American diplomat, US ambassador, sports officer, and writer Charles H. Sherrill further developed this sentiment in his 1926 essay titled after

Kipling's poem. In it, he portrayed the European conquest of "all of Africa, of the Near East, of India" as an inevitable and benevolent march of civilization across the globe. He mentions historical figures such as Marco Polo or Christopher Columbus as the forefathers who made modern colonialism possible, and praises American imperialism in the Philippines as an accident, which is nonetheless a welcome enhancement of everyone's lives. This rhetoric was heavily influenced by Kipling's ideas and is filled with expressions of racial superiority and the inevitability of the empire, and is a perfect representation of the colonial ideological fantasies where the white nations are not only entitled to rule the world, but have a moral obligation to do so.

It is important to mention that those ideas and fantasies were often challenged by other contemporaries, mainly by the representatives of the colonized nations themselves. One such example is Ben N. Azikiwe, who was one of the most prominent anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist voices of his time, and later became the first president of independent Nigeria. He started his writing career by covering the massacre of the Nigerian women by the British soldiers, and later, while studying religion and philosophy at Lincoln University and anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania, in 1931, he published an essay titled "Ethics of Colonial Imperialism." In it, he harshly criticizes the ideological justifications for imperialism, revealing how the big words and the rhetoric of morality are, in fact, placed to hide the facts of severe physical and economic exploitation and the brutal reality of racial domination. Imperialism, according to Azikiwe, is the amalgamation of social Darwinism and capitalist expansion, and there was no moral force driving colonialism, instead, it is fully based on the desire to secure new resources, markets, and military dominance. He explains that the needs of the market drive imperialism and colonialism: "Since the commercial and industrial revolutions, nations have encouraged commercial relations. Raw materials were needed in order to manufacture goods. From these have come the need for the conservation of

precious metals” (Azikiwe, 1931, 288). He also quotes E. D. Morel saying, “the material gods of the white man in Africa are embodied in the trinity of imperialism, capitalistic exploitation and militarism” (Azikiwe, 1931, p. 287). While recognizing and acknowledging the rhetorical power of the civilizing mission, he insists that reality does not correspond to any of the proclaimed noble ideals.

Taking the French imperial context into consideration, in which the Republic’s universalist ideals were completely dismissed when it came to colonial rule, the contradictions become even more prominent. Conklin (1998, pp. 434-436) points out that the French civilizing mission was used to justify and explain their involvement and expansions in West Africa. The stated goal of the French officials was “to liberate Africans from forms of oppression that they believed to exist—including African slavery, 'feudalism,' ignorance, and disease” (p. 420), yet forced them to work against their will, and the “colonized persons were designated as subjects, not citizens. They had duties but few rights” (p. 419). This created a stark contrast between the rights of ‘man’ praised by the French Republic and the real treatment of Africans as their subjects and not as equal citizens. According to Conklin, this opposition was not at all a contradiction, but rather a defining feature of liberal colonialism, where some were granted liberty and others were to be disciplined.

The notion of progress was another tool that was used to justify and gain support for the colonial expansion of the European empires in the nineteenth century. It was not only used as a measure of technological advancement, but also created a framework that placed all of humanity on a strict universal timeline. Pomeranz (2005, pp. 37-38) points out that the concepts of progress and development “implied a need for continuing guidance. It fit an understanding that whole societies had to be transformed, and it had more objective, measurable correlatives. Development could also serve metropolitan economic interests, making an empire a valuable market for the metropole’s manufacturers and financial services

rather than just a source of raw materials.” It created an assumption that all cultures were going through the same developmental stages, but some were slower than others. Following such a belief was the idea that Europe was the furthest along the path of progress, while other areas of the world were lagging behind. Therefore, the colonized people were perceived as temporarily delayed and that they were living in a version of Europe’s past instead of the modern world.

In this framing, there was not and could never be any plurality of what progress means; it was meant to be linear and singular. Every society was measured against the Europeans, which did not allow any variation as to what being modern looks and feels like. This understanding of development has been heavily criticized, as it presents the technological advancement that came to be as a result of the colonial exploitation as proof of the backwardness of the exploited, and their need for guidance “to be self-disciplined free laborers, patriotic soldiers, practitioners of modern hygiene” (Pomeranz, 2005, p. 37). Hence, the civilizing mission was used to create an impression of “temporal correction,” where the white progressive people were kind enough to bring the native up to speed in terms of technological evolution. This structure, however, heavily relied on the erasure of non-European history. Other peoples were seen not as historical agents, but as subjects to whom history was applied, based on what the imperial societies deemed them worthy of.

Besides the political arena, this ideology deeply penetrated other areas of life through anthropology, missionary education, and colonial administration. European imperial governments created many knowledge institutions, including censuses, museums, and exhibitions, that were used to produce elaborate ranking systems of different races and populations according to where they would place them in terms of development. Johannes Fabian (1983, p. 31) argues that this led to the typical nineteenth-century representation of the African, Asian, and Native American societies as “living fossils” whose customs and ideals

were frozen in time and displayed for the white Europeans to consume. This kind of portrayal managed to transform the perception of cultural difference into a historical delay. Consequently, colonial power was upheld not only by force, but also by the cultural narrative that simply placed certain groups at the earlier chapters of human history.

Both civilization and progress frameworks depended heavily on evolutionary science, and what was later described by a French historian and philosopher, Michel Foucault, as biopolitics, an attempt by the governments to control and manage populations using scientific knowledge and state control. As he puts it:

For the first time in history . . . biological existence was reflected in political existence. . . . But what might be called a society's "threshold of modernity" has been reached when the life of the species is wagered on its own political strategies. For millennia, man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question (Foucault, 1981, pp. 142-143).

He goes on to explain that in the late nineteenth century, empire-building also involved control over life itself, including births, deaths, and reproduction of the population. Scholars such as Hidefumi Nishiyama (2015) used Foucault's theoretical work to highlight that these tendencies were not only used in Europe, but also in other areas of the world, notably Japan used biometric systems in colonial Korea to mediate colonial authority and regulate colonized bodies and to differentiate themselves from Koreans and Chinese, whom they considered to be "lawless, atrocious, and heartless" (Nishiyama, 2015, p. 337). They created a concept called "national body," which was defined "exclusively in racial terms—creating 'Japanese' as a distinct racial category and making possible racialisation of Asian Others" (Nishiyama, 2015, p. 337). Alison Bashford similarly describes how European medicine in the early

twentieth century became a geopolitical and colonial tool, as “demographic and later epidemiological statistical knowledge was the initial ingredient of, if not the impetus for, a national biopolitical state and its colonial extensions” (Bashford, 2006, p. 70).

Within this framework, race was not only decided by skin color, but it also became a marker of moral, biological, and evolutionary development. Based on this, the “pure”, white Europeans were considered the pinnacle of evolution, who were biologically and morally superior to every other group. At the same time, the Indigenous or mixed-race people were deemed unstable, regressive, and deviant. Annie Stuart notes that despite the fact that the “racialist explanations were shot through with contradictions” (Stuart, 2006, p. 65), the British colonizers in Australia consistently linked the non-white bodies with “unsanitary and therefore uncivilised living conditions,” as well as “mental and physical degeneration” (Stuart, 2006, pp. 63, 66). Thus, race turned into a biological code defining people’s proximity to civilization, health, and productivity, and the idea of racial purity became a measure of evolutionary fitness and moral integrity (Stuart, 2006, p. 70).

The policies of assimilation, segregation, and reproductive control were put in place to institutionalize these ideas. The racialized labor was not just beneficial to the imperial economies, they were dependent on it, as Leong (2013, p. 2152) puts it: “The process of racial capitalism relies upon and reinforces commodification of racial identity, thereby degrading that identity by reducing it to another thing to be bought and sold.” Therefore, the racial hierarchies existed to justify who could and had to work, and who could rule, own land, and receive education. This inequality was portrayed as the outcome of the natural world order and not as a result of discriminating imperial policies. Therefore, the aforementioned concepts of civilization and progress were used as tools in biopolitics since they were the ones to decide which bodies belonged to the past and which to the future.

Another important, yet often overlooked, component of the imperial ideology is gender. Sen (2000, pp. 13-16) and Adas (2004, pp. 34-35) both highlight that qualities usually associated with the “civilized” identity, including rationality, discipline, and industriousness, were consistently considered masculine. Therefore, the perfect imperial fantasy is created by uplifting and strengthening not only the racial, but also the gender hierarchy. This is noticeable in the feminization of the colonized men who were often depicted as emotional, superstitious, and weak, as opposed to the European men who are represented as reasonable and always in control of their feelings. For example, Adas mentions that “feminine qualities were often associated in colonial thinking with dominated, inferior races. Some writers stressed the similarities in the mental makeup of European women and Africans or other colonized peoples; others argued that key female attributes corresponded to those ascribed to the lower orders of humanity” (Adas, 2004, p. 34) and that “European women - like the colonized peoples - were intuitive, emotional, passive, bound to tradition, and always late” (Adas, 2004, p. 35). For example, British colonial literature and policies both connect the authority to civilize with masculinity, which was a job to be carried out by men onto the feminized ‘Other’. Women’s role in the colonial framework was limited to reinforcing the colonial patriarchy. As Adas puts it:

The club-centric, sports-obsessed, hard-drinking enclave culture of the European colonizers celebrated muscular, self-controlled, direct, and energetic males. Wives and eligible young females were allowed into these masculine bastions. But their behavior was controlled and their activities constricted by the fiercely enforced social conventions and the physical layout of European quarters that metaphorically and literally set the boundaries of European communities in colonized areas (Adas, 2004, p. 34).

According to Ghosh, “seen to be in diminished capacity because they were members of the 'weaker sex', white women benefited from being members of the 'superior races', and were charged with the responsibilities of upholding the cultural and moral values of empire” (Ghosh, 2004, p. 738). At the same time, the colonized women ended up being “double invisible” where their agency was removed and they were perceived as either the victims that needed saving or the threats to the civilization to be removed.

As Indrani Sen (2000, p. 13) states, if race was used to define who stood where in history, gender was the feature that would structure the qualities assigned to those positions. The existence of irrational, timeless, and bound-to-tradition women marked the cultures from which they came as pre-modern too. Women were the symbols of cultural stability that were trapped in the familial and religious structures that resisted change. This positioning of women as anchors of tradition allowed the imperial thinkers to frame modernity as the masculine need to bring order and discipline to the world.

This logic also extended to the colonial ordering of space. Spaces, depicted as feminine, such as the harem, the hut, or the rural village, were depicted as feminine, portrayed as static zones of emotional excess, sexual danger, and superstition. On the other hand, the representation of the male and European spaces, such as schools, offices, and courts, was that of places of discipline, morality, and rationality. Edward Said highlights this point by saying:

Every one of them [Western writers] kept intact the separateness of the Orient, its eccentricity, its backwardness, its silent indifference, its feminine penetrability, its supine malleability; this is why every writer on the Orient, from Renan to Marx (ideologically speaking), or from the most rigorous scholars (Lane and Sacy) to the most powerful imaginations (Flaubert and Nerval), saw the Orient as a locale requiring Western attention, reconstruction, even redemption (Said, 1979, p. 206).

These spatial metaphors also strengthened and upheld the narratives of gendered and racial binaries, where Europe is dynamic, modern, and male, while the colony is stagnant, backward, and female.

These assumptions had a heavy influence even on the nineteenth-century feminist discourse. Nuñez (2012, p. 31) points out how even the leading French feminist and a women's suffrage activist of the late nineteenth century, Hubertine Auclert, was a huge proponent of female education, but it had to be done within the existing colonial framework that reinforced European superiority. Nuñez also claims that "Auclert never wavered in her allegiance to French national interests and actively promoted the assimilation of 'backwards' peoples to French civilization" (Nuñez, 2012, p. 31). For the metropolitan feminists from France, Britain, or Belgium, colonized women never became peers in their gender struggle; they were perceived as recipients of moral and intellectual rescue. Auclert, for example, believed that "injustices were easily correctible, if only colonial administrators would follow the logic of assimilation and apply French laws in Algeria" (Nuñez, 2012, p. 32). Even when the civilizing mission claimed to oppose the patriarchal and racial hierarchies, it nonetheless continued to uphold them.

It is true, however, that many European feminist thinkers doubted the empire, pointing out the contradictions between fighting patriarchy and supporting imperialism. For example, another prominent French feminist and writer of the same period, Olympe Audouard, provided a more cosmopolitan critique of orientalism. She "inverted the conventional dichotomies that associated France with liberal ideals like justice and tolerance, and the East with despotism" (Nuñez, 2012, p. 26). She viewed misogyny and racism as two sides of the same coin and "hinted at the hypocrisy of grounding France's civilizing mission in the country's liberal ideals. "Does it become us to reproach the Turks for their intolerance?" she asked. "No, let us be silent, so that one does not dream of reminding us that a short time ago,

one of our generals in Africa set fire to caves where Arab women, old people, and children were taking refuge” (Nuñez, 2012, p. 26). This tension allowed to create the more intersectional feminist position, linking race, gender, and empires. The postcolonial feminist thought, which would later challenge the universalizing tendencies and emphasize the overlap between colonial oppression and gender hierarchies, and the reimagining of the post-imperialist world, would not be possible if it were not for these contradictions.

The rhetoric of both the civilizing mission and of progress were used by European imperialism to construct and uphold a hierarchical vision of humanity, justifying their domination by claiming moral, intellectual, and historical superiority (Adas, 2004, p. 34). The concept of “civilization” itself, as discussed earlier, placed Europe as the source of the universal values of discipline, reason, and liberty, while positioning the colonized societies as morally and culturally deficient. Progress expanded this logic by embedding it in time, placing the non-Europeans behind in terms of their development. This temporal ideology allowed the colonialists to present their actions as benevolence and historical necessity. As pointed out earlier, both race and gender were essential in establishing these ideas. While racial differences mapped cultural differences onto the evolutionary timeline, gender defined who was modern and who would stay fixed in the pre-modern era. Put together, these thoughts have created a world in which white European men had a claim on authority, rules, and reforms, while others were left behind as voiceless and static. These narratives were often contested and criticized in their times, revealing how it relied on silencing, exclusion, and the colonial fantasy.

The civilizing mission and the rhetoric of progress were not just some abstract notions, they resulted in specific forms of governance, violence, and social control within different imperial contexts. As I turn to the next section of this chapter, I will provide an overview of how in the British Empire and the Belgian Congo, these ideologies took distinct institutional

forms, however, they both relied on the same basic assumptions of Europe being modern, masculine, and rational, and the colonized people being the feminized and racialized people of the past. The next section of this chapter explores the ways in which these assumptions have shaped the realities of colonial rule in the British and Belgian empires, pointing out both the shared ideological imperial foundations and the regional differences between them.

1.2 British and Belgian Colonialism: The Congo Free State and “The Empire on Which the Sun Never Sets”

In the previous section, I have explored and analyzed the ideological basis for European imperialism, especially in the context of civilization, the civilizing mission, and progress, and their connections to race, gender, and temporality. This section aims to examine the application of those ideologies in practice. I pay closer attention to the British and Belgian Empires, arguing that despite the same ideological principles, the logic of their conquest and government on the ground was drastically different. Belgium and Britain are good examples of two different models of what an empire could be, with one based on bureaucratic control and brutal exploitation, and the other attempting to apply a more liberal rationalization of their domination. These differences are not only important in the context of historical analysis, but also when we begin to analyze *Heart of Darkness*, where both Marlow’s and the author’s positions mirror the combination of these forms of imperialism.

Both the Belgian and the British empires put a lot of effort into producing a picture of progress, civilization, and uplift. However, in reality, their administrative structures, relationships between the metropole and the colonized areas, as well as the levels of integration between them, differed significantly. Mathew Stanard argues that it was important for the Belgian government to maintain the so-called “imperial immobility” (Stanard, 2014, p.88), where they created a very strict and deliberate distance between the metropole and its

colonies in order to avoid the cultural cross-contamination and having to take responsibility for their actions. Stanard also claims that “after a longer than half-century relationship with Belgium, the number of Congolese living in the metropole numbered exactly ten” (Stanard, 2014, p. 92). Compared to Britain, which developed a flexible system with assimilation, indirect rule, and economic liberalism, the Belgian model was heavily dependent on autocratic rule, minimal contact between the populations, and the protection of the metropole from the brutal reality they created in Africa. The Belgian concept of imperialism was purposefully structured in a way that would make the creation of a truly reciprocal empire impossible. They brought the Congolese to perform at the colonial exhibitions, such as those in 1897 and 1958, and then quickly removed them from sight, which is a powerful symbol of the spatial and psychological boundaries that were imposed by Belgium on its subjects (Stanard, 2014, p. 88).

While British imperialism was not less exploitative than Belgian imperialism, it managed to maintain an impression of a more inclusive and progressive system. The works of Kingsley Martin (1924), a British journalist and the editor of *The New Statesman*, show the ways in which the British justified their expansionism through moral rhetoric about trade, democracy, and gradual development. During the UK Parliamentary debates in 1942, one of the members of the House of Lords, Lord Wedgwood, claimed that the duty of the British “is trusteeship, to teach these people gradually to acquire the power of governing themselves...” (Wedgwood, 1942). This showcases the pride the British government took in considering itself as a “school for self-government”, especially in the context of their settler colonies and parts of India. This liberalism in their ideology did not necessarily bring wealth and prosperity to their subjects, but it created a framework for them to position their empire as more modern and moral. Even if this rhetoric was self-deceiving, it allowed the British

colonizers to imagine that they were on a universalizing, civilization-building mission, unlike the more openly exploitative Belgian colonial project.

It is crucial to point out and understand the gap between the imperial rhetoric and the real actions of those in power, especially in the context of colonial representation. This section of my thesis is aimed at setting the stage for the following analyses of the institutional and cultural differences between the British and Belgian Empires to highlight the ways in which imperialism could take different forms, internal logic, and systems of control.

The Congo Free State that existed between 1885 and 1908 differed significantly from other African colonies of the European states of the time. The main difference lay in the fact that it was not controlled by Belgium as a state and was rather a personal property of its king. To increase the loyalty of the Belgian workers and peasants, Leopold II attempted to expand the country's markets and economy through the colonial exploitation of the Congo (Viaene, 2008, pp. 741-742). The system installed to achieve that suggested that all the "unused land" and anything it produced belonged to the state, and thus, the natives were bound to collect them. Such enforcement led to a lot of bloodshed and suffering among the native population of the area, and these practices were abandoned at the beginning of the 20th century (Viaene, 2008, p. 752).

For Belgium, a country that only became independent in the 1830s, the expansion was a means of establishing itself among other nations such as the Netherlands, Prussia, and France, which were seen as trying to conquer the state. At the same the king's letters and diaries show that the colonial conquest of Africa was also aimed at fixing the internal disagreements in the country, mainly between the anticlerical liberals and Catholic conservatives, by providing a greater idea for the citizens to aspire to, thus unifying the country. In Conrad, we can see the results of such a policy in the character of Marlow's aunt, who is fascinated by the idea of civilizing the natives.

In addition, Viaene (2008, p.758) claims that for the youth of lower and lower middle classes, serving in the military of the Congo Free State was meant to provide social and financial mobility: “The military in Belgium was hardly an aristocratic preserve, and the Congo Free State often served as a springboard for the social mobility of ambitious young soldiers from (lower) middle-class backgrounds (as Leopold intended).” This also benefitted the general satisfaction of the Belgians with their country and its government as it “strengthened the army’s position in Belgian society, which had been fairly marginal until then” (Viaene, 2008, p. 758).

It is safe to assume that for the general public satisfaction of the Belgian citizens, the plan partially worked. Even the most humanitarian defenders of colonialist policy could find ways to justify the harshest punishments of the locals carried out by the Belgian officers. Deaths and mutilations done on thousands of African natives were called “acts of justice” and “an immense saving” (Viaene, 2008, p.787). Therefore, an average Belgian citizen at the time would have the same orientalist mindset that Edward Said describes at the very beginning of his work, *Culture and Imperialism*:

What are striking in these discourses are the rhetorical figures one keeps encountering in their descriptions of "the mysterious East," as well as the stereotypes about "the African [or Indian or Irish or Jamaican or Chinese] mind;" the notions about bringing civilization to primitive or barbaric peoples, the disturbingly familiar ideas about flogging or death or extended punishment being required when "they" misbehaved or became rebellious, because "they" mainly understood force or violence best; "they" were not like "us," and for that reason deserved to be ruled (Said, 1994, p. xi).

This passage highlights the ways in which the imperial ideology normalizes violence, as it frames it as justice or possibly even a moral necessity. Said underscores that these attitudes are not unique to Belgium, but are an inherent feature of the empire, which always finds a way to dehumanize its subjects in order to legitimize imperial domination.

The state of things in the Congo was far from what it was supposed to be. In 1890, George Washington Williams, an African American historian, minister, a Civil War veteran, and a former member of the Ohio legislature, wrote an open letter titled “An Open Letter to His Serene Majesty Leopold II, the King of Belgians and Sovereign of the Independent State of Congo by Colonel, the Honorable Geo. W. Williams, of the United States of America” (Williams, 1890). In it, he describes the atrocities and the general issues with the way that the territory is governed, and that he was “disenchanted, disappointed and disheartened” with what he saw. The letter, which is one of the earliest examples of public indictments of the Belgian policies in the Congo, presents some general observations about the area and then shows us twelve charges against Leopold II’s government in the Congo Free State.

Some of the issues all of those charges share are that His Majesty’s government was immoral and inefficient. Colonel Williams specifically mentions that such a vast territory was very poorly managed and did not have a sufficient number of soldiers to guard it. The ones present on the posts are often not white Belgians, but instead slaves and soldiers, imported from other African countries. He claims that “the labour system is radically unpractical; the soldiers and labourers of your Majesty’s Government are very largely imported from Zanzibar at a cost of £10 per capita, and from Sierra Leone, Liberia, Accra and Lagos at from £1 to £1/10 per capita” (Williams, 1890, p. 6). The mercenary slave-soldiers were meant to provide their sustenance and did not have any rules to follow. He writes that “the soldiers who open the combat are usually the bloodthirsty cannibalistic Bangalas, who give no quarter to the aged grandmother or nursing child at the breast of its mother. There are instances in

which they have brought the heads of their victims to their white officers on the expeditionary steamers, and afterwards eaten the bodies of slain children” (Williams, 1890, p. 12) The situations like this led to the devastation and burning down of the native villages due to the cruelty and permissiveness of the imported soldiers.

Other issues included the Belgians pitting the native people against each other for fun or making the slave soldiers kill the villagers for no reason. After most villagers were killed, it is noted that the Belgian officers would walk around and pick women for themselves to own, which he considered to be a representation of their lack of morality (Williams, 1890, p. 12).

Williams (1890) also makes a separate charge based on the government’s treatment of the native women. In most cases, they would either be sold into becoming white men’s mistresses by a “procurer” or they would be forced to perform such a function based on the phony charges against the state. The children born from such unions usually ended up also being the property of the state without any rights:

They are introduced by two methods, viz., black men are dispatched to the Portuguese coast where they engage these women as mistresses of white men, who pay to the procurer a monthly sum. The other method is by capturing native women and condemning them to seven years’ servitude for some imaginary crime against the State with which the villages of these women are charged. The State then hires these women out to the highest bidder, the officers having the first choice, and then the men. Whenever children are born of such relations, the State maintains that the woman being its property, the child belongs to it also (Williams, 1890, p. 10).

By quoting some of the most prominent figures of the Belgian pro-colonial movement, also called *congolaîtres*, such as Picard, a socialist, yet pro-imperialist, member of Belgian

Parliament, and Hauleville, the director of the Congo museum, Viaene (2008, p. 783) highlights how sexual imagery was so actively present in the Belgian colonial discourse. He specifically cites the text where imperialism is considered to be the “work of social procreation”. One of the goals of the colonizers in Africa was to cleanse the barbarians with the new Belgian blood to civilize them and to make the land itself more “fecund”. This would also lead to the irreversibility of the conquest, as the natives would now and forever be partially Belgian by blood: “The genetic hardwiring of the civilizing mission by “the fusion of races” would make the cultural and commercial conquest of Central Africa by Belgium irreversible, even if the mother country were one day forced to relinquish political control.” Besides that, “virtually all officials and traders had one or more African concubines—often slaves or minors—and they were not shy about it,” as it was encouraged by the state itself (Viaene, 2008, p. 784).

In its essence, colonization constitutes racist violence against colonized peoples; it is always compounded by sexual and patriarchal violence against colonized women. Among other things, the control of women's sexuality seems to be one of the structural obsessions of the colonial powers. Thus, in the first phase of the conquest, the colonization of the Congo, women's bodies symbolized as much the “prizes of war” seized, willingly or by force, by the Belgian colonizers as a message of masculinist domination addressed to Congolese men. In the second phase of colonization aimed at accomplishing the civilizing mission, the colonial administration undertook to “civilize” the Congolese: the Congolese family would be reshaped according to the Belgian norms prevailing at the time in matters of sexuality, conjugality and parenthood, establishing male authority as central and legitimate to the exclusion of all others. Karen Bouver (2010, p. 16) talks about this in her work, *Gender and Decolonization in the Congo*: “The Belgians advocated and attempted to institute a European model of the nuclear family, in which pious Christian women fulfilled the roles of wife and

mother.” She also mentions that there were even formal organizations to achieve these goals: “The same values were inculcated by the foyers sociaux. In these domestic training institutions, married women living in urban centers learned to cook, clean, sew, raise their children, and decorate their homes” (Bouwer, 2010, p. 16). In radical contrast to pre-colonial social structures that granted a certain power to women, this forced restructuring of gender relations had consequences on male-female relationships during colonization but fueled a colonial imagination producing many of the stereotypes from which Congolese women and men still suffer today.

The idea of regulating and controlling women’s bodies and sexuality in the Congo was neither new nor unique; it should rather be viewed as a common colonial strategy of restructuring native societies to make them fit into the ideals of Western society. Spencer-Wood (2016, p. 480) refers to this concept as “patriarchal domestic colonialism,” which involves colonizers teaching their way of life to colonized societies, attempting to shape them into an ideal Western-style life and the distribution of labor among the natives. In some cases, this was also enforced by taking the children out of their families and raising them “the right way”.

Unlike the highly centralized and king-focused system of the Belgian Congo, the British Empire operated in Africa through a much more bureaucratic and decentralized model. Their government took pride in what they portrayed as a democratic, rational, and technocratic administrative system based on laws, delegation, and indirect rule. A prominent British critic of the Belgian regime in the Congo and a key figure in Congo Reform Association, E. D. Morel, describes this form of governance as a “statesmanship which, having for its goal the essential and necessary establishment of supreme British control, yet determined that once that control was accepted, the government of the country should be left, under Residential advice and supervision, in the hands of the country's natural rulers; that the

existing social structure should not be shattered and, of course, that the religious beliefs of the people should be respected” (Morel, 1912, p. 636). While it was just as committed to the domination over the continent as Belgium, the British were interested in creating and maintaining an image of the “moral empire,” ruled by administrative efficiency instead of brutality and violence. This difference in form and presentation, though not necessarily in their substance, also serves to highlight the complexities of the imperial strategies in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The concept of indirect rule is further explored by a distinguished scholar and intellectual voice on British imperialism, Ernest Barker. His work, *The Ideas and Ideals of the British Empire*, starts with a quote from the Report of the Balfour Committee of the Imperial Conference of 1926 on inter-imperial relations to argue that the British Empire was built on “positive ideals”. He goes on to mention that “the idea of Indirect Rule is associated with that general ideal of the Double Trust, or the Dual Mandate (the trust or mandate not only for the benefit of native peoples, but also for the benefit of civilized peoples generally, or in other words of humanity at large)” (Barker, 1941, p. 70).

As one of the most influential thinkers interrogating the imperial contradictions, Hannah Arendt, in her 1945 essay titled “Imperialism, Nationalism, Chauvinism”, argues that one of the most notable characteristics of the British imperial system was the considerable distance between the colonial administration and the government of the metropole, and the indirect rule is an evidence of that. She writes: “It is characteristic of [British] imperialism that national institutions remain separated from the colonial administration, although in its initial stages they are allowed to exercise some control over it” (Arendt, 1945, p. 447). She also identifies a contradiction between the declared values of the British Empire and the way in which those values were not extended to the colonies, citing as an example Lord Cromer, who, while stationed in Egypt, pleaded to be “saved from English departments”, which

Arendt claims “has been repeated over and over again until in the twenties of our century the nation and everything it stood for was openly blamed by the extreme imperialist party for the possible loss of India” (p. 438). This created a situation in which the imperialists could hide their brutality and keep their mask of bureaucratic rationality, while not being limited by the societal norms and expectations of the metropole. Arendt concludes that this strategy ultimately destabilized and compromised the system, as it both relied on “imperialism for the sake of the nation” and undermined the principles it claimed to represent (p. 433).

The high level of bureaucracy was also used to hide the violence inherent in British imperialism. The Belgian abuses in Congo, while atrocious, caused a lot of international outrage; at the same time, the brutality of the British during the Mau Mau Uprising or the suppression of rebellions in Sudan were considered rough but necessary by many. In this context, the main difference between them is not the reality, but the representation and the image they built for themselves. The depiction of colonial violence as a civilizational responsibility and moral duty was an effective tool used to create a desirable image of being fair and just. As Edward Said puts it:

The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them. Most important, the grand narratives of emancipation and enlightenment mobilized people in the colonial world to rise up and throw off imperial subjection; in the process, many Europeans and Americans were also stirred by these stories and their protagonists, and they too fought for new narratives of equality and human community (Said, 1994, p. xiii).

Other crucial elements that were necessary to shape this image were public opinion and domestic political discourse. Arendt calls the British parliament and press “the conscience of

the nation” (Arendt, 1945, p. 447), as they served the role of a moderating force that restricted the worst excesses of the empire. The justifications of the expansion had to cover not only the security and economic interests but also fit into the liberal agenda of the time. Thus, this system created an imperial ideology that insisted on paternalism, trusteeship, and uplift. The codification of tradition through legal frameworks and bureaucratic elements was used as a mechanism to institutionalize gender, racial, and political hierarchies under the banner of progress. Therefore, the British imperial model had to balance portraying itself as an empire that was fundamentally different from the more openly exploitative regimes like Belgium, while maintaining the systems of inequality, segregation, and violence that were the inherent parts of colonial control. Edward Said also highlights how history was changed to fit that narrative:

... the official version of British history embedded, say, in the durbars arranged for Queen Victoria's Indian Viceroy in 1876 pretends that British rule had an almost mythical longevity over India; traditions of Indian service, obedience, and subordination are implicated, in, these ceremonies so as to create the image of an entire continent's trans-historical identity pressed into compliance before the image of a Britain whose own constructed identity is that it has ruled and must always rule both the waves and India (1994, p. 312).

While criticizing the Belgian atrocities in the Congo, the British built their infrastructure to engage in a subtler, yet no less damaging, form of domination.

The British Empire created an elaborate and complex architecture of legality, rationality, and public relations in addition to coercion and oppression. The greatest failure of the Belgian model was its brutality and lack of infrastructure, while appearing less oppressive allowed the British Empire to endure longer. However, this image was maintained by the

structures that were created to hide the true cost of the empire from both its subjects and agents.

The Belgian and British colonialisms in Africa represent two different versions of imperialism. King Leopold II's Belgian Congo was marked by unregulated violence and brutality, and was an example of a system where there was no institutional restraint on the colonial authority. It heavily relied on slavery, racial domination, and sexual exploitation that were all enforced through direct coercion. In contrast, British imperialism created a more bureaucratic and legalistic structure. Their use of indirect control, administrative distance, and moral rhetoric was what allowed them to maintain their rule over the colonized lands for a longer period of time, while keeping their image of discipline, power, and progress. However, despite those differences in form, these empires shared their core logic based on racial and gendered hierarchies as well as on the economic exploitation of the natives. While the British system tried to make its oppression less conspicuous, its portrayed restraint on violence in reality was not a moral boundary, but a strategic tool used to create the image of benevolent rulers. The tension between the imperial practice and its narrative framing sets the stage for the next chapter, which covers the ways in which these contradictions intersect with Conrad's life, worldview, and literary strategies.

Chapter 2. An Author in Imperial Time: Joseph Conrad and Colonial Modernity

2.1 A Life between Worlds

While Chapter 1 has traced the history and ideology of European imperialism, Chapter 2 focuses on the expression of those imperial values in literature. Joseph Conrad spent his childhood between two empires; thus, his perspective on the mechanisms of domination and troubles with national identities is a unique one. In order to fully appreciate his contribution to these topics, it is necessary to consider his personal history, his family, and how his experiences shaped his writing.

Joseph Conrad, born as Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski on December 3, 1857, in Berdychiv (then called Berdyczów), in the Zhytomyr region, which is currently Ukraine, but back then was a place at the center of cultural and political crossroads. At the time of Conrad's birth, it was a vibrant mixture of many different social groups, including Polish nobility, Ukrainian peasants, Jewish merchants, and Russian administration. Historically, this region is tied to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, but after the partitions of Poland, it was absorbed by the Russian Empire. The historian, Mykhailo Hrushevsky, one of the most prominent figures of the Ukrainian National Revival, in his *Illustrated History of Ukraine* (1917), describes how in this period, "the Polish nobility tried to recover their state, but it was all in vain" (Hrushevsky, 1917, p. 471). The layered historical and geographical background of Berdychiv imprinted itself on young Conrad's imagination and his later fiction not only as a memory of his hometown but also as a symbol of imperial dissolution, identity fracture, and cultural ambiguity. As Edward Said claims:

Between Conrad's life, then, and his fiction there exists much the same relation as between the two divisions (past and present) of his life. The critic's job is to seek out the common denominator of the two sets of

relations. As Conrad's history of his part is to his present, so his historical being as a man is to his fiction (Said, 1966, p. 31).

Conrad's early environment could never be considered homogenous or monocultural. It was shaped by a long history of displacement and political resistance. According to a famous Polish literary historian, critic, and activist, Zdzisław Najder, the Korzeniowski family belonged to the Polish nobility (*szlachta*); in particular, they were part of the Nalecz clan, which was both the symbol of pride and a reason to beware of the government at the time of the Russian Empire (Najder, 2007, p. 4). The Polish nobility, unlike that of other countries, constituted almost 10% of the population and was very active politically and culturally and as Najder points out "the more enlightened members of this class also cherished the traditions of religious and racial tolerance for which Poland had been famous when wars of religion ravaged Western Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries" (Najder, 2007, pp. 3-4; Zdrada, 2008, pp. 23-24). He also notes that "being a *szlachcic* for Korzeniowski implied, above all, certain obligations, political as well as moral" (Najder, 1998, p. 50).

Apollo Korzeniowski, Joseph Conrad's father, was a minor aristocrat, intellectual, and a prominent figure within Polish nationalism. Apollo was born in 1820 in Honoratka (present-day Ukraine) and was the son of a landowner and soldier who raised his children to be patriotic and fight for Poland's independence (Najder, 2007, p. 5). Apollo faced the realities of Russification early in his life, being a teenager and experiencing the new Russian education system, where Russian headmasters would warn Polish students against participation in rebellions (Zdrada, 2008, pp. 25-26). After the Konarski conspiracy to create the Union of Polish People and fight for independence was uncovered, the Kyiv university was "quarantined," and Apollo decided to study in St. Petersburg, studying Oriental languages at first, and later focusing on law (Zdrada, 2008, p. 26). The scope of his work speaks of his many talents: he worked as a lawyer, dramatist, and translator, closely

connected to the intellectual movements, and a participant in the failed January Uprising of 1863 against Russian domination. Najder argues that “Apollo Korzeniowski and other radical activists like him have been described as the "szlachta revolutionaries" in Polish historiography” (Najder, 1998, p. 53). Moreover, he regularly organized with his peers in Warsaw, where they published politically charged literature and pamphlets. All of these things combined led to his arrest by the Russian authorities in 1861.

Joseph remembered this period of his life very clearly. Later, he mentioned that “in the courtyard of this Citadel—characteristically for our nation—my childhood memories begin” (Conrad, in Najder, 2007, p. 19). One of his early photographs also has the inscription on the back, saying: “To my dear Granny who helped me send pastries to my poor Daddy in prison—grandson, Pole-Catholic and szlachcic, KONRAD” (Conrad on the verso of the photograph, in Najder, 2007, p. 22). These recollections are more than just sentimental artifacts, as they show his early exposure as a little boy to a world with political obligations, national memory, and political identity closely tied together.

Subsequently, Apollo was exiled to Vologda, to the inhospitable north of Russia, where the family had to face a different set of hardships. In this period, he wrote his most significant political work, titled *Poland and Muscovy*, which was a “treatise-cum-memoir” and a harsh critique of Russian imperialism (Zdrada, 2008, p. 21). His wife, and Joseph’s mother, Ewelina, chose to follow her husband into exile with their young son. The harsh conditions quickly led to the deterioration of Ewelina’s health, which resulted in her untimely death in 1865. In despair, Apollo wrote: “When She is not here, when all I dream about is to see her again—this creature without a blemish, who constituted the entire delight of my existence—doubts overwhelm me and call out: and if my faith is but deluded imagination?” (Apollo Korzeniowski in his letter to Kaszewski, 1865, in Najder, 2007, p. 26). However, he remained engaged in the upbringing of his son, teaching him languages, political philosophy,

and literary translation. As he wrote in the letter addressed to his cousins at New Year's 1866: "I begin once again to tackle my life, which is, at present, confined solely to Konrad. I teach him all I know myself—alas, it is not much; I guard him against the influence of the local atmosphere, and the little mite is growing up as though in a cloister" (Apollo Korzeniowski in his letter to the Zagórkis, in Najder, 2007, p. 29).

At this time, young Conrad would often need medical treatments due to many diseases, so he mostly stayed with his relatives. In December 1867, the family was allowed to leave their exile and go to warmer places to rest and recover. However, Apollo, being mortally ill and in a lot of financial trouble, did not want to go far from home, so he decided to take his son to Lviv, which was at the time occupied by Austria, and was called Lemberg, and enjoyed much more freedom than the territories under Russian control (Najder, 2007, p. 31). Despite his high hopes, Apollo was very disappointed in seeing, as Najder put it: "Galician inactivity and sycophancy, with quarrels between Poles, with their neglect of national affairs, the squandering of money on festivities, and, finally, with the Germanization of the Polish language" (Najder, 2007, p. 31). After that, they traveled around that area for some time, until Apollo decided to bring his son to Kraków: "Probably I too shall settle down in Cracow because of the stupid Lwów schools. I am sorry for Konrad's capabilities, which are being wasted here, and I am unable even to supervise his lessons" (Apollo Korzeniowski in his letter to a friend, in Najder, 2007, p. 32).

Unfortunately, the exile broke his body, and he followed his wife four years later on May 23, 1869. Regarding the death of Apollo, Najder writes:

His dead father had left him a formidable psychological legacy: an exceptionally intense emotional life; a rigorous and desperate love of country, and a spontaneous, instinctive belief in democracy; a hatred of the invaders, particularly Russians; inflexible principles that clashed with his

volatile moods; a peculiar approach to life's practical problems that was not based on cool perception but consisted rather of absorbing them as if with sudden spasms of his heart, and viewing them always in the light of ultimate aims; an acute sense of humor, evidenced mainly in irony, also turned towards himself; a great love of Romantic literature; a solitariness imposed by intractable circumstance; the bitterness of shattered hopes; and fidelity to the main goal, an independent Poland (Najder, 2007, p. 35).

Grabowski (1958, p. 53) highlights that these early years, filled with difficulties, became the bedrock of Conrad's identity, where the values of duty, sacrifice, and cultural importance were passed down to him not through formal schooling, but through the suffering and instruction of his parents who saw education as a means of resistance. He says that "it is impossible to separate Conrad from the sombre mood of defeat and despondency which had swept over Poland after the 1863 calamity, and much of his pessimism and of his dark vision of the world can be traced back to this black event in Poland's history" (Grabowski, 1958, p. 53).

This important period between his birth and his parents' death was mainly lived on the territory of modern-day Ukraine, not just a backdrop, but a site of historical trauma and political controversies. Many towns like Zhytomyr, Berdychiv, and Lviv, which were all located in historically complex regions of different empires, formed what many historians consider to be the borderlands as they were spaces shaped by constantly shifting borders, overlapping empires, and diverse populations (Hrushevsky, 1917, p. 473). Oftentimes, places like these were Polish in memory, Ukrainian in language and peasant culture, controlled by Austrian and Russian imperial administrations, and had vibrant Jewish communities. For a young nobleman like Conrad, who was raised in Polish patriotic traditions, educated in French, and surrounded by ethnicity-based oppression, identity was not a fixed thing, it was

constantly negotiated and layered. For example, some Ukrainian scholars believe that his personal connection with Ukraine may have resulted in chauvinistic attitudes towards it. For instance, Serhii Yakovenko argues that since “Ukrainian ethnic territories were part of the Polish Empire before the partitions, and therefore, in one way or another, a colonial ideology regarding Ukraine had to be formed in the Polish mentality” (Yakovenko, 2009, p. 272). This creates another layer of his personality, since being oppressed within the Russian empire does not necessarily mean that he did not absorb slightly imperialist views towards others.

His later recollections kept this complexity; on the contrary, he often stated it explicitly. In one letter, he famously said:

It is widely known that I am a Pole, and that Józef Konrad are my names, the latter being used by me as a surname so that foreign mouths should not distort my real surname—a distortion which I cannot stand. It does not seem to me that I have been unfaithful to my country by having proved to the English that a gentleman from the Ukraine can be as good a sailor as they, and has something to tell them in their own language (Conrad to J. Korzeniowski, 14 February 1901, in Najder, 2007, pp. 311-312).

By calling himself “the gentleman from Ukraine,” he reveals that he did not view it as a foreign place, but rather as his birthplace that was an integral part of his self-image. Despite embracing the English identity in his adult life, he preserved the cultural memory deeply rooted in his Polish-Ukrainian borderland. Experiencing the death of both parents even before he turned eleven had a profound influence on Conrad’s life. It was more than just a personal tragedy; it was a symbol of the collapse of his world, which had been built on Romantic ideals, nationalist struggle, and nobility. His maternal uncle, Tadeusz Bobrowski, a conservative landowner and legal administrator, took the orphaned and displaced boy under his wing. Bobrowski’s views stood in sharp contrast to those of his brother-in-law Apollo, as

he was more pragmatic, cautious, and moralistic. Najder even goes as far as to call Bobrowski a Russian appeaser: “ Intelligent and hardworking, judicious and “realistic” — in effect, an appeaser — in his youth he dreamed about a civil service career and even gave up his excellent academic prospects for it” (Najder, 2007, p. 7) This was not unusual, considering the general attitude towards nationalism and uprisings in Bobrowski’s family, where, according to Najder, “Józef Bobrowski, Ewa’s father, augmented his wealth by holding himself aloof from all freedom movements” (Najder, 2007, p. 6). Thus, Józef and Tadeusz both opposed Ewa’s marriage to Apollo, despite her fancying him. Tadeusz even took Apollo “on a round of visits to country houses in the neighborhood, a scheme to get him married off to someone else” (Najder, 2007, p. 7).

At the time, Bobrowski lived near Kyiv, and later he moved to Lviv and to Kraków, where he attempted to save his nephew from the dangerous influences of political idealism and social chaos. His letters to Conrad were full of appeals to self-discipline, reason, and duty, which were the virtues that he saw as absolutely necessary for survival in exile and under harsh political control (Najder, 2007, p. 40). For example, in the very first letter composed in Polish, he sent his nephew after his father’s death, he wrote:

Without a thorough education you will be worth nothing in this world, you will never be self-sufficient. . . . Therefore, not that which is easy and attractive must be the object of your studies but that which is useful, although sometimes difficult, for a man who knows nothing fundamentally, who has no strength of character and no endurance, who does not know how to work on his own and guide himself, ceases to be a man and becomes a useless puppet. Try therefore, my child, not to be or to become such a puppet, but to be useful, hardworking, capable, and therefore a worthy human being—and thereby reward us for the cares and worries

devoted to your upbringing (Bobrowski's letter to Conrad, in Najder, 2007, p. 40).

Bobrowski became one of the leading influences on Conrad's life and choices, despite their differences. According to Najder, "Conrad avowed later that Tadeusz had had an enormous influence on him and, not without justification, he regarded that influence as beneficial" (Najder, 2007, p. 37). Trying to do what was best for his nephew, he arranged for private tutors in Lviv and Krakow to educate young Conrad, continued his education in languages and mathematics, and introduced him to more pragmatic varieties of political and ethical thought (Najder, 2007, pp. 38-39). In spite of the restlessness and defiance of young Conrad, who preferred poetry and history to administrative studies, he managed to absorb a lot of his uncle's lessons. When mentioning Bobrowski after his death, Conrad wrote:

I cannot write about Tadeusz Bobrowski, my Uncle, guardian and benefactor without emotion. Even now, after ten years, I still feel his loss. He was a man of great character and unusual qualities of mind. Although he did not understand my desire to join the mercantile marine, on principle, he never objected to it. I saw him four times during the thirty [sic] years of my wanderings (from 1874-1893) but even so I attribute to his devotion, care, and influence, whatever good qualities I may possess. The last two occasions on which I visited him were in the Ukraine (as a British subject) in 1890 and 1893 (Conrad to K. Waliszewski, 5 December 1903, in Najder, 1964, pp. 239-240).

However, his education was not limited to textbooks and tutors. Life in Galicia and later in Austrian Poland created a unique situation that brought him into contact with discourses of imperialism, nationalism, and assimilation. For example, Lviv was inhabited by Ukrainians, Poles, Jews, Armenians, and Germans. Officially being a part of the Habsburg Empire, it kept

a lot of its Polish character, which made it a haven for Polish culture, especially compared with the Russian-occupied territories. The Austrian government, unlike that of Russia, actively promoted the local cultures and languages, opened schools, and tried to educate the peasants (Hrushevsky, 1917, pp. 479-480). Being brought up in this liminal cultural space provided Conrad with a space in which his national identity could be maintained; however, it also reinforced his sense of fragmentation as he felt neither rooted nor free.

The anxieties around his future were steadily rising by the time he reached the age of fifteen. There was a threat of forced conscription into the Russian army looming over him, which would place him under direct control of the regime that killed his parents. As an act of both rebellion and survival, Conrad decided to escape to Marseille, with financial and logistical help from Bobrowski (Najder, 2007, p. 44). This journey led him away from the oppressive tsarist regime to the vast, ambiguous spaces of the sea.

In the 1870s, Marseille was a Mediterranean port teeming with exiles, sailors, fortune-seekers, and political radicals. It offered both anonymity and space for personal transformation for the young Polish nobleman trained in languages and literature. At first, Conrad worked as a steward and later as a mate on French merchant ships, sailing to the Caribbean and South America (Najder, 2007, pp. 50-51). The seafaring years offered more to Conrad than just money and navigation skills; they opened to him the transnational, polyglot world, built on trade, violence, and colonialism. These early encounters with the empire exposed Conrad to the contradictions and the exploitative practices of the colonialists. He saw the same patterns of moral hypocrisy in French and British colonies that he saw as a young exile growing up in the Russian Empire.

In 1878, Conrad had another issue that compelled him to leave France. In 1878, Conrad's uncle received a letter that his nephew needed help. After that he arrived to Marseille and found out that Conrad

...was forbidden to go on the grounds of his being a 21-year-old alien who was under the obligation of doing his military service in his own country. Then it was discovered that he had never had a permit from his Consul - the ex-Inspector of the Port of Marseilles was summoned, who in the register had acknowledged the existence of such a permit - he was severely reprimanded and nearly lost his job - which was undoubtedly very unpleasant for Konrad. The whole affair became far too widely known, and all endeavors by the Captain and the shipowner proved fruitless, and Conrad was forced to stay behind with no hope of serving on French vessels (Bobrowski to Buszczyński, 24 March 1879, in Najder, 1983, p. 51).

As a result of this trouble, “it was decided that he should join the English Merchant Marine where there are no such formalities as in France” (Bobrowski to Buszczyński, 24 March 1879, in Najder, 1983, p. 53). After this move, he was naturalized as a British citizen in 1886, but even the legal shift could not erase his complex identity. While Conrad became British legally and professionally, he remained culturally foreign, as he himself puts it: “Both at sea and on land my point of view is English, from which the conclusion should not be drawn that I have become an Englishman. This is not the case. Homo duplex has in my case more than one meaning” (Conrad to Kazimierz Waliszewski, December 5, 1903, in Simmons, 1995, p. 32). This distance is also reflected in his letters, in which he admired British efficiency and order, and simultaneously exposed their moral blindness and imperial arrogance.

Conrad’s journey led him to secure a position with a Belgian trading company, which brought him to the Congo Free State in 1890 to work as a river steamer captain. Despite lasting only six months, this trip left a lasting psychological impact on him. Conrad got to witness the brutalities of what the Belgians called a civilizing mission, encountering the violence, degradation, and racial hierarchies within King Leopold II’s personal colonial

regime. His letters from that time describe the Congo as a place of “horror and disgust”, and in his letter to Roger Casement, who was called the “father of twentieth-century human rights investigations” for his report on atrocities in the Congo, he referred to the whole experience as “the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience” (Conrad in his letter to Roger Casement, in Najder, 2007, p. 258). Zins points out that Conrad’s ethnic background, in particular his awareness of foreign domination and the oppression of one’s national identity, made him more sensitive to the injustices he saw in Africa. As he puts it:

The case of Poland, his oppressed homeland, was one such issue. The colonial exploitation of Africans was another. His condemnation of imperialism and colonialism, combined with sympathy for its persecuted and suffering victims, was drawn from his Polish background, his own personal sufferings, and the experience of a persecuted people living under foreign occupation. Personal memories created in him a great sensitivity for human degradation and a sense of moral responsibility (Zins, 1998, p. 63).

These absurdities and atrocities became the raw material for *An Outpost of Progress* (1897) and, more famously, *Heart of Darkness* (1899), where Conrad’s personal disillusionment got transformed into a broader discussion on the imperial collapse.

The departure from Eastern Europe can be viewed as both an escape and a self-imposed exile. While fleeing the violence and oppression of the Russians, Conrad also had to leave behind his dreams of Polish independence that took his family away from him. The work on the European merchant ships in the global waters only amplified the feelings of contradiction within him. His writings, first in French and then in English, give the readers an insight into the life of someone who had seen many empires from the inside, yet never been claimed by any of them.

Conrad began writing in English in the 1890s, performing a huge identity transformation. He chose to become a professional writer in a language that he only started to learn in his twenties, after crossing the boundaries of cultures, nations, and empires. This is what makes his becoming one of the most celebrated stylists in English literature so remarkable. As Edward Said put it in his work *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography*: “Either one faculty or the other, mind or heart—perhaps his acquired English reason or his restive Polish sensibility—kept from him both a solid sense of identity and a fully satisfactory harmony struck between the experience and its realization in words” (Said, 1966, p. 40). His transformation was not a simple assimilation into British culture; it was a strategic and well-thought-through way of self-fashioning, heavily influenced by his earlier life in Eastern Europe and the memories of exile.

Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski, Conrad’s full birth name, was, according to Najder, a name that was “too Polish for the British tongue” (Najder, 2007, p. 129). Thus, he chose to adopt Joseph Conrad as a pen name for his public identity, a name that would make him a person who was foreign, yet relatively acceptable. Choosing “Conrad”, one of his given Polish names, as a surname, allowed him to both keep his Polish heritage and adjust himself to the British literary culture. Yet, this change of name did not hide his differences that were showing in his accent, syntax, and rhythm, which were often described as abnormally elaborate, most likely as a result of his early education in Polish and French. For example, Najder comments that “there are signs of French influence on the vocabulary, and Polish on the syntax,” (Najder, 2007, p. 148) and Clarke highlights that one of the most prominent features of his texts is their musicality: “I wonder whether Conrad's love of such words may not be explained, in part at least, on the psychological side by their melancholy negation-values, and on the aesthetic side by their dooming melody (l, m, n, and r are our most melodious consonants, and these favored words begin with one or another of these

sounds, most of them ending with the l sound)” (Clarke, 1922, p. 272). This may be a reflection of both his language mastery and the underlying alienation of someone who is not writing as a native speaker, thus having to consciously pick his words in a world where he remained an outsider.

This duality is deeply entrenched in his prose. As George Herbert Clarke claims in his work “Joseph Conrad and His Art” (1922, p. 270), the characters he wrote are dealing with the issues of loyalty, dislocation, and compromised ideals, which mirror his own lived experiences. Lord Jim and his internal torment, Charles Marlow, morally paralyzed by what he saw, and duplicitous Razumov in *Under Western Eyes*, are all reflections of their author’s tension between personal honor and politics. Clarke also points out that “Conrad’s heroes are nearly always quiet men of a rare simplicity, the slow revelation of whose soul-processes constitutes both the essence of his stories and the extraordinary emotional inspiration of his tone” (Clarke, 1922, p. 270), which he believes to be a reflection of Conrad himself who was a Polish Catholic nobleman, raised under Russian rule, sailing under French and British flags, and writing in the language of the empire.

Joseph Conrad never denied his origins. His letters reflect his Polish origins and his Ukrainian birthplace. He once said, “I have proved to the English that a gentleman from the Ukraine can be as good a sailor as they,” (Conrad to J. Korzeinowski, 14 February 1901, in Najder, 2007, p. 220) revealing his belonging not through blood or culture, but through action to disprove the imperial hierarchies that portray Eastern Europeans as backward, irrational, or unfit for public life.

Therefore, the act of writing was inseparable from an act of self-determination for Conrad. All of his works were shaped by his memories of exile, the languages he spoke, and the need to translate not only between the languages but between different worlds. For this reason, Bojarski argues that we cannot fully classify Conrad as a British writer. To support

this argument, he provides a recollection of a conversation between Rudyard Kipling and Jan Perkowski, Conrad's acquaintance. As he recounts: "Kipling pointed out that Conrad, "When speaking English, was sometimes difficult to understand, but with a pen in his hand, he was first amongst us," and that " It was Kipling's firm conviction that intellectually there was nothing English in Conrad at all" (Bojarski, 1965, p. 31). His worldview, ethics, and concerns were not only shaped by the Victorian or Edwardian cultural experiences but also by the trauma of Poland's partitions and the experience of tsarist oppression. According to a Ukrainian Polonist, Olha Stoliarenko, "he did not feel at home either in Poland or in England. In his native land, the writer was accused of treason, infidelity, and desertion. In England, he was never accepted as a national writer. Conrad was perceived as a foreigner who wrote in a foreign language, it was claimed that he had neither a country nor a language" (Stoliarenko, 2007, p. 335).

Conrad's life was shaped by geographic, linguistic, and cultural movements, but it was also based on fractures. The family he was born into was destroyed by a failed revolution and imperial subjugation, yet he emerged from the currents of 19th-century Eastern Europe as a man with no stable home, writing in a foreign language, and living in a world the values of which he could neither fully embrace nor escape. In 1899, he wrote: "For myself, I look at the future from the depths of a very dark past, and I find I am allowed nothing but fidelity to an absolutely lost cause, to an idea without a future" (Conrad, *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad: Volume II 1898-1902*, in Niland, 2005, p. 171).

Being in-between languages and empires defined not only Conrad's identity, but also his artistic views. As Simmons points out: "There is hardly a Conrad novel where the characters are 'at home' (1995, p. 37). Instead, they are out in the world, experiencing alienation by the systems they serve, they are haunted by their own decisions, and pursued by the shadows of their past. Moving through the imperial spaces and witnessing brutalities, they

need to narrate things that are hard to explain. This is a reflection of the man who created them, shaped by the margins of empires, forever stuck between critique and complicity, nostalgia and estrangement, voice and silence.

The complexity of Joseph Conrad's early life, marked by his birth in Ukraine, orphanhood due to the empire, and subsequent exile, suggests that the colonial imagination does not necessarily begin in the colonies. It can start in the borderlands of Eastern Europe, where entire nations were erased, cultures overlapped, and new identities were created in resistance. The darkness Conrad later wrote about was not only in the Congo, it was also hidden in the political prisons of Warsaw, the cold winters of the exile, and in the memories of the home that he lost.

2.2 *Heart of Darkness* in Context: Publication, Politics, and the Literary Field

In order to fully grasp the political and symbolic work in *Heart of Darkness*, it is crucial to locate the novella in the context of its first publication, which is the conservative and pro-imperial literary world of late Victorian Britain. While being far from depicting abstract philosophical allegories or metaphors of evil, the novella was initially published in a deeply political setting that was shaped by literary gatekeeping, that is the editors, publishers, and cultural institutions deciding what is worth publishing and what is not, imperial ideology, and the political currents of the late 19th century. Initially, it was presented to the world between February and April 1899 in three installments of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, and it was highly enjoyed by the British conservative public at this period of active British colonial expansion and amid the popular criticism of King Leopold II's actions in the Free Congo State.

In this section, I will analyze and examine the political and literary context of the serialization of the story, particularly focusing on *Blackwood's* as a means of promoting the

British imperial hegemony. I argue that *Heart of Darkness* is more than just a critique of the empire, or an important piece of early modernist literature, before modernist literature even became a term, but a complex hybrid heavily influenced by its medium. Using the detailed analysis of *Blackwood's* published by Atkinson (2004), this section studies the positioning of Conrad's novella for readers who believed in the moral supremacy of British imperialism, despite its hints at some dark truths beneath the civilizing mission rhetoric. The section will then examine the implications of it being a serialized story and how its form and tone were shaped by the expectations of the format and the magazine's conservative audience.

Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine was founded in 1817, and from that very moment, cultivated its distinct conservative voice within the British literary scene, doing so by supporting all the prominent right-wing politics and promoting imperialist and nationalist values to its readers (Atkinson, 2004, pp. 370-371). It had achieved recognition as a prestigious and traditional venue for adventure fiction, travel journals, and commentary, aligning with British imperial ideals by the 1890s. In February, March, and April of 1899, it published Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* within this exact ideological space, which praised the British Empire and criticized its imperial rivals from time to time.

Atkinson writes that *Heart of Darkness* was deeply embedded in the contemporary discourse on imperialism in *Blackwood's*, which had a basic rule "that good imperialists are British and bad imperialists are not" (Atkinson, 2004, p. 390). His thorough analysis of the issues of the magazine in which the novella was published reveals that it was surrounded by works and essays focused on reinforcing British imperial, economic, and moral superiority. He also claims that "the average *Blackwood's* reader would have been neither equipped nor inclined to read Conrad's story 'against the grain,' as ultimately subversive of its own and the reader's discourse" (Atkinson, 2004, p. 375). Viewed in this context, the critique of imperial violence presented by Conrad, which was mainly aimed at the Belgian practices of managing

the Congo, was perceived by its first readers as yet another confirmation of what they saw as more humane British rule.

This ideological filter has definitely shaped the perception of the story by the audience. It is widely accepted that the Company in *Heart of Darkness* stands to represent the Belgian Colonial Administration, infamous for its brutality, exploitation, and lack of oversight. These references would be obvious for an average *Blackwood's* reader, who would see Marlow's disillusionment as criticism of foreign corruption instead of imperialism in general. This assumption is reinforced in the text when Marlow says that in British colonies, "there is a touch of work about it... one knows that some real work is done in there," which mirrors the distinction maintained by *Blackwood's* about morally justified British imperialism and the evil, depraved rule of their continental rivals and "the magazine as a whole encourages its readers, many of whom lived and worked in the empire, to read '*The Heart of Darkness*' as a critique of foreign-that is, Continental-imperialism and an analysis of why it is inferior to the British variety" (Atkinson, 2004, p. 379).

However, Conrad's stance on the issue is more ambiguous than suggested by this framing. While it is true that the story was positioned within the nationalist discourse of *Blackwood's*, the text does not provide easy moral distinctions. Despite this fact, Atkinson (2004, p. 380) insists that *Heart of Darkness's* initial readers would more than likely see it not as an anti-imperialist critique, but as a cautionary tale talking about the dangers of the mismanagement of the colonies by others, mainly their "ancestral enemy" - the French (Atkinson, 2004, p. 380). Of course, *Heart of Darkness* is not about France or its colonies, but "While such [*Blackwood's*] readers would certainly not confuse Belgium with France, it is unlikely that they would regard the two countries as particularly distinct, since French was the language of both" (Atkinson, 2004, p. 380). While agreeing with Atkinson's argument about the novella serving more as a warning against foreign imperialism than a general

rejection of imperial ideas, Conrad's text also reveals the moral weaknesses and contradictions that are inherent to every empire, as they are not limited to a specific imperial power, but are something inevitable in the imperial enterprise as a whole.

The ideological framing of the magazine and the real picture of Conrad's narrative framing created a tension that is crucial for understanding the novella's initial critical and political reception. As Conrad's narrative fits in with other segments of *Blackwood's*, not because it is written in support of imperialism, but because the language, assumptions, and figures written in it are familiar to a conservative reader. Therefore, the most radical points of the novella get blunted by the vehicle of delivery of those thoughts to the public. Atkinson highlights that

‘*The Heart of Darkness*’ acknowledges the complexities of the imperial project, of human imperfections, and of the consequent dangers of being beyond the reins of civilized life. In doing so, it is fully a part of the moral and political discourse of *Blackwood's*, whose basic rule is that good imperialists are British and bad imperialists are not. Conrad is faithful to this discourse in that while he shows negative examples of imperialism, his examples are never British (Atkinson, 2004, p. 390).

At the turn of the 20th century, serialization was a very common way to publish literary pieces. Especially for authors like Joseph Conrad who had to rely on public support and patronage of popular periodicals, however, it influenced not only their contents, but also their form and tone (Donovan, 2014, p. 73). Currently, *Heart of Darkness* is mostly read as a unified novella, presented as a single text, despite its initial publication being split into three parts, which required certain adjustments from the author to enable it to function as separate installments, each having its own rhythm, tension, and character arc.

The publishing history of this text by Conrad suggests that serializations had a heavy impact on the author's narrative flow and the adjustments of the plot to fit the readers' expectations as "the periodicals that published his writing are uniquely valuable as records of the production of textual meaning" (Donovan, 2014, p. 83). In this case, it meant achieving a balance between imperial adventure and philosophical reflection, both supporting their moral framework and pointing them to modern political and psychological complexities. The recursive framing, temporal shifts, and delayed climaxes are a reflection of this balancing act in *Heart of Darkness*. The frame narrative on the boat going through the Thames anchors the narrative, which allows each installment to be opened and closed within a reflective frame that helps the reader to understand the plot even as it gets more complicated and unsettling.

Furthermore, serialization affected and amplified Conrad's ambiguity, since each section had to keep the readers interested while providing some sort of partial revelation. This explains, for example, why Marlow's monologue keeps looping back on itself, repeating and reframing the previous thoughts. The famous literary critic and historian, Ian Watt, describes the resulting phenomenon as "delayed decoding since it combines the forward temporal progression of the mind, as it receives messages from the outside world, with the much slower reflexive process of making out their meaning" (Watt, 1979, p. 175). The feeling of epistemological stalling reflects Marlow's confusion, psychological disorientation, and the growing uncertainties of the imperial mission. The narrative does not provide a coherent moral judgement; instead, it focuses on maintaining tension and delay, which is very suitable for the serialized content, as then ambiguity can perform both as a narrative device and an adjournment of the author's political stance.

This strategy is also relevant when it comes to other stories by Conrad. He relied heavily on periodicals throughout his whole career, contributing not only to *Blackwood's* but also to *The Pall Mall Magazine*, *The Nineteenth Century*, and later, *The English Review* and

many other magazines with different audiences across multiple countries (Donovan, 2014, p. 74). These magazines also helped to shape his public persona as that of a morally serious and stylistically innovative author, who pays close attention to world politics. Therefore, we can view serialization not only as a mode of distribution for him but also as something that shaped the text and its perception. This positions *Heart of Darkness* as both entertainment and ethical inquiry, literary experimentation and a report on imperial crimes.

As discussed earlier in Chapter 1, the 1890s were a period of increased imperial anxiety in Britain, marked by the intensified public awareness of the Belgian atrocities in the Congo Free State, which led to the rhetoric of moral differentiation between Britain and other European empires. This climate allowed for the critical assessment of imperialism, as long as it was targeted at the rivaling states. Arendt argues that late-imperial liberalism often tried to merge conquest and morality by pretending that colonialism could be a form of stewardship: “British imperialists, compromising on the Mandate system, looked like the guardians of the self-determination of peoples” (Arendt, 1945, p. 443). This contradiction is essential in the context of *Heart of Darkness*, where the Company is portrayed as the opposite of the British restraint and efficiency, despite their shared ideological underpinnings of exploitation and hypocrisy (Atkinson, 2004, p. 379). Hence, the publication context of the novella is a reflection of its narrative ambiguity, operating within the imperial nationalist framework while trying to subtly undermine its core principles.

While the immediate reception of *Heart of Darkness* was shaped by its imperial and periodical context, the complexity and obliqueness of the novella made sure it would not be remembered simply as yet another imperial text. The publication of the story coincides with the period of a major shift in literature, where the realist conventions started to give way to modernist experimentation, marked by a fracture of generic expectations of adventure, travel,

and imperial narratives. *Heart of Darkness* was canonized for its modernist critique of language, certainly, and empire in this landscape.

From the get-go, the novella manages to disrupt the literary standards and expectations. While adopting the structure of a typical imperial adventure with its European protagonist going into the unknown, encountering danger, and undergoing a transformation as a result, Conrad also manages to deconstruct this narrative through his recursive, framed narration, psychological and emotional depth, and symbolic opacity, which would be typical of modernist use of language which was “characterized as much by this independence as by any fit with consciousness or phenomena” (Berry, 2006, p. 116). What *Heart of Darkness* offered to its readers was not a story of conquest and moral triumph, but a monologue constantly postponing resolution. The events are filtered through the mind of an unreliable narrator, and the symbolism is deliberately unstable. Thus, not only does the novella resist the ideological underpinnings of imperialism, but it also rejects the formal expectations of the adventure tale.

This instability is important when it comes to understanding the success of the novella and its place in literary history. Fowler argues that the formation of the literary canon is not only based on thematic importance, but it also hinges on the text’s ability to disrupt and redefine its genre: “We may depart from it [the official canon], that is, in ways that are not merely eccentric: as by seeing merit in an experimental work or by revaluing a neglected one” (Fowler, 1979, p. 98). *Heart of Darkness* is a perfect example of this phenomenon. While its initial reception was based on its position within imperial fiction, it gradually shifted to being celebrated as an important work of early modernism, amplified by its inclusion in literary anthologies and curricula all over the world.

The following chapter is going to show that this instability of voice, perspective, and identity gets extended into the structure of the novella’s racial imagination. The evasive

critique of imperialism also rendered its depictions of Africa and its people deeply fraught. Chapter 3 will cover the topic of racial absence by examining the ways in which *Heart of Darkness* portrays the African landscapes and bodies as visible, yet still voiceless and narratively erased, which both mirrors and complicates its historical and literary context.

Chapter 3. Race and Representation in *Heart of Darkness*

First published in 1899 in *Blackwood's* magazine, *Heart of Darkness* has since become a canonical yet controversial work of modern literature. The novella is framed as a story told by the seaman Marlow aboard a boat on the Thames, and the events are filtered through multiple levels of perspective. The combination of unreliable narration, evocative symbolism, and slightly disorienting temporal shifts is central to understanding how the novella engages with the ideology of its time. Instead of presenting a clear defence or critique of the imperial systems, *Heart of Darkness* employs ambiguity, silence, and metaphors to both expose the logic of colonial domination, while still occasionally reproducing the very assumptions it critiques. These stylistic choices are not accidental as they are the key to understanding how the novella constructs Africa as a landscape of primitivism and darkness, and excludes African voices from its narrative.

The question of “race” and the ways in which it is constructed, imagined, and obscured has always been very prominent in discussions on Conrad, especially when it comes to *Heart of Darkness*. Whether it is Chinua Achebe’s famous indictment of Joseph Conrad as a “thoroughgoing racist” (Achebe, 1978, p. 9) or a softer reading highlighting the novella’s ambiguity, there is always some controversy when it comes to the author’s depiction of Africa and the Africans.

This chapter shifts from abstract discussions of civilization to its manifestations in the narrative of *Heart of Darkness*. Since the imperial ideology relied on the hierarchies of race and temporality, the novella uses metaphors and narrative omission to portray those hierarchies. Instead of reducing the novella to the discussion of critique and complicity, this chapter argues that the story portrays a sort of symbolic instability, both exposing the mechanisms of racial erasure and participating in them.

3.1 The Portrayal of Africa as a Site of Mystery, Savagery, and Primitivism

From his childhood under Russia's colonialistic policies towards the Polish people to his work with a Belgian Company in the Congo, Joseph Conrad's life had many ties to imperialism and colonialism. While these terms are sometimes used interchangeably, the differences between them need to be pointed out. The former, imperialism, refers to the ideological systems and principles that justify the expansion of the state for the sake of economic benefits, and it implies "command and supreme authority" of the imperial states over their subjects (Chilcote, 2002, p. 81). Colonialism is described as a form of physical domination and exploitation of those subjects (Horvath, 1972, p. 46). Conrad faced both of these issues and discussed them in his works. In spite of his being directly affected by colonialism and being perceived as lesser than others solely because of his origin, Conrad applies the same reductive views of Africans as are applied to him as a Pole. The vivid descriptions he employs portray Africa as an enigmatic, mysterious, untamed, fertile space, in stark contrast with white, polished, and sterile Europe, highlighting the otherness and alienation of the African people.

Nowadays, scholars, for example Patrick Brantlinger, Hunt Hawkins, and Jonah Raskin, point out that in *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow seems to justify British imperialism by claiming it to be efficient and backed by an "Idea," unlike the Belgian colonialism in the Congo, which is depicted as inefficient and solely based on the greed of the Belgian rulers. Raskin claims that such a statement was included by Conrad as an attempt to blend in with the dominating narrative among the British, as he, being Polish, felt like an outsider in the culture in which he lived, yet he had an agenda of exposing them and showing the truth:

Marlow talks about sacred flames, the flag, the indomitable British Spirit. It's Korzeinowski the Pole aping the British, insinuating himself into British culture, trying to disguise that foreign look, that Eastern European

accent. But he is also an explorer, a middleman with contacts at the end of the road. He is out to bombard the British (Raskin, 1971, p. 151).

Hawkins (1979, pp. 287-288) is another scholar who insists on remembering the ways in which colonialism in the Congo was different from others, highlighting that the colonial practices tend to be different depending on both the empire and the colony, instead of being a monolith of ideas and practices shared by everyone: "Because we use the single word "imperialism," we tend to think that the phenomenon was essentially the same in all areas, varying only according to such subjective factors as the culture and the benevolence of the mother country," and that "since imperialism was no identical in all territories, Conrad's harsh evaluation of the Congo need not imply any final judgement, either favorable or unfavorable, of British imperialism" (Hawkins, 1979, p. 288). In *Heart of Darkness*, imperialism as an ideology is judged only on two factors: its efficiency and the "Idea" (or lack thereof). While "the Idea" is never clearly defined in the story, one can assume that it has something to do with "civilizing" the natives and with teaching them the Western ways of life instead of just trying to produce as much profit as possible. In that case, it is clear why Marlow was so attracted to the thought of Kurtz as an enlightener of the savages, as opposed to the Company, which insisted on just exploiting the natives for its own benefit (Hawkins, 1979, p. 286).

For Hawkins, Marlow's insistence on efficiency was not necessarily a way to blend in and not stand out among the typical texts published in *Blackwood's* but a way to "appeal to the values of his audience" to showcase the extent of the harm done in the Congo. As he puts it:

Conrad was not necessarily trying to ingratiate himself with the British, to 'disguise that foreign look.' Rather, in the political aspect of the story, he was making an appeal to the values of his audience so that they

might censure the atrocities in the Congo, a colony materially different from Britain's territories. In the subtext of *Heart of Darkness* Conrad suggests a further judgement against British imperialism itself, but this judgement is made according to entirely different criteria and remains implicit (Hawkins, 1979, p. 288).

Being a personal possession of King Leopold II, the Congo was very different from other European colonies. So, by using the popular beliefs among the British in efficiency and the idea of civilizing missions, Conrad was able to gain some more sympathy from an average reader for the Congo cause (Hawkins, 1979, p. 288).

In 1975, a famous Nigerian novelist and literary critic, Chinua Achebe, gave a lecture at the University of Massachusetts Amherst that has greatly influenced all the criticism of Joseph Conrad's literature that followed it. It was titled "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" and has sparked a lot of discussions and counterarguments regarding the topic of representation of Africa and the Africans in works written by Western authors, so it has often been re-published later in many literary journals and collections of essays. Achebe claims that *Heart of Darkness* treats Africa as only a backdrop for Kurtz's moral deterioration and that it is reduced "to the role of props for the breakup of one petty European mind" (Achebe, 1978, p. 9). In his view, in the text, Africa has become a symbol of mysterious femininity, a place of seduction and savagery, rather than its own place with thousands of separate cultures and histories. The lack of knowledge allows the Europeans to project their deepest fears onto it, creating an abstract site of chaos and danger that helps them to put it in opposition to the "civilized" core of the empire.

In my opinion, one of the most harrowing examples of this projection is the scene of Marlow's encounter with the dying workers in the so-called "grove of death," where "black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth,

half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair” (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 17). Later in the text, he returns to the same metaphor, as he says: “Dark human shapes could be made out in the distance...” (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 61). I think that by presenting the workers and the native tribes as mere shapes time and time again, Marlow strips them of their humanity and pushes them into the shadows. In the “grove of death” scene, Conrad visually frames the picture of the horrors of colonial exploitation, yet renders African bodies as indistinct and faceless. Bette London claims that the qualities projected onto the continent also create a justification for the conquest and colonization as a means to civilize it and the people living there. The native way of life is considered inherently inferior to that of the colonizers; the “primitivism” of the African cultures is not objective, but it is seen as such due to the Eurocentric standards in place (London, 1989, p. 239).

Despite the pragmatism of the notion that the communication between the oppressor and the oppressed is often marked by the latter’s absence, Hooper (1993, p. 71) claims that the realist interpretation of the novel simply does not work, considering Conrad’s personal history with being subjected to Russian imperialism as well as needing to adapt, live, and write in a foreign language (while he successfully managed to do that, he was still heavily criticized by his contemporaries for his accent and unintelligible speech). She also asserts that critics like Achebe fail to consider the symbolism in Conrad’s work. She mentions a letter that the author sent to Richard Curle on 24 April 1922, which specifically states:

It is a strange fact that everything that I have, of set artistic purpose, laboured to leave indefinite, suggestive, in the penumbra of initial inspiration, should have that light turned on to it and its insignificance... exposed for any fool to comment upon or even for average minds to be disappointed with. Didn't it ever occur to you, my dear Curie, that I knew

what I was doing in leaving the facts of my life and even of my tales in the background? Explicitness, my dear fellow, is fatal to the glamour of all artistic work, robbing it of all suggestiveness, destroying all illusions (Curle, 1928, 112-113).

So, Conrad himself seems to be suggesting that his works are not meant to be taken at face value but rather carefully dissected to be able to see all of the symbols he puts into them. I believe he is sincere in his assertion that this literary work need not be taken at face value, as it deliberately resists clarity to mirror the instability within the imperial system.

The language of the novella seems to reinforce the stereotypes of Africa as a primitive and savage place, something that is inherently different from the civilized European countries as it is depicted as “dark”, “mysterious”, and an overall chaotic place, in stark contrast with the light of the European civilization, which polarizes their representation with Africa portrayed as the opposite of culture and development: “*Heart of Darkness* 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, 1978, p. 3). This is one of his main arguments when he refers to Conrad as “a bloody racist” (Achebe, 1978, p. 9). However, I believe it is important to note that this symbolic register in the text is not limited to descriptions of Africa. The novella’s frame narrative, for example, describes the Thames in a similar fashion: “What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth!... The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires” (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 5), but the same place is now “condensed into a mournful gloom, [the air] brooding motionless over the biggest, and the greatest, town on earth” (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 3). The continuity between the river of the empire and its supposed greatness and the river of colonized lands complicates the clarity of the boundary between the imperial centers and the peripheries.

The symbolic representation of Africa as unknowable and threatening is more than just a literary device, but rather a part of a broader political logic. In this regard, I find particularly relevant the concept of necropolitics, introduced by Joseph-Achille Mbembe, a Cameroonian historian, political theorist, and one of the most prominent voices in contemporary postcolonial discourse. Building on Foucault's idea of biopower, he defines necropolitics as the use of social and political power to determine who must die, and, as he claims, this is "the ultimate expression of sovereignty" (Mbembe, 2003, p. 11). In the imperial context, where the colonies do not possess that kind of power, they get turned into what he calls death-worlds, "unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead" (Mbembe, 2003, p. 40). In such spaces, African lives are treated as expendable and unimportant.

In my opinion, Mbembe's theoretical model helps explain the portrayal of Africa in *Heart of Darkness* not just as a dark and dangerous place, but as a site of sanctioned violence. One example of such violence is the scene where Marlow sees the chained-up Africans:

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 (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 16).

In this case, the violence against the so-called "criminals" is directly sanctioned by the state, and the signs of starvation Marlow sees are not incidental if Mbembe's theory is taken into

consideration. Another example of sanctioned violence is shown when Marlow sees Kurtz's house and the heads on the stakes around it:

These round knobs were not ornamental but symbolic; they were expressive and puzzling, striking and disturbing—food for thought and also for vultures if there had been any looking down from the sky; but at all events for such ants as were industrious enough to ascend the pole. They would have been even more impressive, those heads on the stakes, if their faces had not been turned to the house. Only one, the first I had made out, was facing my way. I was not so shocked as you may think. The start back I had given was really nothing but a movement of surprise. I had expected to see a knob of wood there, you know. I returned deliberately to the first I had seen—and there it was, black, dried, sunken, with closed eyelids—a head that seemed to sleep at the top of that pole, and, with the shrunken dry lips showing a narrow white line of the teeth, was smiling, too, smiling continuously at some endless and jocose dream of that eternal slumber (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 58).

In my view, these heads symbolize violence and domination, fully accepted by the state, and not even shocking to see. The image of danger in Africa in the novella also reflects the necropolitics described by Mbembe. For example, the description of the river:

But there was in it one river especially, a mighty big river, that you could see on the map, resembling 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. And as I looked at the map of it in a shop window, it fascinated me as a snake would a bird—a silly little bird (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 8).

Here, the reader is immediately presented with a depiction of the African landscape as a snake, which is generally accepted as a symbol of danger, deceit, and death. While it is nonetheless enchanting and fascinating, I think it represents the predatory nature of colonial power winding through Africa. The river is depicted as a sort of lifeline for the death-world described by Mbembe, which allows the imperial powers to penetrate and dominate the land. I believe that Mbembe's idea of colonial sovereignty governing through death resonates with the serpentine imagery of the river, which is depicted as a menacing force carrying and enforcing death throughout the colony.

This portrayal of the land eventually extends to the colonized people, who are then viewed as just as savage and primal as their lands. For example, Singh (1978) writes that the language of the novella supports and reinforces the culture that the imperial rulers rely on to keep the natives "in their place". To him, Marlow seems to think of the natives not as people, but as something slightly above the hyenas, a force of nature unable to control itself, and that creates a lot of confusion for him when he sees the cannibals practicing restraint despite the fact that they were the "savages" and on top of that were starving due their hippo meat provisions having been thrown away by the pilgrims:

Marlow's sympathy for the oppressed blacks is only superficial. He feels sorry for them when he sees them dying, but when he sees them healthy, practising their customs, he feels nothing but abhorrence and loathing, like a good colonizer to whom such a feeling offers a perfect rationalization for his policies. If blacks are evil then they must be conquered and put under white man's rule for their own good. Marlow is trying to have it both ways, anti-colonialistic and anti-depravity, but as long as he associates the life of depravity with the life of blacks then he can hardly be called anti-colonial. He may sympathize with the plight of blacks,

he may be disgusted by the effects of economic colonialism, but because he has no desire to understand or appreciate people of any culture other than his own, he is not emancipated from the mentality of a colonizer (Singh, 1978, p. 45).

Native customs and rituals terrify Marlow not because he understands them but precisely because he does not. I believe that his fear is not rooted in knowledge, but in his fears and refusal to even try to understand them. Instead of attempting to engage with the natives, he reduces their customs and beliefs to mere savagery and chaos. For example, this is how he describes one of his encounters with a native tribe:

... a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage. The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy. The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us—who could tell? (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 36)

Here, Marlow gets to witness what could likely be just a ritual dance, but he admits to not understanding what it is, and instead of seeking meaning, he just calls Africans “prehistoric” and does not give it a second thought. Another example is his interaction with the cannibals on the boat. He seems to be surprised that “they did not eat each other before my face: they had brought along a provision of hippo meat which went rotten, and made the mystery of the wilderness stink in my nostrils” (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 35), but, according to Singh, “he should have realized, if he had really kept his eyes and mind open, was that cannibals do not eat human flesh out of greed or lust or even as a dietary staple, but to commemorate an important occasion connected with the well-being of their society” (Singh, 1978, p. 46). When observing the traditional rites of the tribes they are passing, Marlow immediately comes to the stereotypical conclusion that they are performed to invoke some dark powers,

despite there being no indication of this. This shows that anything different from what Marlow is used to is automatically perceived by him as dark and ugly. And the sole idea of being related to the people who perform those rituals scares Marlow:

It was unearthly, and the men were—No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. 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 (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 36).

It is easy to see how Marlow manages to get rid of the awareness of the kinship between the men on the steamer and the men performing the rites by labelling their actions as horrid, ugly, and dark. This allows him to think of them as lesser than him and that there is some sort of connection between the physical blackness of the natives with the darkness in their souls: “A kinship does exist between the men on the shore and the men on the boat, but it is ugly because the black men personify in themselves and reawaken in the whites through their practices the destructive powers of the Unconscious” (Singh, 1978, p. 47).

Ironically, the rites and talismans that the natives use are not inherently that different from the things Marlow uses:

Marlow, for all his superior attitudes, is not at all superior to the blacks. Like a tribesman he possesses talismans to ward off evil, only he calls them devotion to duty, efficiency, and a sense of responsibility.

Incidentally the physical manifestation of his devotion to his job, the strips of woolen blanket hastily tied to leaky steam-pipes, looks perilously similar to his 'very second-rate' helmsman's impromptu magic 'charm, made of rags, tied to his arm' (Singh, 1978, p. 48).

I think that his point of view that hard work and efficiency could lift anyone from the savagery of Africa to becoming a civilized man is not just an opinion; it is an almost religious belief that keeps him going in the circumstances in which he ended up.

The language obscurity is considered one of the main tools of their "othering". Conrad's vague language makes both Africa and its inhabitants seem mysterious, unfathomable, and dangerous by using words such as "savage", "dark", and "unknowable" to describe them. The lack of a clear and nuanced description heavily contributes to the general stereotypical perception of Africa as primitive and exotic. They also claim that the choice of obscure, full of metaphors, language reflects the deep fears of the Europeans. The uncertainty of Marlow's descriptions mirrors his emotional vulnerability, inner conflicts, and racial biases: "the obscurity, namely the sign, not only demonstrates Marlow's perception of the physical world, but also reveals Conrad's concern for people's inner world. Ultimately, it enlightens that what is presented is not necessarily true and we need to pay more attention to details in order to extrapolate the truth of our world" (Liu & Zhong, 2023, p. 319). Therefore, Conrad's portrayal of Africa is not the exact representation of reality, but rather the European fears of degeneration, darkness, and collapse of the system. The existing hierarchy, which values European rationality and efficiency, is only reinforced by such projections within the novella.

Nature is shown in the story as dominant and overpowering, just waiting to repudiate all of the "civilization" that the colonisers have created on its territory. Such depictions strongly reinforce the existing stereotypes of Africa being a primal land, where everything

(including the “civilized” men) inevitably returns to the savage state, leading the good men like Kurtz who believe in the idea of civilizing the natives, bringing progress to those lawless lands, into madness, revealing their primal desires that were hidden under the facade of the civilization. Achebe argues that

It was and is the dominant image of Africa in the Western imagination, and Conrad merely brought the peculiar gifts of his own mind to bear on it. For reasons which can certainly use close psychological inquiry, the West seems to suffer deep anxieties about the precariousness of its civilization and to have a need for constant reassurance by comparison with Africa. If Europe, advancing in civilization, could cast a backward glance periodically at Africa trapped in primordial barbarity, it could say with faith and feeling: There go I but for the grace of God. Africa is to Europe as the picture is to Dorian Gray - a carrier onto whom the master unloads his physical and moral deformities so that he may go forward, erect and immaculate. Consequently, for Achebe, Conrad portrays Africa as something to be avoided, just as the picture has to be hidden away to safeguard the man's jeopardous integrity (Achebe, 1978, p. 13).

But not everyone agrees on interpreting Marlow’s words directly. Frances B. Singh (1978, pp. 41-42) highlights three ways in which Marlow shares his impressions of colonialism: his description of the colonization of Britain by the Romans is claimed to be a direct attack on the imperial structures, where he actively criticizes their practices and methods, calling them “robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale” (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 7). On the second level of his attitude, he shows his opinions by using irony as a method of subverting the fancy words used by the colonial rulers against them. Here, he uses phrases such as “noble cause” (Conrad, 1899/1971, p.9) and “the jolly pioneers of

progress” (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 10) to point out and highlight how such speeches and phrases are just hollow terms hiding the greediness and hypocrisy of the colonizers.

The third type of comment, according to Singh (1978, p.42), has to do with the use of metaphor as a way of criticizing colonialism. On this level, the title itself rises as a powerful metaphor with several layers to it. First of all, without directly naming it, it points to the location of the story, which is on the “dark continent” and in the heart of it, which suggests the center of Africa as a setting of the story. Secondly, it is a reference to the horrible practices of the European colonizers, showing that maybe the real darkness is not found on the dark continent but in the hearts of those who plunder it. These two interpretations also correspond to the first two types of criticism Marlow’s narrative offers to us. Last, but certainly not least, is the psychological aspect of this metaphor. The reason for the colonizer’s depravity is their distance from civilized Europe, which allowed them to abandon all morals and return to their natural state. The journey upriver is not only the physical journey through the conquered land but a trip “back to the earliest beginnings” (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 34), the descent into the repressed, savage parts of their psyche. It reflects their own internal corruption, hidden under the pressure of the so-called civilized society. In my opinion, Marlow himself does not intend to expose or reveal the dark and violent nature of colonial expansion, however, by using the vivid and powerful metaphors, as described by Singh, Conrad manages to uncover the brutalities and destruction of imperialism. Therefore, overwhelming depictions of nature do not serve to reinforce the stereotypes, but to expose the fragile foundation of the “civilization”.

The moral decay of Kurtz is perceived as the result of his “going native” and adopting the savage and cruel ways of acting from the native tribes with which he surrounded himself. But Singh (1978, p. 49) argues that if anything, Kurtz did not go native enough, as his cruel ways of ruling the natives were done to collect and sell as much ivory as possible, and that

would only be beneficial for the empire, “Kurtz perverted the customs of the tribe, making them a means to a deplorable end—namely, keeping the ivory flowing and colonialism a profitable venture for his employers—and he never assumed the positive virtues of the tribe. Thus, the adoption of the tribal way of life is the wrong symbol for Kurtz's depravity. Marlow picks it because he does not differentiate between tribal customs and evil practices (Singh, 1978, p. 49). Had he fully adopted the natives' ways of governance, he would have thought of their well-being more than he did of the glory of the empire and the income it would produce for him. However, I think that Marlow does not see it as for him all of the native things and customs are inherently evil and nothing good can come out of them, hence, the degeneration of Kurtz can only be the result of his assimilation into his new environment.

The discussion on whether the novella can and should be separated from its author, the times, and the context in which it was written, is to this day popular among critics and readers of this story. Achebe's answer to it is definitely negative. He wrote:

Certainly, Conrad appears to go to considerable pains to set up layers of insulation between himself and the moral universe of his story. He has, for example, a narrator behind a narrator. The primary narrator is Marlow, but his account is given to us through the filter of a second, shadowy person. But if Conrad's intention is to draw a cordon sanitaire between himself and the moral and psychological malaise of his narrator, his care seems to me totally wasted because he neglects to hint, however subtly or tentatively, at an alternative frame of reference by which we may judge the actions and opinions of his characters. It would not have been beyond Conrad's power to make that provision if he had thought it necessary. Marlow seems to me to enjoy Conrad's complete confidence - a feeling reinforced by the close similarities between their two careers (Achebe, 1978, p. 7).

He insists that works of literature like *Heart of Darkness* only work to strengthen the pre-existing negative notions people have of Africa as a savage, undomesticated land, filled with brutes, instead of bringing peace and unity into the world.

The representation of Africa as a space of racial otherness is not limited to the landscapes. While turning the continent itself into an abstraction as a metaphor for fear, darkness, or the end of reason, Conrad also transforms its people, who are rendered voiceless, nameless, and narratively opaque. Just like the land is presented to the reader as a symbolic void, so are the people belonging to it treated as extensions of that void. Their silence is not the choice of the characters, it is a situation of absence imposed by the narrative. While this section has focused on the symbolic construction of Africa as a primitive and unknowable space, the following section explores how Conrad's representations of silence and speech contribute more directly to the dehumanization of African characters.

3.2 The Dehumanization of Africans

Building on the previous discussion of symbolic erasure, this section turns to the use of language and silence in *Heart of Darkness*, not just as metaphors, but as instruments of narrative and moral exclusion. Here, the concern is not with how Africa is framed in contrast to Europe, but with how Africans themselves are denied subjectivity through the suppression of voice.

As evidenced by the widespread inclusion of *Heart of Darkness* into the literature curricula worldwide, it is considered to be a very important piece of literature of the early modernist period, especially considering its critique of imperialism of the Victorian era. Of course, symbolism in modernism cannot be analyzed without bringing race into the discussion. As a scholar on cultural diversity in literature, Martha Jane Nadell highlights that the works of literature are often a reflection of the social anxieties of the times they were

written in, and the end of the 19th - beginning of the 20th century saw the beginning of the end of the previously existing racial power hierarchies: “Anxieties about immigration also surfaced in concerns about the purity of the English language: in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, efforts were underway to standardize English, despite the fact that many writers produced work that employed ethnic or racial dialects” (Nadell, 2005, p. 529). She also mentions that at the time, the theme of Africa was very popular in art and literature and many creative people were drawn to it as it was free from the boundaries that were imposed by the European tradition; others considered it wild and savage, with their forms of art being nothing compared to those of Europe (Nadell, 2005, pp. 528-529). Regardless of the race of the writer, modernist literature was inherently characterized by racial themes. So, according to her, all the literature written in that period would one way or another inevitably be a political statement on race and imperialism. I agree with Nadell’s sentiment, since I believe that no work of literature can be truly apolitical, especially in the times of major societal changes, and the authors cannot avoid engaging with such issues as racism, whether consciously or subconsciously.

The use of language in modernist literature was drastically different from everything done before. According to Berry (2006), “in Europe and America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the subject of language began to take on an unprecedented centrality (Berry, 2006, p. 113). In this period, the language is destabilized, the meaning of the words and metaphors becomes fluid and unfixed. I think that Conrad’s ambiguous language when it comes to describing Africa and its people fits right into this pattern. One of the most prominent features of Conrad’s writing is what is sometimes referred to as “silenced language” (Liu & Zhong, 2023, p. 313).

I believe that this absence of comprehensible speech coming from the natives perpetuates the image of the colonized people as a faceless, voiceless mass that we can only

see through the lens of a biased European narrator. Their language is described as “a violent babble of uncouth sounds” (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 19), “words that resembled no sounds of human language” (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 68), and a “satanic litany” (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 68). The linguistic choices, when not obscure, tend to be derogatory and dehumanizing towards Africans. The animalistic language, comparing the natives to dogs, and describing their customs as “savage,” leads to the dehumanization of the colonized people, showing them as inferior to the European, which in turn means that a white man is there to fix it and bring light to the primitive peoples. Such beliefs were the driving force behind the European colonial ambitions.

For example, Achebe comments that “it is clearly not part of Conrad's purpose to confer language on the ‘rudimentary souls’ of Africa. The only ‘exchanged short grunting phrases’ even among themselves, but mostly they were too busy with their frenzy” (Achebe, 1978, p. 6). The novella only offers two occasions on which the African subjects are granted intelligible speech: one time, when the helmsman jokingly suggested that Marlow should let the cannibals eat the natives that posed a threat to the boat and its crew, and the moment when the death of Kurtz is announced by the manager’s boy. Achebe claims that neither of those instances is put in the text to humanize the Africans, as the cannibals are speaking only to produce evidence of what “dumb brutes” they are, and the death announcement is just a symbol of Kurtz’s tainted soul joining forces with “the devils of the land” (Achebe, 1978, p. 7). I think that Achebe’s critique effectively reveals Conrad’s failure to grant the Africans their own voices. Nonetheless, I think this silence may be a reflection of Conrad’s personal viewpoint, as he could not avoid being affected by the principles and narrative of his time. The absence of African voices is more than just erasure, it mirrors the colonial attitudes framing the story altogether. Therefore, the novella manages to both expose and participate in

the colonial narratives, and recognizing these complexities is crucial in order to understand the lasting impact of *Heart of Darkness*.

The silence of the natives and its meaning are crucial to fully understanding the meaning of the novel. In her 1993 paper titled “The Heart of Light: Silence in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*”, Myrtle J. Hooper discusses the symbolism of silence in the story and its racial implications. She states that Conrad’s portrayal of Africa is heavily influenced by the Western and Eurocentric views of his time. She calls for the readers to consider the non-European perspectives when reading *Heart of Darkness*. According to Hooper (1993, p. 71), silence has always been a powerful metaphor, symbolizing the voicelessness of the oppressed people, especially considering the context of imperialism. The silent natives represent the lack of cross-cultural communication, which led to the absence of mutual understanding: “speaking realistically, cross-cultural encounters frequently are characterised by the silence of one party, particularly when there is a disparity in power” (Hooper, 1993, p. 71). The mind of the silent people can never be fully understood, it is doomed to forever remain in the “darkness”. In this way, it could be said that the novel promotes a very one-sided narrative, showing the reality (almost) exclusively from the point of view of a white man. While I can definitely agree that the only reference point that is presented in the text is that of Marlow, a white man, I would argue that by centering the white man’s perspective, the novella highlights the limitations of his beliefs and allows the readers critically engaging with the text to identify whose voices are missing. This way, silence pushes us to question the authority and validity of the dominant narrative.

Boehmer and Matthews (2011) highlight that such a narrative structure is, for Conrad, a way to show the processes of deconstruction of European colonialism and the colonial “othering”: “Colonial and nationalist writers and artists sought through their work, within its dissociated forms, to speak of alternative worlds and to create alternative selves – alternative

both to their parochial colonial realities and to the alienating urban modernity that they now confronted” (Boehmer & Matthews, 2011, p. 288). The natives are shown as faceless, voiceless “others”, perfectly filling the role prescribed to them by the Europeans. Marlow’s inability to grasp the African ways of life shows us the way a typical man in his position would think. His perception of the Africans as silent entities does not necessarily reflect the reality of things. It shows how Western narratives have a hard time understanding and representing non-Western perspectives. Hooper claims that

... the value of the inversion is that it demands we recognize the autonomy of those who use silence; it demands we see them as subject and not as object. The assumption has often been made that oppression takes away the voice of the oppressed. And yet the voice of the oppressed can never be taken away. If they choose not to speak, it is their silence we must listen to (Hooper, 1993, p. 75).

I strongly agree with this interpretation, as, in my opinion, whenever we are presented with only one side of the story, especially when it is shaped by someone holding power over others, we must stop and think why that is the only view we are getting. This way, I believe, the silences and omissions can help the readers to understand the strategies of marginalization. Instead of just taking the dominant narrative at face value, one should consider what it hides, distorts, or silences. Berry (2006, pp. 118-119) sees the modernist use of language as a way to subvert and expose the limits of communication and, by extension, the powers that rely on those limits to justify their own existence. This way, any language expression, or lack thereof, can be interpreted as a way of resisting the power structures that have been put into place by someone else, and every silence is a means of political expression.

In *Heart of Darkness*, the language is not only used to describe the existing order of things, but it also actively creates the image of Africa and the Africans as “the other” and depicts their physical darkness as darkness within them, inherent to an inhabitant of the continent. In doing so, it justifies colonialism as something necessary to bring them up to the European level. The carefully curated, yet ambiguous language of *Heart of Darkness* is not only present to show the dehumanization and primitivization faced by the Africans from their colonial rulers, but it also portrays the fears and anxieties deeply rooted in the minds of the white men who are “carrying the burden of enlightenment” of the “savages”.

It is important to remember that the silencing of the native people in *Heart of Darkness* is not just an erasure of dialogue, as it is a part of a broader pattern involving moral and symbolic exclusion. Though imperial subjects' voices and agency are denied, this denial unravels the deeper inconsistencies throughout its ideology. It is especially prominent in the figure of Kurtz, whose ability to speak and command others becomes the reason for his downfall. Being a man of words and a carrier of the civilizing mission, Kurtz becomes the site of complete language breakdown. The final section of this chapter will turn to his depiction not only as a failure of a colonial agent, but as a symbol of the imperial ideology, and the man who became the embodiment of the very darkness he was meant to destroy.

3.3 Kurtz and the Failure of Imperial Supremacy

This section considers Kurtz as more than just a character, but as a symbol of imperial ambition and its downfall. His story is narrated by Marlow on the deck of a British ship on the Thames, and it frames Kurtz's collapse as a part of a broader reflection on the moral cost of the imperial system. As its product, Kurtz becomes a symbol of instability of the imperial narrative. When we first hear of Kurtz, he is presented as a grand figure, a promising man, someone who “will be a somebody in the administration before long” (Conrad, 1899/1971, p.

20), the manager describes him as “the best agent he had, an exceptional man, of the greatest importance to the company” (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 23) and the river is crawling to him exclusively, he quickly became the main point of Marlow’s trip. But as the story - and the journey itself - progresses, the readers begin to see how the reality and the forces of nature lead to his descent into madness and degeneration, showing how even the most civilized and advanced Europeans can be destroyed by the primal instincts within them:

The wilderness had patted him on the head, and, behold, it was like a ball—an ivory ball; it had caressed him, and—lo!—he had withered; it had taken him, loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation. He was its spoiled and pampered favorite (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 49).

Initially, Kurtz only exists as a word, then turns into a voice, but as we go through the story, even the voice disintegrates. This collapse of the communication and the narrative structure is a symbol of a general failure of human attempts to fully capture and describe reality, highlighting that the chaos and the underlying horrors of civilization cannot be easily put into words or controlled (Navarette, 1993, p. 286). There are two levels to Conrad’s writing: the surface-level descriptions of colonialists’ inhumane behavior and a deeper layer, which he uses to show the psychological horror of the collapse of the imperial society:

Afflicted by an anxiety bred of the nearly Herculean effort required to determine what, if anything, is ‘real’ and credible within the narrative, the reader struggles to find meaning, to complete ellipses, to understand the dynamic that prevails within a cluster of unrelated and even seemingly irrelevant images, and, finally, to complete a story that, because its meaning

is only partially disclosed, is, like the Harlequin, "improbable, inexplicable, and altogether bewildering.... an insoluble." (Navarette, 1993, p. 288)

In my opinion, Kurtz's breakdown is not a personal moral failure but a symptom of the general moral decay in the colonial society. Figures like Kurtz are the embodiment of the contradictions that are inherently present in any imperial ideology. "All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz" (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 50), and it is his mental and physical decline that mirrors the decline of imperial Europe and the colonial enterprise as it was.

Bruce R. Stark (1974) also insists on interpreting Kurtz as a symbol of decay at the very center of European imperialism. He is not portrayed as a lunatic trapped in the jungle, he is the key figure in the system built by the colonizers in Africa, which is built on the endless pursuit of money and power. Kurtz is set out to be "a remarkable man" (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 63), someone to bring light to the untamed continent, his reports supporting the idea that "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" (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 32). At the same time, he ends up being the one consumed by darkness and unable to resist the temptations presented to him:

The sinister implications of these charismatic and demagogic techniques of political manipulation are fully realized within the *Heart of Darkness* in the adoration of the Lake Tribes who raided the country for Kurtz and then were immolated in their attempt to keep him. Seen in this light, a light that can only be gained by relating Kurtz's story to all of Europe, not just to Belgium, and to all colonial exploitation, not just to King Leopold's adventure in the Congo, Kurtz's 'intentions' do indeed suggest 'a whole phase of life... quite on another plane than an anecdote of a man who went mad in the Centre of Africa.' (Stark, 1974, p. 554).

I believe that Kurtz's moral decay is especially noticeable in his treatment of the local tribes who serve him as if he were their god. Marlow says that when he saw Kurtz open his mouth, "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" (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 61). This image represents the greed and the possessiveness that overtook Kurtz and corrupted him. And it is this kind of power and greed that colonialism is built on: the desire to destroy the generations of people just for the sake of profit. Furthermore, this unraveling of Kurtz's inner barbarity questions one of the main ideas behind imperialism: the distinction between the "civilized" and the "savage" (Raskin, 1967, p. 125). The unchecked power leads to the dissolution of that distinction. The noble idea of the civilizing mission is always deformed by the violence hiding inside everyone, leading to moral bankruptcy and the exploitation of the natives. As he describes it:

Conrad's myth about moribund colonialism rested on the notion that there was, as in the case of Rome, an inescapable and critical relationship between imperial decadence and savagery. The colonial power confronted and infected by barbarism becomes decivilized and disintegrated; this myth developed from Conrad's sense that he was in 1890 on the frontier between civilization and savagery, and from his scrutiny of the pervasive and endless struggle between blacks and whites, on chain-gangs and in jungle outposts. It is a moral myth, too, for it details the evils which befall the civilized man when he transgresses against barbarism, when he exploits primitive man and nature. Kurtz has robbed the wilderness of ivory, has 'kicked the very earth to pieces', and in turn 'the wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion'. He has exploited and exterminated primitive man (primitive in the sense of natural and pre-social

as well as specifically Congolese), and they avenge themselves by working his corruption: the torturer becomes victim (Raskin, 1967, p. 125).

Kurtz's disintegration is presented as a symptom of moral and ideological deficiencies in the society. According to Navarette, his individual genius quickly spirals down to represent the inherent corruption and the decay of the Western imperial ambitions, as "those who were acquainted with him before he departed to make his fortune in Africa, conceived of him as a type of the Nietzschean superman: a 'prodigy,' an 'emissary of pity, and science, and progress, and devil knows'" (Navarette, 1993, p. 286). Thus, Kurtz is not so much a singular character, but a collection of metaphors that represent the failure of the ideological, moral, and cultural structures. I think that, looking just a little closer, under the surface of a certain idea of civilization, the text frames incomprehensible chaos and horrors.

According to Francis (2014), Kurtz is not unique in this case - he is at the center of the very system that led to his downfall. His station is remote, at the very heart of the "dark continent", yet we are also constantly reminded of the polished world of the Intended that exists as if in a parallel reality to that of Kurtz. He is both the victim and the perpetrator of the colonial system, and he is a perfect person to show that the real darkness does not lie in the "savage" lands he wanted to enlighten, but in Europe, the civilization itself. In my opinion, there is some irony in an imperial figure like Kurtz falling victim to imperialism. His language and eloquence, used to justify the barbarism against the natives, lose their power when they are faced with the harsh realities of the exploitation experienced by the colonized people. The beautiful speeches only exist to mask the horrors they were creating in the conquered lands. As Francis puts it: "Conrad was by no means alone in his time in expressing doubts about the imperial enterprise, nor in recognizing that, for all the claims often made for it as a means of advancing civilization, material gain lay at its foundation" (Francis, 2014, p. 150).

I find one of the most revealing points of the novella to be Kurtz's report to the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs, which was meant to enlighten and "civilize" the native people. The report is full of speeches about uplifting the African population, "the unbounded power of eloquence—of words—of burning noble words" (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 51), but at the very end, Kurtz added the infamous line: "Exterminate all the brutes!" (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 51). This terrifying reversal of his views just further exposes the collapse of imperial justification. His "civilizing mission" ended in a call for complete extermination. I believe Conrad placed this contradiction at the very center of Kurtz's symbolic function as an embodiment of the moral decay of the empire itself, with noble ideals being nothing more than just a cover for its blood lust.

Another striking depiction of Kurtz is when Marlow sees "on that ivory face the expression of somber pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror — of an intense and hopeless despair. There was a touch of insanity in the proceeding, a sense of lugubrious drollery in the sight" (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 71). I think that the contradictions provided by Marlow perfectly encapsulate the instability at the heart of Kurtz, and, by extension, the heart of the imperial ideology he embodies. Simultaneously, he is authoritative and broken, proud and terrified. I believe that at this very moment, Kurtz ceases being a man and fully becomes a symbol of moral confusion and imperial collapse.

He is not a man, he is a warning of what happens to the people with great ideas when they're consumed by their greed and power. Navarette (1993) argues that Kurtz's final words - "The horror! The horror!" - not only serve as an expression of his personal failure and moral degradation, but also reflect the emptiness and void that exists at the heart of the colonial enterprise, as "these stylistic effects are evidence of a failed endeavor to fix and convey meaning- and, by extension, to define or describe "the horror"- but they nevertheless succeed in creating horror" (Navarette, 1993, p. 291). Kurtz's breakdown implies that even the best

representatives of civilization can and will inevitably fail and completely disintegrate upon encountering the raw forces of nature. As I see it, his final words emphasize the psychological and symbolic collapse of a man and the empires that shaped him; therefore, the horror is not what Kurtz saw, but what he had become.

The framing of the novella with Marlow telling the story aboard a ship on the Thames further highlights the ambiguity at the very heart of the story. The Congo River is a dangerous snake, a site of horror and destruction, but the Thames is also described as dark, brooding, and mysterious. The opposition between the “civilized” Europe and “savage” Africa collapses here. The darkness encountered by Kurtz and Marlow is not just limited to the colonies, it flows out of the very heart of the empire and eventually comes back to it. The two rivers mirror each other, which serves to suggest that the violence and corruption we see in the Congo are embedded into the European “civilization” itself.

According to Francis, centering of characters like Kurtz is used in Western literature to participate in “politics of representation” (Francis, 2014, p. 147). These figures are not created as representations of individual personalities, but rather as cultural constructs that create a very specific and Eurocentric vision of the colonized world. Francis (2014, pp. 147-148) claims that Kurtz exists as a tool of othering the native people of Africa, portraying them as faceless, silent shadows, as opposed to the eloquent Kurtz, whose language, images, and actions are constantly highlighted in the story. Kurtz’s identity as an enlightener cannot be separated from the ideas of the empire that brought him to Africa, the ideas that deny the agency and independence of the locals. In my view, this centering of Kurtz is not only a reflection of the narrative bias but also a further representation of the imperial logic, which equates voice and agency with whiteness, while reducing other groups to a symbolic backdrop for European self-reflection.

Essentially, Kurtz's downfall serves to question the very idea of imperialism. Instead of being the beacon of light, hope, and education in the "savage" lands, Kurtz becomes their god and torturer, bringing the tribes to their knees only for his own (and the empire he serves) benefit. Kurtz's unraveling is more than just a personal failure of a man, but rather a symbol of the collapse of the imperial fantasy from within. He went from being an enlightened emissary to a self-appointed demi-god, revealing the fragility of the veneer of civilization and how quickly it falls apart once it is away from the institutions enforcing it. Kurtz represents the implosion of the racial and symbolic logic of the empire, as the man who came to civilize the natives ends up embracing chaos, his voice becoming the loudest yet least coherent of all. His death did not become a redemption of his sins, but an echo of a moral void at the heart of imperial discourse. In this light, *Heart of Darkness* does more than just critique the empire from the outside, it stages its collapse from within, building a symbolic structure which is inherently unable to suppress its own contradictions.

The contradictions of imperial exploitation do not appear in isolation. Racial hierarchies are deeply intertwined with gendered oppression, reflecting a complex intersection of domination. The following chapter examines the interconnections between these two power structures and how, together, they further dehumanize the marginalized people subjected to the imperial system of control.

Chapter 4. Gender as/and the Imperial Order

Despite Conrad's assertion to his publisher that *Heart of Darkness* would not have any women or love interests in it (Conrad to Unwin, 1896, in McIntire, 2002, p. 257), one can find several of them on the pages of the novella, and they happen to be crucial for the development of the story, despite being banished to decorative roles rather than active participants of the narrative. Gabrielle McIntire (2002, p. 258) claims that the female characters face "double invisibility": they are rarely included, and when they are, their voices are muted or misinterpreted. This exclusion is a reflection of how both gender and race were used to decide who is allowed to speak within the imperial discourse. This chapter discusses the gendered logic of the colonial system as presented in *Heart of Darkness*, showing how femininity is constructed to uphold the male authority. I argue that the roles assigned to women in the novella reinforce the cultural hierarchies and that they mirror the broader acts of colonial domination by representing female purity, irrationality, and danger. Many feminist critics, such as Straus, London, and McIntire, have emphasized how the narrative presented by Marlow supports these gendered divisions. By claiming that women are "out of it," he insists on women's complete separation from imperial reality, and this separation also justifies lying to them, silencing them, and ignoring their narratives. This exclusion is far from neutral, it is used within the imperial ideology to reaffirm its masculinity and moral superiority.

This chapter examines the functions of gendered silence as a political tool through a close reading of the Intended, the African woman, and Marlow's narrative on women and masculinity. *Heart of Darkness* reproduces the Victorian ideals regarding femininity and the role of women to serve the imperial fantasy, but it also manages to point out the cracks in the imperial order. Despite being presented as figures of absence, the women remain crucial to the story, as they anchor the illusions of men who speak.

4.1 Masculinity and Colonial Authority

Colonial power in *Heart of Darkness* is constructed as inseparable from a specific vision of masculinity. Military and economic domination are not the only ways in which the empire is enforced, it also relies heavily on the narrative and culture system, which defines white, European men as rational, morally superior, and fit to rule over every other group of people. Drawing on Andrew Michael Roberts's definition of masculinity as an ideology instead of a biological trait, this section explores how colonial masculinity is constructed in the novella and how it works to legitimize masculine domination.

In his *Conrad and Masculinity*, Roberts suggests that "masculinity as a socially constructed identity needs to be distinguished from biological maleness, which has a genetic basis" (Roberts, 2000, p. 4). The distinction between the two is crucial in understanding the influence of masculinity as a political category. In my opinion, the depiction of masculinity in *Heart of Darkness* highlights the ways in which gender becomes a tool of imperialism, marking the colonizers as decisive, emotionally restrained, and morally elevated, while portraying the colonized as those lacking those supposedly masculine features. As a result, these characteristics function as forms of cultural authority legitimizing colonial rule.

These ideals are continuously reinforced by the narrative voice in *Heart of Darkness*. The composure and detachment presented by Marlow are depicted as markers of authority, despite his occasionally expressing doubts. This aligns with Roberts's claim that "the dominant assumption of Conrad's time was that masculinity was innate, an essential and 'natural' quality of the male. Yet masculinity was also employed as a moral or social ideal, as in the common injunction, 'be a man!'. As a result, the dominant idea of masculinity was always internally incoherent" (Roberts, 2000, p. 4). I think that Conrad captures this incoherence with his depictions of Kurtz and Marlow that embody the masculine ideals, yet get trapped and eventually ruined by their demands.

Roberts goes on to claim that “masculinity as an ideology has always misrepresented the complexity of experience, has always been a ‘legitimation’ through ‘distortion and dissimulation’. Part of the effect of an ideology is to obscure the contradictions on which it is based” (Roberts, 2000, p. 7). I believe that this concept applies to Marlow’s storytelling style. The instability of what he is describing is masked by his rhetorical control, indirectness, and detachment, and the calmness of his tone manages to conceal the chaos of the story, which allows him to appear in control even when confronted with the failure of imperial logic. In my opinion, this ideological construction is visible in how *Heart of Darkness* portrays the contradictions without offering a solution to them. Marlow often expresses uncertainty regarding imperialism and the actions of its agents, for example, when he thinks of Kurtz as someone who “had collected, bartered, swindled, or stolen more ivory than all the other agents together” (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 48). I think that his using the words like “swindled” and “stolen” signifies a certain level of understanding that the imperial project itself was criminal, yet he never leaves his narrative position that gives him authority. This position and his restrained tone are a distinctly masculine form of performance that suppresses the contradiction instead of confronting it and solving the issue.

Roberts claims that in the story, there is a complex system of male voices and bonds that continuously reaffirm and strengthen the authority of the colonizer. In my reading, this ideal is not only upheld by the characters but is a part of the narrative itself. Any deviation from traditional masculinity in the novella is portrayed as a weakness that must be fixed, while the male leadership and control are praised as the ideal to strive for (Roberts, 2000, p. 5).

He argues that the construction of masculinity in colonial times was a tool used to define and strengthen interpersonal, social, cultural, and political boundaries: “The idea of ‘the service that colonialism performed in the realm of sexual fantasy’, inverting the more

common tendency to see sexuality as recruited in the service of Empire, suggests a mutuality between the discourses of masculinity and of imperialism which avoids hypostatizing one as essence or cause” (Roberts, 2000, p. 22). I think that this perspective is extremely relevant in the context of *Heart of Darkness*, where the masculine authority is not just assumed, but also erotically charged, linked to the conquest itself and the power to narrate, name, and dominate. This is exemplified by the fact that in young Marlow’s dreams Africa was “a blank space of delightful mystery” (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 8), which presents a feminized vision of the continent as wild, unknowable, and alluring. This Western version of masculinity was actively used to dismiss and disregard the native perception of masculinity, portraying it as backwards and uncivilized, thus justifying their subjugation as a means of “fixing” them.

The construction of masculinity in the European colonial mindset is not merely a biological category, but also a civilizational force. The traits considered essential to building and maintaining the empire also happened to be those typically associated with men: emotional detachment, dominance, and rationality. These traits could both justify colonial expansion and sustain the authority of white men in African spaces. I argue that Marlow internalized this logic, which positioned his voice as the moral compass of the story. Considering this, I can conclude that masculinity is not an innate feature, but a moralized construct, in which being a man means claiming the authority to act, decide, and speak for oneself and others. Roberts mentions that

Any attempt to reduce masculinity to a mere function of maleness seems to me as implausible as the contrary endeavour to deny any connection between the two. Masculinity, then, might be regarded as a psychic structure, as a fantasy, as a code of behaviour, or as a set of social practices and constraints (Roberts, 2000, p. 5).

The approach that focuses on the “masculine traits” is inherently exclusive of women, who are thus not able to participate in decision-making processes. Gender roles, therefore, operate as core structures in colonial narratives that shape both the symbolic and the literal journeys of men like Marlow and Kurtz.

The imperial masculine ideal was self-reinforcing, positioning itself as both the standard and the exception. Men were expected to be stoic and courageous, yet also introspective and capable of moral insight. Emotional detachment was valorized as a sign of strength, and this detachment was particularly evident in the way male colonial agents discussed or interacted with women. The cost of this ideal was the systematic silencing and sidelining of any figure, be it real or imagined, who did not fit into this standard. I think that this exclusion is not accidental, as it is what makes the colonial masculine identity possible. It is noticeable in the way Marlow’s tone changes entirely, whenever a woman is mentioned, for example, the very first time we hear of the Intended, he says “Girl! What! Did I mention a girl? Oh, she is out of it—completely” (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 49). His composure and calmness are gone, and he becomes more emotional. As Roberts argues, such a model of masculinity is a constructed identity that requires constant performance and reinforcement, especially within the high-stakes arena of colonial exploration:

Conrad’s psychological portrait inhabits that paradoxical structure of masculinity which involves anxiety and instability alongside power and persistence. One is required by the ideology of masculinity both to be a man and to become one, to be in assured possession of a masculinity which is always at risk because it constantly needs proving and could at any time be lost (Roberts, 2000, p. 26).

The imperial mission within *Heart of Darkness* is prominently gendered. Roberts claims that “Freud’s highly gendered theory illuminates the gendered nature of imperial fantasy, as

conquest of the (mother) earth and return to the 'primitive' mother, a fantasy in which self-assertion and self-destruction shadow each other in a specifically masculine configuration" (Roberts, 2000, p. 30). Thus, Marlow's journey up the Congo River is both a professional endeavor and a masculine initiation ritual where he had to cross into the unknown territory, devoid of women. Different masculine ideals that are in one way or another central to the colonial enterprise are represented in the male characters of the story (Marlow, the Company officials, and Kurtz). The role of Marlow would then be that of a contemplative observer, Kurtz functions as the dangerously charismatic and enigmatic overachiever, and the company officials represent the bureaucratic enforcers of the imperial order. All of these forms of masculinity are an inherent part of the imperialist ideology, and Straus (1987, p. 126) identifies their realm as an exclusively male "circle of secret-sharing," in which the ability to perceive and share the truth is limited on a gender basis. According to her, "it is Conrad's text itself that stimulates the notion that the psychic penury of women is a necessary condition for the heroism of men, and whether or not *Heart of Darkness* is a critique of male heroism or is in complex complicity with it, gender dichotomy is an inescapable element of it" (Straus, 1987, p. 125).

Any sort of influence coming from women, such as Marlow's aunt's help with securing the job position for him, is immediately dismissed by the male characters. Marlow's reaction to her help is not about gratefulness, it is about his embarrassment for requiring assistance from a woman: "Then—would you believe it?—I tried the women. I, Charlie Marlow, set the women to work—to get a job. Heavens!." (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 8). I believe that since Marlow is bitter about having to rely on his aunt for a job, he chooses to dismiss women's insights in general. His aunt's understanding of the imperial dealings is also met with criticism and claims that all women in the world are out of touch with reality. Yet, women's illusions remain essential, as they do not exist outside of the empire; the women's world props it up by

insulating men from the moral consequences of their actions. Such an assertion only further drives the divide between those who are able to comprehend the issues of imperialism and those who are again denied comprehension due to being born a woman. Straus asserts that “Marlow presents a world distinctly split into male and female realms--the first harboring the possibility of ‘truth’ and the second dedicated to the maintenance of delusion. ‘Truth,’ then, is directed at and intended for men only” (Straus, 1987, p. 124).

The importance of those gendered boundaries to the imperial project is hard to overestimate. The idea of masculinity being necessary for morality is heavily supported by the exclusion of women from the realm of knowledge and action. According to Roberts (2000), the representation of masculinity within Conrad’s works is often that of a fragile, but vital construct and an ideology that must be constantly performed and reaffirmed to oppose the “woman-like” passivity and irrationality. As he puts it:

Conrad’s experience of displacement and cultural marginality may go some way to explain his scepticism about identity, certainty and effective action. This scepticism leads to a highly problematic sense of masculinity as fractured, insecure and repeatedly failing in its attempts to master the world, in particular the world of modernity (Roberts, 2000, p. 3).

This kind of interpretation asserts the notion that *Heart of Darkness* not only exists and operates within the imperial context it was written in, but also reinforces and supports those ideologies through narrative forms and character dynamics. As a result, I think that the novella portrays masculinity as both the condition for and a result of colonial power. Permission to leave their homes and to act in the imperial world is a masculine endeavour defined by sticking to the ideological standard that equates courage and moral clarity with men. Therefore, *Heart of Darkness* not only highlights the gendering of the imperial discourse but also the importance of silencing the feminine voices to legitimize the empire.

The masculine narrative structure poses femininity as an antithesis of imperial logic and ideals. That and the masculinization of the colonial space and history become a strategy for neutralizing and getting rid of the feminine, reducing it to a backdrop for men's superiority (Roberts, 2000, p. 129). As he puts it:

The pragmatism of Marlow the practical sailor, with his belief in work, serves only to keep at bay, when necessary, Marlow the spinner of spectral enigmas. Yet suddenly, in the face of his naively idealistic aunt, Marlow sees himself as the contented inhabitant, with other men, of a commonsense, positivistic world of 'facts'. It would seem that one purpose of women, for a man like Marlow, is to make his own world seem epistemologically secure (Roberts, 2000, p. 129).

As discussed in the previous chapter, *Heart of Darkness* was criticized by figures such as Achebe and Okafor for seemingly reducing Africa to a backdrop for European drama. I believe that the same thing happens with the presentation of women. A good example of this kind of othering in terms of gender would be the scene where Marlow meets the Intended at her house. As he describes her: "She had a mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering" (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 76). This language strips her of subjectivity and turns her into a symbolic backdrop to reinforce the tragedy of Kurtz's failure. Just like Africans, women are denied agency and voice, and exist mainly as signs and symbols to be interpreted by white men.

The feminine gendering of Africa is not limited to the fact that it is represented as something that has to be controlled. It is mysterious, fertile, and dangerous, and those traits also turn it into something that can only be understood, described, and penetrated by a man. Ray (2006) insists that the imperial project itself was deeply tied to a gendered conquest of space; therefore, Marlow's journey is a masculine assertion and its claim over a feminized

landscape: “the colonized but insurgent female subject has been systematically censored, silenced, and sexualized in the name of extending empire and that the female subject ostensibly situated on the side of the colonizing powers (like Kurtz's Intended or Aeneas's Creusa) has also been lied to, betrayed, and minimized” (Ray, 2006, p. 154). In my opinion, the feminization of Africa in *Heart of Darkness* is a reflection of its portrayal of women as unknowable, silent, and in need to be interpreted by men.

The gendering of space is also reflected in the narrative structure, in which Marlow is both the explorer and the storyteller. Hence, he is the one to determine what counts as truth, what shall stay hidden, and who is allowed a voice in the story. His role as a narrator places him at the very top of the hierarchy, where he is the mediator of the reader's experiences and the main source of interpretations (Straus, 1987, p. 127). Furthermore, even the “commentary centers upon the secret sharings of male characters whose isolation from female language or experience evokes (if not sanctions) the dream of a homocentric universe” (Straus, 1987, p. 126). This way, even the narrative itself becomes a masculine domain where storytelling is tightly aligned with masculine mastery and skills, as Conrad “chose to tell his story indirectly through an idiosyncratic, first-person narrator, Marlow, whose narrative is in turn relayed by another narrator who presumably has not even been to Africa. This elaborate structure makes us aware of structure as structure; thus, the novel doesn't pretend to offer us a perfectly clear, uncluttered, unbiased, perfectly natural view of the facts of the past” (Thomas, 1989, p. 236). The power to narrate the story is what grants Marlow dominance. Even though he claims to hate lying as a concept, he ends up concealing Kurtz's final words from her, which I believe is also used to reinforce his narrative power.

While the initial representation of masculinity in *Heart of Darkness* is that of power and dominance over space and the truth, ultimately, it reveals the instability within the system. The narration exposes the ways in which the primitive jungle tests and challenges the

colonizers, exposing the contradictions within them. The traits that they perceived as inherently masculine crumble until there is nothing left of their rationality and moral superiority. Kurtz, whose collapse has already been discussed in relation to racial absence, reappears here as an example of the most extreme consequence of imperial masculinity. Unlike him, Marlow manages to return to Europe, but not unscathed. His disillusionment is delayed mainly because he remains complicit in the masculine systems he critiques. As Roberts (2000) observes, Conrad's male characters often embody a paradox: their outward control masks deep-seated insecurity and alienation, which corresponds with the idea that the late nineteenth century was the time "when an alienation of men from their bodies is matched by an excessive identification of women with the body" (Roberts, 2000, p. 108). In my view, Marlow gets caught between a rock and a hard place, where he feels like he needs to uphold the masculine ideals and the awareness regarding the moral bankruptcy of those ideals.

The climax of this tension is in his conversation with the Intended. By choosing to lie to her about his final words, he preserves the illusion of the masculine heroism, but it comes at a cost to his own integrity. Okafor (1988) offers a particularly relevant position here: the authority of the imperial male heavily relies on the silencing of both the other, whether it is racial or gendered: "people are used merely as a background for this narrative, which is essentially Eurocentric. In this respect, the novelist is like a photographer; he chooses a particular background for his portrait to suit his special objective" (Okafor, 1988, p. 18). In *Heart of Darkness*, masculinity not only exists to be a trait of its characters, but it also represents the logic of the empire itself. The masculine traits, such as dominance, emotional detachment, and narrative control, which determine who has the right to have their voice are the defining features of the world Marlow lives in. Imperial legitimacy is based on the assertion of masculine authority, and the narrative reflects this dynamic. Yet the novella also shows that this logic is ultimately set to fail.

The story reveals that the more dominance is asserted by masculinity, the more its fragility is exposed. This whole system heavily depends on the binaries between men and women, and civilized and primitive. However, these binaries limit the empire's ability to sustain, meaning the second these oppositions begin to blur. As the next section will explore, women in the novella do not exist as their own characters, but rather as symbols and silences. Their absence from the narrative is not an accident, but is representative of the core masculine beliefs that serve as the foundation of the empire.

After establishing how colonial masculinity performed as an ideological and narrative drive in *Heart of Darkness*, the next section will move on to talk about the roles of women in the story, who function not as independent agents but as figures of silence and symbolism. Masculinity and femininity work together, the former shaping the structure in the imperial world, and the latter marking its boundaries as the symbolic and literal limits of action, voice, and power.

4.2 Conrad's Women as Symbols and Silences

The women of *Heart of Darkness* often function not as characters with their autonomy and free will, but rather as symbols bound to the colonial narrative. While the women frame the narrative and even symbolically guard the door to the darkness, they are, for the most part, omitted from the story, only resurfacing from time to time as the "traces" or the "absent presences" (Saeedi, 2015, p. 538). These contrasting representations of the women serve to highlight the mechanisms of imperial discourse.

It can be argued that the whole novel is structured in a way that highlights male experiences and ignores those of the women (Straus, 1987, p. 130). The journey through "the dark continent," therefore, is not only a physical trip through Africa, but also a perilous trip into the heart of the masculine world. In this world, access to secrets and the truth is reserved

exclusively for men, and the narrative revolves around Marlow and Kurtz communicating with each other, making sure they remain unavailable to women such as the Intended, keeping them in the realm of delusion and ignorance. I believe that it reinforces the broader logic of the patriarchal control that is essential for the existence of the imperial order. The truth circulating among men gets intentionally withheld from women, like the way in which Marlow justifies his lying about Kurtz's final words: "I could not tell her. It would have been too dark— too dark altogether . . ." (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 79). I think that his refusal is not just about shielding the Intended from the harsh truth, but also about preserving the gendered boundary of who gets to access the reality. Bette London claims that:

In Marlow's configuration, the woman occupies the place of lack, emptied of even the darkness of feminine sexuality. In the context of the ensuing narrative, the blankness of the feminine constitutes the stable ground upon which masculine adventure can be mapped, the same ness that sets masculine difference in relief (London, 1989, p. 236).

Essentially, both women are limited in their ways to the functions and roles that the European imperial system has given them. The white women in the text are bound to be a silent testimony to the reality that the white man seeks to preserve; her fixed, domestic imagery, her absence, her controlled identity, and purity stand in contrast to the chaotic, primal, and savage "darkness" of the colony. On the other hand, the native woman is symbolically merged with the nature of Africa itself, and her presence is used to underscore the depths of the colonial Other. London (1989, p. 237) argues that these dual constructions allow Conrad to enact a vivid visual scene that legitimizes and reinforces the colonial hierarchies by mapping gendered differences onto racial identity. Furthermore, "the non-representation of women promotes the novel's myth of inscrutability, functioning as both a cause and effect of its ruling construct: the unexplorable heart of darkness" (London, 1989,

p. 238). The perfect representation of this phenomenon, in my opinion, is the way in which the silence of the African woman is mirrored in the silence of nature itself: “She stood looking at us without a stir, and like the wilderness itself, with an air of brooding over an inscrutable purpose” (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 62).

The whole world in the novel is clearly split into two realities, which do not overlap: the knowledgeable, wise, adventurous reality of men and the delusional, passive, and unenlightened domain of women (Straus, 1987, p. 124). This narrative strategy leads to the embedding of patriarchal stereotypes into the world of high literature. Marlow’s revelations and stories are only shared with men, further protecting women from the reality of things, positioning men as inherently superior. I argue that this gendered narrative structure acts as a reinforcement of imperial fantasy or moral superiority, based on the exclusion of women from both action and knowledge. Women are limited to becoming symbolic functions - either representing the moral purity and devotion, like *The Intended*, or, like the African Woman, depicting the uncontrollable force of nature.

The women are always tied to a certain space; they “do not travel.” Marlow’s aunt is associated exclusively with her upper-middle-class Belgian house; the *Intended*’s place is in the elegant drawing room of her house; and even the African woman who is described completely differently from the other “domestic” white women is tied to her land, which she is seen as an extension of, because, according to McIntire,

Conrad associates women with the cultures and geographies they inhabit as though by contiguous extension. The principal women of the text are always positioned in transitional spaces in either the colony or the metropole, while they are decidedly static and unable to wander between cultural, ideological, and national boundaries (McIntire, 2002, p. 258).

I believe that this highlights the role of women as the keepers of the family, who are left to wait for their men while they explore Africa and dominate the world. It serves to emphasize the opposition between the adventurous men and the women who “live in the world of their own” (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 49) and are essentially locked up in their spaces.

Marlow’s choice to lie to Kurtz’s Intended is evidence of his perception of her being a stereotypical Victorian woman. His belief is that a good woman like herself could not possibly be able to handle the reality of her beloved’s actions or even his last words. However, this lie is clearly not said by him to protect her, but rather to protect his masculine fantasy of what the feminine realm is and should be, that is, completely removed from the real world. Hyland (1988, p. 5) points out that this projected inability of the Intended and, by extension, the Victorian woman in general, to deal with reality is a result of a limitation to stay in “their lane” imposed on them by men. This image of a woman not only existed in their personal lives, but the same prejudices were there not only to keep women unaware of the colonial brutalities, but also to prevent them from participating in politics and business. This allowed men to maintain the patriarchal and colonial order, keeping women sheltered and silent. As London describes it: “Women's expulsion from the world of dark truths does not so much protect women's position as preserve masculine constructs; for women's absence constitutes a condition of narrative coherence—the foundation of masculine authority” (London, 1989, p. 238). The gap between the genders is deeply connected with the spatial and narrative exclusion of women. Marlow believes that the reality of women is incompatible with the truth, because they are “out of it” (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 49). Men like Marlow himself and Kurtz are the explorers who learn the truth about life through going to Africa and participating in dangerous ventures; women are limited to the space within their own minds, living in a dream-like world of imperial propaganda and unrealistic ideas (McIntire, 2002, p. 258). I

think that this frames women as people who are completely incapable of understanding the reality of things and renders them unsuitable for the “modern” world.

Besides that, Straus (1987), points out that traditional literary criticism tends to maintain the same male-centered mode of understanding art, which in turn supports the idea of pushing women to become the symbols that only exist to enhance the heroism of men, while staying in the dark, passively waiting for their men to come back: “The mainstream critic thus replicates the pattern of the text he describes; his literary method is to stress the formal and aesthetic ingredients at the expense of its sexist resonances; to exclude the possibility of woman's intended views just as Marlow excludes the Intended from sharing in the views his tale discloses” (Straus, 1987, p. 126). The feminist critique is a call to reassess the traditional literary analysis in order to foster a more inclusive narrative structure that allows many different voices to share and consume the truth. I think that this critical tradition is a reflection of the patriarchal assumptions embedded in the text, where women only exist to highlight male experiences.

Straus (1987, p. 125) also references the “autobiographical vulnerability,” which, when applied to feminist criticism, refers to the ways in which the female readers see their own experiences of being silenced and excluded reflected in the narrative structures of the texts. This concept not only highlights the marginalization of women in literature but also reminds us of the exposure experienced by women when they face the echoes of their real-life problems reflected in the stories they read. She wrote:

An awareness of the different autobiographical vulnerabilities of male and female readers encountering *Heart of Darkness* is warranted by the fact that Marlow-Conrad discriminates between male and female views of the world. [...] This is not to suggest that a woman reader cannot identify with Kurtz or Marlow any more than she can identify with the African woman or

the Intended, but that her response to the Strong Poet who is both Conrad and Marlow involves a self-defensiveness and self-consciousness that the male commentator probably does not experience (Straus, 1987, p. 125).

For a female reader, a text like *Heart of Darkness*, which centers on male experiences, exposes them to their own past, where they were silenced, making the reading process much more intimate. In my view, this intimacy highlights the narrative of *Heart of Darkness* as a gendered one, structured around exclusion. Women are forced to confront the personal implications of their exclusions from the narrative. Hence, the text in such a situation is not just a story to be analyzed, but a mirror that reflects the lived reality of many of its readers. However, Straus insists that the autobiographical vulnerability can be a tool to expose the impact of the patriarchal narrative in our society and to fight it. In order to do so, we must recognize and challenge the restrictions of the literary canon, reveal how the narrative structures are complicit in creating and supporting the existing marginalization and silencing of women. She claims that it can become a catalyst that will allow us to reimagine and create alternative ways of storytelling:

Because the female figure's psychic penury is so valuable in asserting the heroism of the Strong Poet and the Strong Poet's character, the male commentator (who serves both) is filled with pleasure - a pleasure so therapeutic that it subverts his capacity to discover on what terms Marlow is a hero or a coward. Because the woman reader is not so 'filled,' she is in the position to insist that Marlow's cowardice consists of his inability to face the dangerous self that is the form of his own masculinist vulnerability: his own complicity in the racist, sexist, imperialist, and finally libidinally satisfying world he has inhabited with Kurtz (Straus, 1987, p. 135).

Marlow says that “it's queer how out of touch with truth women are. They live in a world of their own, and there had never been anything like it, and never can be” (Conrad 1899/1971, p. 12), projecting his narrow understanding of his aunt on all the women, distancing their lived experiences from objective reality and portraying those experiences as alien to the truth. Therefore, I believe, women in the text are not allowed to express or even have subjectivity; they're reduced to being symbols, mostly defined by their silence.

This oppression of women's voices also allows for the preservation and reinforcement of the colonialist dichotomies that are essential to Conrad's narrative (McIntire, 2002, p. 263). Women, be they the Western “domestic guardians” or the “savage” Africans, must remain voiceless and immobile, unable to break out of the role assigned to them by the colonial system. Seldak insists that the world shown to us in *Heart of Darkness* is centered entirely around the male perspective. As a result, the absence of women is not accidental - it is a carefully planned part of Conrad's narrative: “Marlow, who does not understand the experience he has gone through, and an audience of four men who do not understand it either. Clearly, then, Conrad has marked out quite a job for his readers. The reader needs to “see” what Marlow reports but does not ‘see,’ including the position, role, and function of women within his own experience” (Seldak, 1989, p. 448). For her, the female characters that we see in the story are presented not through their personal qualities, but through thematic characteristics, turning them into “fictive exemplifications”:

As readers, we have been warned about two things: false listening and fictive exemplification. We have been subtly reminded to take Marlow's narrative replaying as it is presented and, in the process, have been admonished to seek the values or propositions presented. In other words, we need to “see.” (Seldak, 1989, p. 451).

Even when their actions are concrete (for example, when Marlow's aunt helps him find a job with the Company), they are still described in ways that remove their individuality and inner life. Therefore, the women's silence is used as a tool to establish a feminine sphere, completely separated from the men's world.

The two types of female characters represented in the text, the white woman (the Intended, Marlow's aunt) and the native woman, are not portrayed as autonomous subjects but rather as the structural elements of the colonial project (London, 1989, pp. 243-244). The image of the white woman is constructed to make her an emblem for European patriarchal ideals, including domesticity and their refined femininity. I think this vision is highlighted by Marlow's description of his conversation with the Intended: "with every word spoken the room was growing darker, and only her forehead, smooth and white, remained illumined by the unextinguishable light of belief and love" (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 76). This line underscores the way the Intended is portrayed as an idealized and inert object that is shining with purity despite her surroundings fading into shadows. Marlow's storytelling excludes them not only from the action but from the reality itself, making their image associated with the absence of life, truth, and mysteries. The presentation of a woman as only an idea, deliberately reduced to a static image, underscores the framework that establishes the masculine colonial authority. The absence, however, does not signify the lack of importance, for it allows the author to highlight the visual distinction between the rational, white European civilization and the chaos of the native world; therefore the white woman's femininity in her satinated, pure world serves as a justification of the colonial expansion as it becomes the way to preserve their social structure.

There is an argument to be made about the portrayal of the Intended not being an honest character study, but just a projection of the idealized Victorian woman and the rigid, patriarchal ideal that constructs it (Hyland, 1988, pp. 4-5). Her image, defined by her

passivity, dependency on men, and almost otherworldly moral purity, is not an accident; it reflects the existing expectations of women in the Victorian era, where women were meant to be the epitome of virtue, removed from the harshness of the real world. Hyland states:

This idea of the truly "feminine" is primarily a construct of patriarchal ideology, for its purpose was to locate women away from the active but corrupting world of work and commerce to protect the superior morality they were supposed to embody. A woman defined in this way could have no interest in "truth" as it relates to confrontation with the reality of the outside world, which is represented in its purest form by the wilderness, the savage frontier; the Victorian woman could only fear and hate this preserve of men (Hyland, 1988, p. 5).

The reduction of the Intended to a familiar stereotype only reinforces the male narrator and the colonial system in general.

In her 1987 paper titled "The Exclusion of the Intended from Secret Sharing in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," Nina Pelikan Straus mainly focuses on using the feminist lens to analyze the role and the exclusion of The Intended from the novel's secret-sharing processes. She insists that by keeping her in the dark about Kurtz's true nature (and his last words), Marlow actively chooses to support the existing dichotomy between the genders, where only men are allowed to possess the knowledge, while women are supposed to be protected from the truth. Marlow himself reveals that to his listeners by saying: "They - the women I mean - are out of it - should be out of it. We must help them to stay in that beautiful world of their own, lest ours gets worse. Oh, she had to be out of it" (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 49). I argue that this moment makes the imperial need for narrative control even clearer as it shows that women's ignorance is not just assumed, but also carefully maintained by men.

The comparison between the Intended's house and Kurtz's station shows how both the colonial and female spaces are used to conceal the decay in the story. As Stark (1974, p. 536) notes, the Intended plays a central yet symbolic role in the text. First of all, he claims that she is the embodiment of the idealized woman in European civilization. She is pure, orderly, and morally righteous. Her house, resembling a "whited sepulchre," is a smaller version of the city and the country she is in, and that is a powerful metaphor. The parallels between her house, the city, and Kurtz's decaying station in the jungle point to all of them being central junctions of the "Infernal System" (Stark, 1974, p. 536). According to Stark, this position for the Intended signifies that her place in the story and the system is not on the outskirts, but in its very center. I agree that the parallels between these two different yet so similar lodgings are hard to miss. For example, this is how the author presents the Intended's house:

The dusk was falling. I had to wait in a lofty drawing room with three long windows from floor to ceiling that were like three luminous and bedraped columns. The bent gilt legs and backs of the furniture shone in indistinct curves. The tall marble fireplace had a cold and monumental whiteness. A grand piano stood massively in a corner; with dark gleams on the flat surfaces like a somber and polished sarcophagus. A high door opened—closed. I rose (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 75).

This description reminds the reader of the one for Kurtz's station:

I directed my glass to the house. There were no signs of life, but there was the ruined roof, the long mud wall peeping above the grass, with three little square window holes, no two of the same size; all this brought within reach of my hand, as it were (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 58).

Both these paragraphs draw the reader's attention to the windows, hers being huge and luminous and his being small and inconsistent. They also both point out the larger sizes for

things such as her “lofty” drawing-room, and his “long mud wall”. Stark (1974, pp. 542-543) mentions that the descriptions of the sounds and lights in the following passage, dedicated to the actions of the tribe, controlled by Kurtz, are used in the text to highlight the difference between the liveliness of the jungle and the cold and silent drawing-room:

...deep within the forest, red gleams that wavered, that seemed to sink and rise from the ground amongst confused columnar shapes of intense blackness, showed the exact position of the camp where Mr. Kurtz's adorers were keeping their uneasy vigil. The monotonous beating of a big drum filled the air with muffled shocks and a lingering vibration. A steady droning sound of many men chanting each to himself some weird incantation came out from the black, flat wall of the woods as the humming of bees comes out of a hive... (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 65)

If one looks more closely at the drawing room, we can see even more similarities and allusions (Stark, 1974, p. 543). Conrad draws our attention to the legs and the backs of the furniture, belonging to the Intended, at the same time, he often mentions the body parts of the exploited Africans. Kurtz's domain is a representation of the external savagery of imperialism and colonial exploitation, while the Intended's quarters symbolize the core of the same system - the beautiful facade hiding the same moral corruption and darkness that led to the monstrosities committed by her fiancé. Both of the locations are described in ways that invoke death, (moral) decay, and the secrets that they hide, be it the bones of the natives or the colonizers' moral bankruptcy, as a result of which it is clearly depicted in the drawing-room, in the “whited sepulchre” (Stark, 1974, p. 544)..

Besides that, Marlow's encounter with Kurtz's fiancée is an important mechanism that allows for the revealing of the deeper irony of the text (Stark, 1974, p. 550). The lie about Kurtz's final words symbolically reveals the ways in which the grand ideas are themselves

built on delusions. Marlow's focus on thinking that the Intended is a simple woman, who must be sheltered and protected from the harsh truths of reality, reflects the broader illusion of a white colonizer being inherently noble and civilized. I think that this moment exposes the deep connection between the gendered idealization and the imperial hypocrisy, since the Intended's ignorance is a necessary illusion that Marlow clings to. Stark (1974, pp. 546-547) also argues that the portrayal of the Intended serves to expose the contradiction between the high colonial ideas and the brutal exploitation happening in reality. Therefore, he insists, she is crucial for the depiction of both Marlow's moral defeat and Conrad's criticism of the empire.

On the other hand, the native woman is pushed to the margins of both the narrative and the very definition of woman. The depiction of the African woman (often referred to as the African Mistress) is extremely vivid, she is described as "savage and stately", "wild-eyed", and "magnificent", her presence is indelible from the untamed, primitive African landscape. Her image is constructed by Marlow as if "she is the dark continent of both the African jungle and female sexuality" (Smith, 2020, p. 292). Another example of this objectification is this description of her: "She must have had the value of several elephant tusks upon her" (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 62). I argue that this is effectively an appraisal of her in terms of imperial plunder.

The description of her first appearance is striking: "The immense wilderness, the colossal body of the fecund and mysterious life seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul" (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 62). Johanna M. Smith interprets this symbology as Marlow trying to distance her body "by conflating her with the jungle: as the jungle takes on a body, the woman becomes the 'image' and the jungle's soul" (Smith, 2020, p. 292). In this reading, she draws on Jungian "pronouncements about the Masculine and The Feminine", which "tend to perpetuate

spacious generalizations about both men's and women's psyches" (Smith, 2020, p. 298). The woman, representing the jungle, becomes less dangerous and easier to control. To me, this conflation of woman and jungle seems to highlight the way in which Marlow's gaze tries to domesticate and change what is fundamentally wild, reinforcing colonial control through symbolic containment.

While it is true that she manages to escape the constraints of domesticity and boundaries set for white women within the colonial framework, her portrayal as an untameable, wild, exotic Other is still deeply rooted in the same imperialist ideology. Her visual representation is a symbol of unrestrained sexual energy; her vitality and fecundity stand in stark opposition to the white, orderly, sterile femininity. Yet the African woman is neither fully present nor given a coherent voice, which only reinforces her role as a counterpoint to the white woman. This way, she is transformed into a signifier of the "dark" forces that are both dangerous and alluring, making the colonial powers seek to control them, which again allows them to justify their "civilizing" missions to tame the native populations (London, 1989, p.237). I believe this duality highlights the constant imperial anxiety about both threatening and alluring female sexuality, which in turn justifies the colonial expansions.

Saeedi (2015, p. 538) draws on theories by the philosophers Derrida and Butler to argue that both main female characters function as the "traces" within the text. This term, while never clearly defined, refers to the simultaneous presence of women in the reality described in the story and at the same time their elusiveness. For example, every gesture of the African Woman is filled with the power of nature; she is "one with the ultimate female, mother Earth" (Saeedi, 2015, p. 547), and she is the one that the white man desires to conquer and colonize. This point is further proved by Johanna Smith's work, as she states:

As Marlow turns the savage woman's body into a symbol of the jungle, this process serves both masculinist and imperialist ends. It is an

effort to defer and control the power and sexuality both of the woman “who tread[s] the earth proudly” and of that “fecund” earth itself. As an ideology of gender works to distance and conquer the savage woman’s body, so an ideology of empire works to distance and conquer the mysterious life of the jungle. And Marlow successfully silences the savage woman; like the native laundress, she does not speak in his narrative. Like the laundress’s silence, however, this one creates a gap in the text, a sign of ideological stress that makes visible the fragility of such containment (Smith, 2020, p. 293).

This kind of comparison of a woman’s body to a force of nature is not new, and it is often used to justify the conquest of both of them. I view the persistent silence surrounding the African woman as pointing to the limits of Marlow’s narrative authority and the ideological strain of representing female power.

However, Andre Viola (2006, p. 166) claims that such kind of literary criticism has simplified and flattened the image of the African Woman as only the embodiment of savagery and primitive sexuality. He argues that this character is presented to us through a series of oxymorons which include both negative and stereotypical descriptions, such as “wild”, “savage”, and “ominous”, and positive qualities which suggest her restraint, dignity, and nobility. The image of the African woman, with her “brass leggings”, “brass wire gauntlet”, and a “helmet” (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 61), according to Viola (2006, pp. 164-165), invokes a powerful iconography of a war goddess. However, instead of wielding aggressive power, she moves “with measured steps”, creating a parallel between her and a Greek goddess Athena, rather than more destructive Artemis or Kali. I agree with Viola in that this more nuanced reading of her allows the reader to see her as more of a protector and a strategist, rather than just a symbol of primal force. This allows for building a dual image of her; while holding an

instinctive and primal identity, Conrad's African woman is shown to have the capacity for thoughtful and protective reflection.

Besides that, the image of the African woman invokes a lot of other myths and epic traditions of the territorial conquest. A parallel between her and the Sibyl, a prophetic Greco-Roman figure whose function was to guide Aeneas into the underworld, can be drawn here. Much like the Sibyl, the African woman is closely associated with liminal spaces, guarding the threshold between the known and the unknown, embodying the mystery and power of the wilderness. Moreover, further reinforcing the patriarchal stereotypes regarding women's voices and achievements, the Sibyl's voice is often attributed to a male god, in the same way the mistress's words are never spoken by her, instead, they are mediated through men (Saeedi, 2015, pp. 541-542).

Very striking is the comparison of her to Medusa (Saeedi, 2015, pp. 546-547). Similar to the mythological figure from Ancient Greece who could turn people into stone just by looking at them, the gaze of the African woman petrifies the colonizers. They are also both feared and desired, and both can be interpreted through Freud's view of male fear or female sexuality. The whole presence of the African woman disrupts the colonial narrative of the woman's role in society; she is powerful and she is a force to be reckoned with.

I believe that this comparison is especially important when we consider Freud's interpretation of the Medusa myth in his 1922 essay "Medusa's Head". The African Woman standing tall and silent on the riverbank can then represent the fear of castration. According to Freud, the anxiety created by such a woman does not lie in a direct threat coming from her, but in the overwhelming presence of female sexual power, which men perceive as a sign of danger regarding their masculinity and stability (Freud, 1922, pp. 273-274). This reading allows us to highlight the emotions lying deep under Marlow's fearful admiration and the symbolic downfall of Kurtz. Freud also mentions Athena in this essay, as she wore Medusa's

head on her dress. In my opinion, this, paired with Viola's analysis of the African woman as a powerful yet benevolent and self-controlling goddess, showcases the very interesting duality of her image as a symbol of hope and control for her people, but at the same time, a hallmark of terror and dread for the white colonizers.

This idea is supported by the descriptions of her internal conflict in the text. Her "high-shaped resolve" and "inscrutable purpose" (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 62) suggest that she is not just a symbol of raw savagery, but someone who is able to engage in internal debate (Viola, 2006, pp. 167-168). For example, her decision-making process when deciding whether to order an attack on the steamer is clearly influenced by restraint in contrast to the impulsiveness of the European characters. Her power is also exemplified in her relation to Kurtz, as she is not just his mistress, her role is far more important: "As a capable ruler, she has set up a reciprocal relationship with Kurtz. Only with the help of her people in raiding other villages, for example, can Kurtz procure ivory when he runs out of supplies to barter" (Ray, 2006, p. 151). I see that this nuanced portrayal challenges the simplistic colonial binaries and offers the reader a glimpse into internal moral negotiations forced onto colonized people by their rulers.

Viola (2006, p. 170) argues that the portrayal of the African woman is far more complicated than the simple duality between savagery and civilization. She echoes ancient femininity, which turns her into an emblem of Africa's deep cultural and mythological roots, and simultaneously, she is a symbol of the painful transformation brought by European colonization. Her multifaceted character challenges the readers to see her not as a one-dimensional stereotype but as someone whose restraint and conflicted nature reflect the broader realities of her world. In my view, this ambivalence offers the readers an opportunity to change their minds on the role that native women play within the imperial narrative, shifting it from passive stereotypes to active agents.

This section aims to describe and provide evidence of the symbolic silencing of women in *Heart of Darkness*. The following one is going to widen the frame to talk about how the exclusion of women, in particular African women, was shaped by the complex intersections of race and gender. It will explore these entanglements through the lens of intersectionality to reveal how the imperial narratives depend on the overlapping silencing of both women and the natives.

4.3 Racial and Gendered Absences

When it comes to the understanding of imperialism, it is impossible to completely separate race, gender, and class, as Boris Bertolt claims: “African societies can’t be understood outside of the colonial context” (Bertolt, 2018, p. 3). The building and stabilizing of the empire were the main goals, and gender power dynamics were an essential tool in achieving them. While both topics of power within imperialism in patriarchy are widely discussed, the studies on their interactions have only appeared in the 1990s. In her article “Beyond Complicity and Resistance: Recent Work on Gender and European Imperialism,” Malia Formes (1995, p. 629) highlights that our perceptions of the role of women in building European Empires are often highly simplified and lack nuance. For example, feminist studies often focus exclusively on the white women of the metropolis while ignoring the problems of the colonized women; at the same time, historians of colonialism can ignore the women’s issues altogether, not paying attention to the gender dynamics in the imperial setting. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a famous literary theorist and a feminist critic, in her 1985 work titled “Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism”, also criticizes the feminist scholars for neglecting the imperialist undertones in women’s writings, which often either ignore or misrepresent non-white women from the colonized nations: “It seems particularly unfortunate when the emergent perspective of feminist criticism reproduces the axioms of imperialism. A basically

isolationist admiration for the literature of the female subject in Europe and Anglo-America establishes the high feminist norm” (Spivak, 1985, p. 243). This is why it is important to pay closer attention to the intersections between these two forms of oppression and power dynamics together. Besides that, there is a tendency to describe the racial experiences under colonialism as more homogenous than they were. This complexity is evident in *Heart of Darkness*, in which the narrative marginalizes colonized women by centralizing the white male perspective, exposing the deep connection between these types of oppression in the text. In order to cover these overlaps between the oppressive systems within the imperialist culture, this section reviews the symbolic silences and the marginalization of African women through the lens of intersectionality, highlighting the shared mechanisms of gendered and racial oppression.

Intersectionality refers to the theoretical framework that examines how multiple axes of differences, such as gender, race, and other social categories, intersect and shape human experiences of injustice. It highlights the interconnectedness of these factors and relies on “recognizing how multiple axes of differences coalesce to shape human experiences of injustice” (Deckha, 2008, p. 249) and acknowledging how they collectively contribute to systems of oppression. In Conrad’s novella, this manifests as the overlapping silencing and exclusion based on both gender and race, rendering the experiences of “the Other” invisible. In the context of imperialism, intersectionality shows us how these differences shape people’s varying experiences within the colonial frame. It shows us how the different forms of privilege and discrimination in colonial societies are not separate and isolated from each other but work together under the imperial rule of the time.

Malia Formes describes the initial discussions regarding the intersections of misogyny and imperialism. According to her, one of the first researchers to realize this importance was Claudia Knapman, who in her 1986 study talks about the ways that the gender and race

hierarchy in Fiji creates justification for the rule of white men. According to it, the white women of Fiji, while still being restricted by the patriarchal mindset of Victorian England, were able to oppress the indigenous women who were at the bottom of the hierarchy (Formes, 1995, pp. 633-635). Later, scholars such as Jane Haggis and Catherine Hall proposed different tools for analyzing oppression on different levels. One such tool is called a “power matrix”. It is created to analyze how race, gender, and class are not independent but instead rely on each other. Unfortunately, the descriptions of such a framework are often vague. For example, Haggis suggests that in order to analyze things in an intersectional way, a researcher must be able to analyze all points of view, from both European and indigenous sources. Formes (1995, p. 635) claims that, despite being an admirable goal, this is something that is not achievable for most people due to the lack of linguistic knowledge to study all the indigenous sources and points of view. I think that this gap in knowledge further highlights the continued dominance of the Eurocentric perspective and the need to develop ways to bridge that gap. Besides that, Formes also claims that the structure of the power itself is flawed:

By visualizing a power matrix rather than merely a social matrix, however, Haggis approaches colonial society deductively. She privileges power over other social attributes. Consequently, while she may avoid dichotomies of black/white, male/female, she may also perpetuate simplistic contrasts between groups she identifies as powerful or powerless. In practice, therefore, her approach may reinforce the notion of a rigid social hierarchy. Although defined by levels of power rather than by race, gender and class, such a structure is likely to be identical in composition to the white male, white female, black male, black female hierarchy suggested by Knapman (Formes, 1995, p. 635).

Another common intersectional critique is the oversimplification of the roles of women within colonial studies. As Formes puts it, women are always portrayed as either complicit in or resistant to imperialism; however, the social relationships in the colonial societies were more nuanced and multi-faceted than that:

While exploitation and oppression are central characteristics of colonialism, they are not its only characteristics. Ironically, by emphasizing these themes, historians may deprive indigenous people of agency in their narratives and turn them into one-dimensional victims of equally one-dimensional European villains (Formes, 1995, p. 635).

Formes suggests the matrix model should be implemented in a more nuanced way to better understand the diversity and fluidity of the colonial experiences of everyone involved in it.

Spencer-Wood (2016, p. 481) offers her own “feminist inclusive framework” that considers not only the hierarchy but also the fluid power dynamics to better her analysis. It “is concerned with both hierarchy and interacting, unranked, multiply ranked, variable, fluid power dynamics in human relationships,” and “incorporates the Marxian domination and resistance model of power dynamics” (Spencer-Wood, 2016, p. 481). She also describes the way the colonial patriarchal economic systems would disrupt the pre-existing native gender divisions of labor in the occupied territories; for example, the construction of the housing, which used to be a job for women in some tribes, was forced to become an occupation for men; or the way the Russian colonists in Alaska would often break up families by taking away both men and women to partake in fur trade. I think that these colonial interventions both worked to impose the colonists’ ways of living onto the natives and disrupted and changed the existing gender structures that existed before, which further contributed to the silencing of the native women. I believe that a good representation of this phenomenon in *Heart of Darkness* is the laundress who appears on the outer station. She is silent, taken away

from her old life, forced to starch the chief accountant's clothes to make him look perfect: "I've been teaching one of the native women about the station. It was difficult. She had a distaste for the work" (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 18). Many feminist theories, such as the radical feminist theory, the structural-feminist theory, and the feminist heterarchical model created by Spencer-Wood, analyze the ways that the male cultural and economic dominance was enforced by physical power as well as making the laws and cultural institutions to keep women "where they belong" within the Western culture; at the same time those power structures also contributed heavily to the relations between different races in those areas. The "patriarchal colonialism" (Spencer-Wood, 2016, p. 482), which she defines as "the structures and institutions enforcing, maintaining and reproducing patriarchal gender and sexual power dynamics" (Spencer-Wood, 2016, p. 482), was present not only in the way gender relations were established, but it penetrated all parts of the colonial society.

Paired with intersectionality, Spencer-Wood's framework makes the concept of "autobiographical vulnerability", described by Straus (1987, p. 125), even more complex and prominent. We should keep in mind that intersectionality allows us to focus on the fact that women are not a monolithic group, and the pain of literary exclusion may be even harder for the women who experience both gendered and racial alienation. Therefore, in my opinion, reading *Heart of Darkness*, a novella that prioritizes white men and their narratives, a modern woman of color could experience othering based on several different aspects, since African women in the story are both symbolically and structurally excluded from the narrative.

The continent of Africa itself is very often described like a woman; many colonizers and leaders of those times would call the land "fecund," exactly the way Conrad describes the African woman. The land is sexualized and eroticized; thus, we can clearly see that the colonial enterprise can be at least partially seen in the same way as the possession of a woman. I think that this metaphor legitimizes the colonial violence by connecting the colonial

control with patriarchal rule over women, further reinforcing the imperial justification through gendered imagery. Bertolt (2018, p. 9) highlights that in colonial times, black women were “triple-oppressed” by the white man, the white woman, and the black man. He also mentions the way this feminization of the continent makes African men not only dehumanized but also invisible, which has led to the normalization of the conquest. This can be compared to the way the white women in Western societies were often made invisible, not meant to be seen or heard of, being restricted to only the functions that were prescribed to them by the men who controlled them. At the same time, the African women who did not fit into such a standard, who were considered hypersexual, needed to be “domesticized”, taught to limit themselves to the roles of mothers and caretakers, existing only in the private sphere while all the power and influence on the society would remain in men’s hands, and “if sex plays a central role in its definition, through the satisfaction of men’s sexual needs, its work is limited to the fields, preparing food and taking care of children” (Bertolt, 2018, p. 10).

Bette London (1989, p. 236) argues that Freud’s theories played an important role in merging the racial and gender myths together by describing female sexuality as the “dark continent.” According to London, this metaphor is not only used to describe women as mysterious and unknowable, but also conflates the exotic and usually negative stereotypes about race with the perceived danger of female sexuality. This imagery strongly supports the patriarchal and colonial ideologies, providing a rationale for keeping the existing rigid power structures, which makes both Africa and women objects to be controlled. However, she also mentions that this theory has a lot of opponents. For example, a famous feminist critic, Hélène Cixous, challenged the notion that darkness as a symbol of mystery and danger should necessarily be associated with the feminine. This critique aims to question and destabilize the reductionist symbolisms that have been used to justify both racial and gender oppression. In Conrad’s narrative, the feminine and the African wilderness are often conflated and framed as

mysterious and erotic, with “Conrad already deploying darkness along these dual tracks to uphold the inscrutable center of his work” (London, 1989, p. 236). I argue that this duality of Conrad’s symbolism of darkness exposes the suggestion that both “the dark continent” and the dark woman need to be tamed and controlled, revealing the overlapping nature of imperial anxiety.

Suzanne M. Spencer-Wood (2016) mentions the concept of “civilizing colonialism” that aimed at creating a typical Western-like society in the colonized lands. She claims that it “was fundamentally gendered because in the dominant Western nineteenth-century gender ideology, domestic women were considered the primary civilizers of mankind and were called the ‘mothers of civilization’ because of their supposedly superior morality” (Spencer-Wood, 2016, p. 478). In my view, this kind of colonialism is also represented in *Heart of Darkness* and in the figure of Kurtz, who, before “going native”, was obsessed with the idea of bringing the Western civilization to the savages, while representing the beacon of enlightenment as a woman in his painting: “Then I noticed a small sketch in oils, on a panel, representing a woman, draped and blindfolded, carrying a lighted torch. The background was somber—almost black. The movement of the woman was stately, and the effect of the torchlight on the face was sinister” (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 25).

I believe this is why, for the representatives of the colonial systems, such as Marlowe, it would be difficult to understand the presence of a powerful and militant female leader, such as the African woman. As an imperial narrator, he presents an identity that is both racialized and gendered. A white man, he has the dual authority in the text by presenting Africa as something to challenge European rationality, and building his masculine power by completely excluding the feminine:

The suppression of the feminine—a nonevent, in narrative terms—sustains the masculine line worlds of the novel's dual plots (the

telling of the tale and the events told about). As the novel's final scene suggests, Marlow pursues his truth at a woman's expense, founding masculine authority upon the discredited feminine (London, 1989, p. 236).

In the article titled “Gender, Race, and Narrative Structure: A Reappraisal of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*,” Carole Stone and Fawzia Afzal-Khan (1997) attempt to reframe the novella by arguing that the racial and gendered realities in it are just simply fixed binaries, but fluid constructs which functions as both tools used by the colonial authorities to establish their power over marginalized communities but also as a way of resistance for the oppressed. According to them, the classical setup of the racial binary is used to mark the opposition between the civilized colonizers and the primitive and subhuman Africans (Stone & Khan, 1997, p. 224). I think that Conrad chose to lean into the ambivalence, thus, Marlow is constantly torn between the opposite ideas: on the one hand, in his colonial mindset, he chooses to reduce and dehumanize Africans, describing them as ants or other animalistic figures, yet on the other hand, he ends up partially identifying with their vulnerability and struggles. For example, when he observes the natives in the grove, he not only sees them as savages, but as real people suffering from the brutal system that dehumanizes them:

Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair. [...] 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. Brought from all the 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 (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 17).

The instability of the racial oppositions in the text highlights the idea that the colonial project itself was full of uncertainties and internal division :

In thus identifying with the African 'other' and against the white male, Marlow/Conrad expresses his sympathy with the unempowered female because he fears that he too will become powerless in the blank spaces of Africa, much like the natives he has seemingly come to conquer, and the disenfranchised women back home (Stone & Afzal-Khan, 1997, p. 224).

In a similar way, the gender binaries within the novella are based on the contrast between the masculine ideals of heroism, rationality, and conquest, and the passivity and dependency of the women in the story (Stone & Afzal-Khan, 1997, p. 225). Marlow's story is indeed framed as a masculine adventure tale, yet his reliance on women (for example, when he needs his aunt's help to secure the job that allowed for the story to happen) and his self-doubts introduce a paradox where the masculine hero is dependent and even partly defined by what he gains from the feminine. I argue that this paradox blurs the boundaries between the masculine and the feminine and suggests that these binaries are not part of the natural world order, but rather social constructs based on patriarchal ideologies. In *Heart of Darkness*, it is especially prominent in the way Marlow has to rely on his aunt to get a job, which points to his dependence on women, which he is deeply ashamed of.

Essentially, I think the key is the interaction between the racial and gendered binaries in the text. The segregation of white (rational, civilized, masculine) and nonwhite (irrational, savage, feminine) realms is at the core of the colonial project. However, Marlow's journey repeatedly exposes the fragility and instability of these distinctions. The intersections of these binaries are highlighted by Marlow's constantly shifting sympathies between his support for

the imperial ideology and empathy towards the oppressed. The African woman, as the representative of both racial and gendered “Other,” serves as a metaphor for the failure of the colonial approach to build reality based exclusively on the oppositions and reductions.

The period of colonial rule in Africa has created a new reality for the natives, both male and female, and has forever changed the perception of gender in their societies. It is crucial to consider all the aspects and axes of oppression faced by these people and the way it influenced them to properly analyze the works of fiction created in this period about the colonized states. The intersectional analysis of *Heart of Darkness* reveals the deep entanglement between gender and race as systems of oppression that reinforce each other within the colonial reality. African women are particularly harmed as they experience the double silencing both as racialized subjects and gendered ones.

The symbolic framework, narrative structure, and ideological bases of the novella frame Africa as both feminine and unknowable, upholding the imperialist ideas, silencing and denying agency to those it considers “the Other”. This intersectional silencing is not accidental, it is a foundational mechanism of the imperial discourse, which has to be exposed in order to comprehend the violence of colonialism fully. Considering this, the African woman becomes the most prominent figure of absence in *Heart of Darkness* as she is present, yet voiceless, seen, yet her power and strength go unrecognized, and she is the one who ultimately has to deal with the consequences of the imperial rule.

Chapter 5. Echoes of Darkness: The Afterlife of Conrad's Colonial Vision

5.1 *Heart of Darkness*: Critique vs. Complicity

From the moment of its publication in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1899, *Heart of Darkness* was at the center of debates around its relationship to the empire. On the surface level, it could be considered an indictment of colonial brutality, especially in the ways it portrays the Belgian Congo as a landscape of terror and moral decay. Simultaneously, it is filled with imperialistic language and logic, in particular when it comes to its reliance on European voices and on depicting Africa as "the Other". This ambiguity of the novella leads to the question of whether *Heart of Darkness* critiques imperialism and colonialism, or is complicit in spreading the colonial narratives it is trying to expose.

When discussing this tension, I believe it is essential to highlight the centrality of narrative framing. The entire story appears to be filtered through Marlow's perspective and that of the unnamed narrator on the boat on the Thames in London, and this may allow Conrad to embed the critique within two layers of distance. There is also no direct presentation of Africa as it is presented through Marlow's perspective, his own beliefs, and contradictions. While the moral degradation and inefficiency he witnesses clearly disgust him, he still resorts to using a language that amplifies the racial hierarchies and implies differences between Africans and Europeans. He considers Belgian colonialism chaotic and cruel and compares it to the British version, which to him is more purposeful and restrained, and useful: "one knows that some real work is done in there" (Conrad, 1899/1971, p. 10). While many of the critics mentioned in this section, for example, Said and Achebe, have already been covered earlier in the text, I revisit their key arguments to examine how their contributions continue to shape the scholarship around the novella.

Chinua Achebe's 1975 lecture "An Image of Africa" is a foundational critique of *Heart of Darkness*. In it, he argues that Conrad grants no humanity, history, or agency to the African

people, reducing it to a symbolic void that exists to reflect the dark corners of the European psyche instead of being a separate place with history, traditions, and cultures. As evidence, he presents the character of the helmsman, who is depicted less as an individual and more like a presence whose death is mainly just an inconvenience to Marlow (Achebe, 1978, p. 8).

According to Achebe, this is not just a problem of style, but a political issue. Conrad's presentation of Africa and his usage of modernist aesthetics to elevate this image is a way of participating and continuing the centuries-long colonial tradition of dehumanization that is not only limited to literature but also has consequences in the real world. Achebe's position is that no literary work, no matter how great it is considered to be, can be excused for the ethical and political implications of what it represents: "A story in which the very humanity of a people is denied cannot be considered a great work of art" (Achebe, 1979, p. 9). This lecture opened an entirely different chapter in Conrad scholarship, with critics trying to figure out whether *Heart of Darkness* can and should be separated from the imperial gaze depicted in it. I think that Achebe's criticism remains essential not just for its political urgency, but also for challenging the assumptions that shaped literary judgement.

A series of responses defending *Heart of Darkness* against Achebe's accusations appeared shortly after his lecture. One of the most vocal opponents of his position was Cedric Watts, who in his 1983 essay "A Bloody Racist: About Achebe's View of Conrad," insists that Achebe misreads and misrepresents the irony present in the novella, as well as oversimplifies the author's position. Watts (1983, p. 204) considers it not to be a story glorifying the empire, but a profound meditation on its contradictions instead. The narrative presented by Marlow is, according to him, deliberately unstable, filled with self-doubt, and implicit criticism:

Not only is there a steady accumulation of widely-ranging instances of the brutality and absurdity of imperialism, but also various devices, from the citation of dominoes as 'the bones' in the tale's fourth paragraph to the

decision not to name the ‘sepulchral city’ as Brussels or the African region as the Belgian Congo, help to erode any final sense that British imperialism is immune to the main indictments that the narrative offers (Watts, 1983, p. 204).

Therefore, I argue that the racism that one encounters in the novella is not an endorsement, but rather a mirror of the moral confusion and cultural arrogance produced by imperialism. Watts’s reading, in my opinion, is important as it highlights the formal complexity of Conrad’s method; however, it also risks underestimating the ideological power of representation and the hidden exclusions built into that complexity.

The main issue with Achebe’s analysis is seen by Watts as his binary framing: for Achebe, the text must be either canonically great or ideologically pure (Watts, 1983, pp. 206-207), Watts argues that it is possible for Conrad to be neither an imperial apologist nor an anti-colonial revolutionary; instead, to him, he uses liberal European thought to dramatize the tensions and hypocrisies in the society in which he lived:

Conrad was able to show some valuable features of European civilization (notably the complex and humane outlook represented by Marlow) while condemning its hubris, its rapacity, and its refusal to accept an equilibrium with the environment, and while noting its male dominance (Watts, 1983, p. 206).

Thus, instead of being a mouthpiece for the empire and its values, Marlow becomes a vehicle for exploring the moral disintegration and degradation of those values. Watts highlights that Conrad’s use of irony, ambiguity, and narrative layering is what allows the reader to analyze information and come to their own conclusions instead of simply consuming the assumptions within the story (Watts, 1983, p. 198).

In my view, a more balanced position on this issue is offered by Patrick Brantlinger. He acknowledges Achebe's arguments, while still considering the novella valuable for learning and analyzing. His 1985 work describes *Heart of Darkness* as a "schizophrenic" (Brantlinger, 1985, p. 364) text that both criticizes and reinforces imperial ideology. Brantlinger insists that the deeply entrenched trope of Africa as savage, dark, and unknowable allows the author to expose the emptiness within the European civilizing mission. He suggests that the novella's ambiguous language is not its flaw but a feature used to reflect the historical moment of the downfall of imperial ideological coherence. Therefore, the text cannot simply be reduced to either condemnation or celebration. I would argue that this reading helps to underscore the double movement of the text, as its critique of the empire is still embedded in the narrative structure, reinforcing what it seeks to dismantle.

The Nigerian critic Clement Okafor, known for his work on postcolonial literature, offers a comparison between *Heart of Darkness* and Achebe's own novel, *Things Fall Apart*. His 1988 article "Joseph Conrad and Chinua Achebe: Two Antipodal Portraits of Africa" is an argument supporting Achebe's idea that Conrad's portrayal of Africa is not just a misrepresentation, but an image completely void of subjectivity. He agrees that the novella turns Africa into a mere backdrop and a symbolic space for Europeans to explore their own guilt, madness, and moral decay: "Conrad, like a photographer, deliberately set his novel in Africa because he-as well as his nineteenth-century European audience-believed that the continent epitomized savagery" (Okafor, 1988, p. 19). He believes that this makes the proper representation of African voices impossible within the existing narrative. Okafor (1988, pp. 20-21) observes that African characters, for example, the helmsman, are absolutely incapable of independent thinking or action; thus, their image is close to that of children, which reinforces the infantilizing colonial stereotypes. They also never reach the depth of development of even minor European characters, and are only portrayed in relation to the

white people. In contrast, Achebe's novel presents a fully developed African perspective, reversing Conrad's colonial gaze and showing a coherent world of African cultural systems, ethical norms, and communal life with their own values, conflicts, and forms of government.

The contrast between these narrative strategies is not incidental, as they reflect two ideologically incompatible positions (Okafor, 1988, p. 27). Conrad uses Africa as merely a symbolic and psychological setting, where meaning and knowledge are limited to the Europeans. Achebe places the center of narrative agency with Africans themselves. Therefore, Okafor claims, *Things Fall Apart* is not just a response, but a complete restructuring of *Heart of Darkness*, as, to him, "where the two novels are as different as night and day is in their portrait of Africa" (Okafor, 1988, p. 27). Okafor uses this comparison to highlight that even if we find Conrad's critique of imperialism to be powerful, it is still heavily limited by his refusal to see Africa as anything more than a metaphor. Drawing on this analysis, I would agree that the problem of the text is not what Conrad says, but what he allows to be said. As Marlow and, by extension, Conrad, speak about their experiences while silencing the colonized, they reinforce the exclusive narrative they try to question.

Possibly the most nuanced response to the question of Conrad's complicity is offered by Edward Said. In *Culture and Imperialism* (1994), he acknowledges Achebe's critique, admitting that the representations in *Heart of Darkness* are damaging and that the African characters are not granted voice or visibility in the story. Nonetheless, his position is that Conrad's narrative allows us to see the historical moment of the erosion of imperial ideology despite their political structures remaining intact: "Conrad dates imperialism, shows its contingency, records its illusions and tremendous violence and waste, he permits his later readers to imagine something other than an Africa carved up into dozens of European colonies, even if, for his own part, he had little notion of what that Africa might be" (Said, 1994, p. 26). In my opinion, this view highlights the significance of *Heart of Darkness*, lying

in its exposure of the cracks within the imperial worldview. His key contribution in this discussion, however, lies in his theory of the text being the means of both dominance and disruption:

Conrad's argument is inscribed right in the very form of narrative as he inherited it and as he practiced it. Without empire, I would go so far as saying, there is no European novel as we know it, and indeed if we study the impulses giving rise to it, we shall see the far from accidental convergence between the patterns of narrative authority constitutive of the novel on the one hand, and, on the other, a complex ideological configuration underlying the tendency to imperialism (Said 1994, pp. 69-70).

While it is true that the European empires used literature similar to Conrad's to consolidate their power by fostering and supporting assumptions, imagery, and selective silences, it still served to expose the underlying anxieties and contradictions within that power as "Marlow unsettles the reader's sense not only of the very idea of empire, but of something more basic, reality itself" (Said, 1994, p. 29). I would add that this ambivalence is at the very core of *Heart of Darkness*, as it shows the colonial journey not in order to celebrate, but to question and condemn the empire. The story is filled with the imagery of decay and futility, and Kurtz's downfall and Marlow's general uncertainty are the symbols of the ideological decline of the empire. However, Said warns the reader to be cautious in interpreting this critique as fully emancipatory. The spatial and discursive logic of colonialism is still present within the novella, as it maps out Africa as some kind of "other world," that is notable for its absence rather than presence "as yet, however, no one seemed to inhabit that region, and so Conrad left it empty" (Said, 1994, p. 24). According to Said, this structure of representation is exactly what enables the broader cultural work of imperialism. Even a self-critical text like *Heart of Darkness* still uses the boundaries of subjectivity installed by the imperial logic, with its

centrality of the European voice and the colonized people only existing to provoke, test, or unsettle that voice, not being able to talk or fight back: “in telling the story of his African journey Marlow repeats and confirms Kurtz's action: restoring Africa to European hegemony by historicizing and narrating its strangeness” (Said, 1994, p. 164).

This duality is what caused the novella’s lasting relevance and controversy. As Said states, *Heart of Darkness* is not a text that can be easily dismissed or defended since it is full of tensions where it is impossible to separate critique from complicity:

Conrad shows us that what Marlow does is contingent, acted out for a set of like-minded British hearers, and limited to that situation. Yet neither Conrad nor Marlow gives us a full view of what is outside the world-conquering attitudes embodied by Kurtz, Marlow, the circle of listeners on the deck of the *Nellie*, and Conrad. By that I mean that *Heart of Darkness* works so effectively because its politics and aesthetics are, so to speak, imperialist, which in the closing years of the nineteenth century seemed to be at the same time an aesthetic, politics, and even epistemology inevitable and unavoidable (Said, 1994, p. 24).

I think that the true value of the novella lies in the way it shows how even the most critical literary minds of the time were unable to fully escape the imperial frame and imagination.

In my opinion, this tension is enhanced by the structure of the story: the whole tale told by Marlow is filtered through the perspective of the unnamed narrator on the ship in London, who is listening to it alongside other imperial professionals. Therefore, the boundary between the critique and complicity is blurred by the use of a frame narrative. I think that the literary style of *Heart of Darkness* is both its biggest power and its problem. Irony and the narrative layering created a text that is deliberately resistant to certainty. Marlow is a deeply ambivalent figure who is both terrified by and attracted to the horror of imperial reality. He often

contradicts himself, as he mixes moral courage with fatalism. The narrative instability is what makes many critics like Bralinger and Said claim that the novella performs as both a condemnation and a symptom of imperial ideology.

I would use Kurtz's final words as an example. The reason his words have become highly discussed is precisely because of their ambiguity. What is "the horror"? Is it a portrayal of his final realization of the colonial brutality he was a part of? Is it a cry of despair? Or could it be just a senseless utterance from a dying man who lost his mind long before his death? There is no clarification from Conrad. This uncertainty is what forces the readers to interpret and reinterpret the story without ever getting to find out the correct answer. Consequently, *Heart of Darkness* becomes less of a political story of condemnation and/or celebration of European Imperialism, but rather a psychological labyrinth that invites us to figure out the moral and ethical collapse of the empire without having simple explanations. However, this ambiguity is what limits the novella's critique of the imperial system. Conrad's refusal to name colonialism as an economic and political structure and his framing it as an abstract or moral problem led to a lack of full implications of what imperialism and colonialism did to their victims. While the suffering of Africans could still be seen, they were only represented as scenery for European introspection. Scholars and writers, such as Achebe and Okafor, rightfully point out that the horror of colonialism in *Heart of Darkness* is, first and foremost, a European horror where the tragedy is centered not around slavery and mass murders, but around white men losing their minds. Therefore, the modernist techniques Conrad uses, emphasizing doubt, alienation, and fragmentation, both expose and perpetuate the imperial ideological blindness.

The reason why *Heart of Darkness* remains a foundational text when it comes to debates on colonial literature is that it refuses to be easily categorized. Its critique of the cruelty and hypocrisy of the empire is combined with narrative strategies that reinforce

colonial ideology. While exposing the moral decay and hollowness of the metropole, it offers no example of resistance to it, African subjectivity, or any possibility of future decolonization. I argue that the discomfort and the dissonance between what is said and what is hidden make it great. The divergent opinions of many critics demonstrate the productivity and fraught nature of that dissonance. Some believe that literary greatness cannot redeem the story teeming with racist assumptions, while others value its dramatization of the contradictions at the core of imperial philosophy. The centrality of the novella to the topic of empires and how they can be imagined and challenged is undeniable, regardless of whether *Heart of Darkness* is seen as a critique, as a testimony of imperial complicity, or of both.

Uncertainty is what has given the novella its lasting cultural power, and it has made it an important point of reference for scholars, educators, and postcolonial writers, dealing with its legacy. This is what the next section is going to turn to, following the ways in which *Heart of Darkness* has shaped many discussions around cultural representation, literary canons, and the politics of reading. If this section explored the text's inner contradiction, the following one focuses on its influence on the academic and political landscapes of the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries.

5.2 A Fraught Legacy

By the mid-twentieth century, *Heart of Darkness* had been firmly embedded into the canon. Praised for its modernist style, psychological complexity, and innovation, it had become an indelible part of the university curricula, anthologies, and scholarly criticism by the mid-20th century. Yet the postcolonial and feminist critics, such as Robinson (1983), have argued that those same qualities that led to the canonization of *Heart of Darkness* are also deeply tied to the imperialist structures of exclusion and Western cultural hegemony.

Lillian Robinson (1983, p. 94) argues that there is no such thing as being ideologically neutral when it comes to the formation of the literary canon, as it mirrors the set of historically contingent judgements regarding value, voice, and tradition. Her essay, *Treason Our Text: Feminist Challenges to the Literary Canon*, heavily criticizes how literary greatness has always been based on the exclusion of the marginalized voices, in particular those of women and the colonized people. Thus, canon upholds the illusion of universality of greatness by simply filtering everything through elite white male sensibilities, and she believes it must be changed: “the rationale for a new syllabus or anthology relies on a very different criterion: that of truth to the culture being represented, the whole culture and not the creation of an almost entirely male white elite” (Robinson, 1983, p. 89). As I see it, Conrad and many other authors like him were canonized not only because of their mastery and talent, but also because their themes of alienation, colonial anxieties, and existential doubt were seen as representative of the general human state of mind.

John Fowler (1979) agrees that both genre and canon formation act as tools of ideological control. According to him, the definition of “serious literature” does not rely on the objective definitions of truth or aesthetic value but rather on the scholarly institutions, including schools, universities, and critics, that perform as mediators between culture and the public (Fowler, 1979, p. 109). Hence, *Heart of Darkness*’s rise to the literary canon should be viewed in this context. Fragmented narration, psychological interiority, and moral ambiguity are the modernist techniques that were valorized by the mid-century critics, especially within New Criticism. This kind of critical standard contributed to the novella’s academic prestige while allowing its colonial content to go unnoticed. As a result, the colonial texts within the were studied for their literary complexity, while the feminist and postcolonial voices were marginalized if they were even lucky enough to be included. This imbalance is exactly what laid the groundwork for critics like Achebe, Said, and Robinson, who chose to evaluate not

only the literary form, but also to analyze who was allowed to speak in those stories and whose voices were considered worthy of preservation. In my view, this critical defensiveness reveals how the self-positioning of literary institutions as neutral and unbiased is often incorrect, as they continue to reinforce the outdated hierarchies of race, gender, and empire.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the literary canon came under increasing scrutiny, in particular from postcolonial and feminist critics. Scholars across these fields argued that the canon both excluded the voices of the marginalized people and naturalized the idea of those voices being inherently inferior. Instead of simply demanding the inclusion of female and post-colonial writers, they wanted a general reevaluation of the values and hierarchies that are at the base of the existing structures. I believe that is a mark of a significant shift from seeking any kind of representation to demanding the transformation of the ideology behind the literary canon.

Some of the first critics to raise the question of the exclusion of alternative voices were feminist theorists such as Robinson (1983), who noted that merely adding a couple of women to the literary canon did not really challenge the deeper ideological beliefs that defined greatness through the masculine lens, European history, and themes that were considered universal. She argued that the problem was not just leaving some people out, but the gendered and racialized norms of canonization in the first place:

The wholesale consignment of women's concerns and productions to a grim area bounded by triviality and obscurity cannot be compensated for by tokenism. True equity can be attained, they argue, only by opening up the canon to a much larger number of female voices. This is an endeavor that eventually brings basic aesthetic questions to the fore (Robinson, 1983, p. 87).

Under this approach reading itself was reframed as a political act, and the texts were not solely measured by their aesthetic values but by the kinds of power relations they represent as well.

In recent years, the decolonial education theorists joined in and expanded critiques of Eurocentric curricula by calling for deeper changes in how knowledge is produced, valued, and taught. One such voice is Paraskeva (2016), who argues that the curriculum has long promoted Eurocentric narratives for both colonized and “metropolitan” students. He calls not only for a wider canon, but also for broader ways of knowing. In his vision, he highlights “deterritorialized curricula” (Paraskeva, 2016, p. 18), epistemological pluralism, and the need to get rid of “curriculum epistemicides,” his term for the systematic erasure of the non-Western intellectual traditions (Paraskeva, 2016, p. 19). Paraskeva calls for an “itinerant curriculum” (Paraskeva, 2016, p. 23), which would disrupt the epistemological foundations of schooling itself. He suggests that we cannot simply widen the canon; we must reconceptualize it. He draws on the idea of “cognitive justice” when talking about creating a different model of teaching that would value different ways of knowing, including oral, communal, indigenous, and affective, alongside the current European literary tradition, arguing that “the main goal for critical progressive educators should be social justice and real democracy, coupled with an acknowledgment that there is no social justice without cognitive justice” (Paraskeva, 2016, p. 19). I believe this is relevant to the argument of this thesis, since it highlights the need for critical engagement with canonical texts like *Heart of Darkness* not only in terms of their content, but also in terms of the educational structures through which they are taught.

Building on Paraskeva’s work, Criser and Knott (2019) insist that just adding a few more works to the curriculum is not a good way to decolonize it, there should be some confrontation and reevaluation of the values that underpin the selection instead. They studied

the British and German university reforms, and that revealed that despite the progressive settings of the contemporary European academia, the efforts to diversify the reading lists often fail to address the ways in which the colonial frameworks to this day continue to shape course objectives, institutional metrics, and teacher training (Criser & Knott, 2019, p. 153). I agree that the problem is more than just the canon, but also that many non-canonical texts are taught in isolation from the historical violence and silencing they are aimed at representing. *Heart of Darkness* as a text is often taught in separation from the critical postcolonial responses, which exemplifies this problem. The issue is not that *Heart of Darkness* is still taught and read, but that generally the critical approaches to it have not changed yet.

For a figure like Conrad, this critique is very important. The continued centrality of texts like *Heart of Darkness* often remains unquestioned, as it is believed that it already challenges the imperial narratives. But Paraskeva (2016, p. 15) reminds us that even texts that intend to criticize the existing power structures can become the tools of white domination as their existence continues to block a more radical transformation within the canon. Therefore, teaching *Heart of Darkness* can be a way for the institutions to signal critical engagement while keeping their framework oriented towards a white male perspective. In my opinion, these critiques show that the conversation on *Heart of Darkness* cannot be reduced to whether it is a good or bad piece of literature. The real issue lies in how power and ideology are inseparable parts of the systems that decide what is even considered literature to begin with. Feminist and decolonial scholars have been pushing for a change of those systems by not only expanding the reading list, but by transforming the approach to reading itself.

I think that since the canon has long served the function of gatekeeping cultural authority, the task in front of the literary community is not just revising the list, but remaking and reimagining the structure behind it. There have been many alternative models of teaching literature created by educators, scholars, and activists who advocate for plural canons that

would overlap, cause dialogue, show the historical contexts of things they teach, and create critical comparisons instead of just focusing on a single interpretation of the texts. One of them is what Paraskeva refers to as “ecologies of knowledge” (Paraskeva, 2016, p. 20), which is concerned with curricula that recognize and celebrate the co-existence of many epistemologies and ways of existing in this world. The way I see it, this would not reject Conrad and other colonial writers, but place them as one voice among many, instead of considering them a single authority on literature. One can still teach *Heart of Darkness*, but it must be placed among other works, such as *Things Fall Apart*, *Season of Migration to the North*, or *The Slave Girl*, which would allow the readers to encounter the empire from many perspectives.

Another benefit of this pluralistic model of teaching is that it would enable a deeper engagement with the issues of race, gender, and power, as Paraskeva puts it: “Opening up the canon of knowledge includes challenging and destroying the coloniality of power, knowledge, and being, thus transforming the very idea and practice of power” (Paraskeva, 2016, p. 22). Instead of treating the canon as a neutral list of works, we can critically inquire as to why some texts were selected and others were excluded, and what political power led to these exclusions. By asking questions like these, we can push the literature classrooms to become places of transformation of the world.

In my opinion, texts like *Heart of Darkness* should not be excluded from the curriculum, but neither should they be taught in isolation as they sometimes appear in the syllabi without being placed in a dialogue with feminist or postcolonial critiques. Their inclusion in the curriculum should be accompanied by the critical and literary works of those they marginalize and silence. This would allow for a deeper and more honest discussion about the empires and their cultural legacies. I believe that such an approach would turn Conrad’s

novella into a part of a broader conversation and challenge the readers to see the aesthetic form in relation to power, history, and voice.

The legacy of *Heart of Darkness* is then not just literary, but pedagogical. It can compel us to ask ourselves what kind of reading practices we perform and want to develop in others, and what kind of cultural work we want literature to perform. Although the literary canon began to be seriously questioned as early as the 1950s, in particular in postwar academic circles, it was still treated as a monument to cultural unity and universalism. But it is time for it to change and become a conversation that acknowledges the marginalized voices and sees them as essential elements of literary criticism.

Conclusion

This thesis explored the ways in which *Heart of Darkness* operates at the intersection of literature and imperial ideology. By using close reading and contextual analysis, I have argued that the novella does not merely reflect or critique European colonialism, but participates in its reproduction and reinforcement. Simultaneously, the text's instability, irony, and ambiguity prevent it from being reduced to a single political stance. The ambivalence of critique and complicity is at the core of the novella's lasting relevance and prominent position in the canon.

In chapter 1, I established the ideological foundations of European imperialism, focusing on how the concepts of race, civilization, and progress were used to justify the colonial domination, as the idea of the "civilizing mission" provided the moral framework to frame violence as benevolence, while claiming that the non-Western people were inferior, childlike, or barbaric. Ideological structures like these were at the very center of the colonialist ideology, and they managed to persist in cultural representation long after the formal collapse of the empire. After that, I investigated the practical application of this ideology, using the British and the Belgian empires as examples, since they are central to *Heart of Darkness*. This foundation is crucial for understanding the symbolic structures that Conrad's narrative both relies on and exposes.

Chapter 2 focused on Conrad's life and the late nineteenth-century context of *Heart of Darkness*, underscoring the complexity of his position. A Polish exile who wrote in English, Joseph Conrad was simultaneously inside and outside of the imperial system. This chapter also allows to situate the novella within the literary climate of his time, highlighting the influence that personal displacement and broader political anxieties had on Conrad's narrative. Conrad's transnational background and the context in which he worked highlight

the reasons his critique of the empire remained strongly connected with the tropes it attempts to dismantle.

Chapter 3 examined the narrative structure and symbolic language of the novella, particularly in relation to the construction of racial absences and their maintenance through indirection and silence. However, despite the African characters being silenced and denied agency, these silences produce a sense of unease, exposing the contradictions within the imperial ideology. These tensions suggest that the novel is a clear critique, but the text that is full of ideological uncertainties. This ambiguity is reinforced by the layered narration and evasive style, compelling the readers to contemplate the political implications without offering a direct solution.

In chapter 4, I turned to the construction of masculinity as an imperial ideology. Drawing on critics such as Roberts and Straus, the chapter showed how masculinity performs as justification for colonialism. The world, constructed in the novella, values emotional detachment, narrative control, and moral ambiguity as masculine characteristics. However, the collapse of a figure like Kurtz reveals the fragility and instability of this masculine ideal and the cost of maintaining it. The complicity and introspection of Marlow highlight how deeply those ideas were embedded, even as they disintegrate under the pressure. Thus, the key site of narrative tension is the psychological toll exerted by these ideals in the story.

Finally, chapter 5 explored the critical legacy of *Heart of Darkness*, with particular focus on its contested place in the literary canon and in the classroom. By revisiting Achebe, Said, and other critics, this chapter argues that the novella's canonization has often obscured its ideological contradictions. The theorists of decolonization in education, such as Paraskeva, urge us to rethink not only what is taught but also how it is taught. In this context, the problem goes beyond the presence of the colonial texts in the canon and focuses on the absence of other perspectives in it. This chapter suggests that teaching works like *Heart of Darkness*

alongside the works of authors from marginalized groups, as well as offering criticism of the historical and political issues within the text, would reveal the stakes of literary power and foster critical literacy.

Together, these chapters show that while *Heart of Darkness* is a text shaped by the ideology of empire, it cannot be reduced to it. The power of this text lies in its contradictions, as it simultaneously exposes and enacts colonial logic, fluctuating between moral uncertainty and colonial authority. I believe that this is exactly what makes the novella impossible to dismiss, but also dangerous to teach in isolation from its context. Its place in the canon should not be questioned only in terms of its content, but rather in terms of the structures of knowledge and authority that sustain it. The novella's ambiguity creates a greater demand for attention to how meaning is produced, disseminated, and institutionalized.

This thesis points out how *Heart of Darkness* can be read as both a product and a critique of empire, and by investigating how its legacy functions in educational and institutional contexts. Conrad's story continues to shape the ways in which the empire is narrated, remembered, and justified. Thus, the debates around it are more than just about literature, but also about history, identity, and the politics of reading. They compel us to ask: Who is telling the story of the empire? Whose voices are elevated and who gets silenced? And how does reading reinforce or resist those hierarchies?

I do not believe that there is an easy solution to the contradictions defining *Heart of Darkness*, nor that there should be. But by directly confronting those contradictions, the readers and educators can create a more critical understanding of the role of literature in the production of knowledge. Teaching texts like *Heart of Darkness* requires responsibility, not just blind admiration. The goal is not to erase such works from the curricula, but to read them along with other voices, and question what is revealed and what is concealed about the world

within them. In this way, the literature classroom can become a space for dialogue, discussion, and transformation.

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