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PÓS-GRADUAÇÃO EM LETRAS – INGLÊS E LITERATURA CORRESPONDENTE

**“EXTERMINATE ALL THE BRUTES”: COLONIALISM AND RACISM IN
JOSEPH CONRAD’S HEART OF DARKNESS**

por

EDUARDO MARKS DE MARQUES

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Leda Maria Braga Tomitch
Coordenadora

BANCA EXAMINADORA:

Sérgio Luis do Prado Bellei
Orientador e Presidente

Rosalia A. Neumann Garcia
Examinadora

Anelise Reich Corseiul
Examinador

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To all those who, one way or another, did not believe...

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ABSTRACT**“EXTERMINATE ALL THE BRUTES”: COLONIALISM AND RACISM IN
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EDUARDO MARKS DE MARQUES

UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE SANTA CATARINA
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Supervising Professor: Sérgio Luis do Prado Bellei, PhD

Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness (1899) is among the best works of literature of the 20th Century. The story of the journey up the Congo river in Africa, made by a sailor who was in charge of collecting the ivory from the colony can be read through several different critical perspectives. The goal of this thesis is to apply a postcolonial reading (based, mainly, on Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism) in order to perceive how Conrad portrayed Imperialism in the Belgian colony of Congo, as well as the mechanisms the author used to construct the black African characters in his narrative. The narrative showed to be a reflection of the web of ambiguities and ambivalences that characterized the imperial ideology – theory and practice being so distant from each other.

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RESUMO

“EXTERMINATE ALL THE BRUTES”: COLONIALISM AND RACISM IN JOSEPH CONRAD’S HEART OF DARKNESS

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Professor Orientador: Sérgio Luis do Prado Bellei, PhD

Heart of Darkness (O Coração nas Trevas), de Joseph Conrad, figura entre as melhores obras de literature do século XX. A história da jornada pelo rio Congo acima, feita por um marinheiro encarregado de recolher o marfim da colônia, pode ser lida através das mais diversas perspectivas críticas. O objetivo da dissertação é aplicar uma leitura pós-colonial (baseada, principalmente, nas noções de Orientalismo, desenvolvidas por Edward Said) para tentar entender como Conrad retratou o Imperialismo na colônia Belga do Congo, assim como ver os mecanismos usados pelo autor para construir as personagens negras africanas na narrativa. O livro mostrou-se ser um reflexo da teia de ambigüidades e ambivalências que caracterizaram a ideologia imperial – teoria e prática estando distantes uma da outra.

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INTRODUCTION

Criticism of Heart of Darkness in the twentieth century ranged from emphasis on a psychological story of self-discovery, to an attack to the colonial regime in the Congo, to the analysis of the highly adjectival language his narrator, Marlow, uses. Robert F. Haugh points out that:

[Heart of Darkness] received a mixed critical press. The story was taken by some as an attack upon Belgian colonial methods in the Congo; as a moral tract; and as a study in race relationships. *The Bookman* called it “a symbolic picture of the inborn antagonisms of two races, the white and the black.” *The Spectator*, without indicating that it understood the story any better, praised the moral tone. Most of the other contemporary reviewers read it as a criticism of Belgian colonialism, an issue that remained alive until Conrad’s death and got attention in his obituary notices. (163)

The early readers of the novel tended to focus on the atmosphere constructed by Conrad’s language. “Some early readers of Conrad . . . failed to find [his] images any more definite than his ideas”, states Ross C. Murfin (100). Novelist E.M. Forster blames Conrad of “discharg[ing] its smoke screen into our abashed eyes (Murfin 100). Other contemporary reviewers, however, praised this same stylistic characteristic. One reviewer for the Athenaeum stated that “[Conrad] presents the atmosphere in which his characters move and act with singular fidelity, by means of watchful and careful building in which the craftsman’s methods are never obtrusive, and after turning to the last page of one of his books, we rise saturated by the very air they breathed” (Sherry apud Murfin 100).

Perhaps the first great critic to review Conrad’s story was F.R. Leavis, who published his then influential book, The Great Tradition (1949). Leavis begins his study of Heart of

Darkness by saying that Forster was correct to criticize Conrad's style. But he also states that Conrad had to be praised for the way he mastered his descriptions of actions and things. Conrad's vagueness, Leavis concludes, is due to his attempt to make Marlow philosophize over the situations he has lived through, by using an immense amount of adjectives that, instead of clarifying, make the scene even gloomier and more obscure. Words such as "inscrutable", "unspeakable" and "inconceivable" recur along the narrative. The main point Leavis makes when analyzing Conrad's repetition of adjectives is that this stylistic construction, often used with the intention of bringing the sensation of inner horror to the foreground of the narrative, does the opposite: it leaves the reader with a sensation that not even the narrator knows what he is actually referring to.

In 1958, Albert J. Guerard, reaffirming previous critical reviews of the novel, places a new light on the debate. Guerard states that Leavis' interesting debate seems to forget all the other aspects of the narrative, focusing on it and on the narrator only. In other words, Guerard accuses Leavis of not paying attention to Kurtz, the character who is the core of the novel's ultimate meaning: Heart of Darkness is a voyage of self-discovery performed by Marlow and made possible by Kurtz.

The novel is compared to a dream, a spiritual account on a man who finds himself in the middle of the African jungle. Guerard, though, is not the first actual critic to acknowledge the psychological aspect of Conrad's story. Edward Garnett stated that Heart of Darkness is a psychological masterpiece, and the fuzziness of its narrative is the same fuzziness of the world that surrounds it. Guerard agrees to this statement, but adds that the novel has a dreamy quality, and so has to be seen as a dream of self-discovery. Therefore, the excessive use of adjectives that blur the story is justified, as dreams themselves are not clear or objective. And the self-discovery has its apogee when Marlow realizes his kinship, not to the Africans, but to

Kurtz himself, who is the European white man who let himself loose in a continent where there are no laws. This psychological reading of the novel will persist throughout the century.

In Joseph Conrad: Achievement and Decline (1957), scholar Thomas Moser brings back Leavis' view, together with Guerard's. Moser, though, adds two points to the debate on Conrad's novel. First, expanding and developing some of Guerard's thoughts, he discusses the impact of the narrative on the reader. Murfin, while commenting on Moser, states that "Marlow in the jungle is like the reader in the text, that somehow Marlow's quest for self-knowledge must be doubled by our own" (104). Second, Moser brings back a topic long forgotten in the debate: the issue of European imperialism. Even though it was not a new subject, it has long been discussed apart from the other issues in the novel, as if imperialism and, for instance, the imagery of the novel could not mix.

Read as an anti-imperialist novel, the pattern established by the previous psychological readings is reversed. The binomial "lightness/whiteness", meaning good and truth, and "darkness/blackness", meaning evil is now reversed, for the purpose is to criticize the colonial/imperial system which took place in Congo. Therefore, the whites become a symbol of evil and deceit, while darkness stands for truth.

During the sixties, the focus was on structural devices. This can be seen in the first Norton Critical Edition of Heart of Darkness (1963), where one can find several essays dealing with the underworld (Robert Evans' "Conrad's Underworld" and William Bysshe Stein's "The Lotus Posture and Heart of Darkness"). The volume also discusses the Russian sailor who receives Marlow, when he does get to the Inner Station, and the lie (when Marlow goes to Kurtz's Intended and tells her that Kurtz had died with her name on his lips). Leo Gurko concludes his study of Conrad's novel by saying that the lie is just like Europe's imperialism in Africa, for both are bad things, and both the lie and imperialism are redeemed.

Nevertheless, Gurko's view of the imperial activities held in Africa by European countries contributed to the debate on whether Conrad's narrative is pro-colonialism or not. Avrom Fleishman, in his Conrad's Politics (1967) states that Conrad was very aware of the effects imperialism had upon the natives of the colonies, and the critic also focused not on the decay of the whites in Africa, as most of the previous critics had done, but on the decay of the blacks triggered by the arrival of the Europeans in Africa. Bruce Johnson, in Conrad's Models of Mind (1971), however, agrees with the view of white decay in Africa, and expands it by establishing a model of decadence in relation to nature: the whites are decadent because they have imposed civilization where nature stands.

The year of 1975 marked a turning point in the studies of Heart of Darkness, with the appearance of two very different essays about the novel. The first one is Fredrick Crews' "Conrad's Uneasiness – and Ours", published as a book chapter, in which the author applies Freudian notions of psychoanalysis, especially those referring to the Oedipus complex. The second, more disturbing, essay is Chinua Achebe's "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness", presented first as a lecture. Achebe attacks Conrad, accusing him of being a racist, by constructing Africa as the antithesis to Europe, and to all it represents, including civilization.

Heart of Darkness has thus been the object of a tremendous amount of criticism. This thesis is another contribution to the vast body of criticism the novel has received along the years, and its purpose is to analyze the relationship between the narrative and the actual history of colonialism in the Congo. In the first chapter, I will deal with the theoretical ground used to make such a study possible, focusing specifically on post-colonial discourse theories and on Edward Said's ideas of Orientalism. In the second chapter, the discussion will focus on an alternative historical account of the Congo, and its connections with the narrative. The

third chapter will discuss the way African natives are constructed in the novel, and the possible reasons that might justify such a construction.

CHAPTER ONE

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In the mid and late decades of the twentieth century, several scholars from English departments, especially those located in English speaking countries that belong to the Commonwealth of Nations, began questioning the fact that their national literatures were all under one same name; “Commonwealth Literatures”, as opposed to English Literature itself. This denomination assumed that Australian, Scottish, Irish, Caribbean and African Literatures were altogether one connected entity that shared not only their colonial past, but also cultural, artistic and literary qualities, which was not true, for these literatures shared more differences than similarities.

The denial of the term “Commonwealth Literature” to relate to these national expressions so different among themselves led these scholars to focus their attention on the fact that these countries *did* share a colonial past that was common to all, and that was the past of English domination. This perception led these countries to shift their attention from the English language to *the reason why that language was there*; in other words, the history of the English occupation in those countries, which led to the imposition of the English language as official and, together with it, of all other elements of culture as a form of making colonization easier.

With the acknowledgment of the fact that colonialism was indeed the convergent point bringing together these literatures, there was also the fact that the colonial era was officially over. The expression *postcolonial¹ literatures* was, then, used to refer to the literary manifestations in those countries who suffered (and somehow still do) the domination of England. Bill Ashcroft and Pat Ahluwalia, in a book about the work of Edward Said, state that postcolonialism “. . . investigates, and develops propositions about, the cultural and political

impact of European conquest upon colonised societies, and the nature of those societies' responses" (15).

The term *postcolonialism* has been used throughout the last decades in two major contexts: 1) to theorize upon the scars colonialism left in the culture of the colonized, and to recover the original, pre-colonization culture during and after the age of colonialism, and; 2) to identify the apparatuses used by the colonizers so as to make colonization easy and effective. Ashcroft and Ahluwalia explain that "[t]he 'post' in the term refers to 'after colonialism began' rather than 'after colonialism ended', because the cultural struggles between imperial and dominated societies continue into the present" (15). Nevertheless, there is still a certain lack of specificity on what postcolonialism really is and does, for the theories are often contradictory. As Stephen Slemon states,

[Postcolonialism] has been used as a way of ordering a critique of totalising forms of Western historicism; as a portmanteau term for a retooled notion of 'class', as a subset of both postmodernism and post-structuralism . . .; as the name for a condition of nativist longing in post-independence national groupings; as a cultural marker of non-residency for a third world intellectual cadre; as the inevitable underside of a fractured and ambivalent discourse of colonialist power; as an oppositional form of 'reading practice'; and . . . as the name for a category of 'literary' activity which sprang from a new and welcome political energy going on within what used to be called 'Commonwealth' literary studies. (45)

Some critics, however, refer to postcolonial theory as an "umbrella term", a theory used to cover virtually all issues in literary theory. Leela Ghandi mentions that, although postcolonialism has gained room among the innumerable theories throughout the twentieth century, it still "remains a diffuse and nebulous term" for "it seems to lack an 'originary

¹ There is no consensus among scholars whether to refer to the term as *postcolonialism* or *post-colonialism*. Once the first one was the most written in the articles and books I have read, I decided to use it.

moment' or a coherent methodology" (viii). Nevertheless, there are some major issues that most of the scholars agree with. As Slemon puts it, one of these issues deals with colonial agency, that is "a question of who or what acts oppositionally, when ideology or discourse or psychic processes of some kind construct human subjects. . ." (50).

For Slemon, the relations between colonizer and colonized are far more complex than they are usually taken to be. One tends to believe that colonization is a process where the strongest dominates the weakest by using only brute force. Although the use of force was a common practice, it alone did not guarantee the permanence of the colonial system. Instead, the importance draws upon the ideological and educational apparatuses created by the colony to facilitate domination and also to justify any and every act that is done by the agents of the colonial system.

Slemon sees the forces involved in the act of colonial domination in terms of three basic connections between colonizers and colonized: a) a one-way direct line (line A) linking those two, that represents the use of brute force to dominate; b) a one-way line (line BC), linking the colonizers to institutional regulators (basically educational apparatuses, such as schools and academies) and those to the colonized, and; c) another one-way line (line DE), linking the colonizers to the semiotic field (textuality, i.e. literature, not only as art, but as written production mainly) and this to the colonized. Also, there is a two-way line (line F) linking the educational apparatuses and the textuality of the semiotic field.

This diagram helps us to understand better the "hidden forces" behind the colonizing process. Colonizers (and by that, not only do I mean the individuals who have actually gone to the colony and lived/worked there directly in the process, but all the members of a colonizer society, which includes also those individuals who stayed in the metropolis) have created a powerful ideology involving the colonized. This ideology is evinced, for example, in schools and books. The schools in the metropolis have the function of affirming the

superiority of the colonizers by creating discursive mechanisms that defined the colonized as inferiors. In the colonies, on the other hand, schools have the function of imposing the colonizers' language and culture upon the colonized as a form of civilization and liberalism. In other words, colonizers create the false belief that the colonized would only achieve a better status in a new, rising society if they accepted the cultural values brought from Europe. In that context, literature, as well as all the other arts, is a part of the colonizing process.

This means that, not only are the arts a reflex of ideologies related to European superiority, but also an instrument of doctrine, used to affirm eurocentric values. These artistic elements that refer to the colonies are filled with imaginative representations of the environment and the people who inhabited these distant lands. The F line in Slemon's diagram represents the two-way relation between these representations and the educational apparatuses held by the colonial system.

These representations, their objectives and their force are studied by Edward Said's, Orientalism (1978), which is

a *distribution* of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts; . . . an *elaboration* not only of a basic geographical distinction (the world is made up of two unequal halves, Orient and Occident) but also a whole series of "interests" which, by such means as scholarly discovery, philological reconstruction, psychological analysis, landscape and sociological description, it not only creates but also maintains; it *is*, rather than expresses, a certain *will* or *intention* to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world. . . (12)

Orientalism is a complex web of disciplines created, on a first stance, to study "the Orient", a term used to refer to the variety of peoples in the East. This European interest in the

“Orient” started in the eighteenth century, with the discovery of a common origin between Sanskrit and the European languages. Since Sanskrit is a much older language than Latin, not only the linguistic roots, but also the roots of the European peoples were to be found in the “Orient”. Nevertheless, all the new disciplines created in order to trace back the distant origins of European peoples (such as philology and ethnology, for instance) saw the “Orient” as Europe’s other, as the counterpart of European identity. These disciplines were given the status of truth; thus, the ideas they passed about the distant east were unquestioned. Basically, this happened because, by placing the “other” in the “Orient”, Europe was also establishing its identity and reaffirming the status of civilization that the continent had had for centuries. As Ashcroft and Ahluwalia state, “[t]he superior ‘order’, ‘rationality’ and ‘symmetry’ of Europe, and the inferior ‘disorder’, ‘irrationality’ and ‘primitivism’ of non-Europe were the self-confirming parameters in which the various Orientalist disciplines circulated” (51).

Before settling the grounds for his ideas on Orientalism, Said makes an important distinction between pure knowledge and political knowledge. For him, pure knowledge is that kind of scholarship that cannot be applied socially and be expected to give concrete social, political or economical results or make changes of any sort in those fields. Pure knowledge, as the contemporary West preaches, has to “be nonpolitical, that is, scholarly academic, impartial, above partisan or small-minded doctrinal belief” (Orientalism 10). On the other hand, political knowledge is that which is made having as its objective a change of some sort in some aspect of society. This distinction is brought in order to initiate the discussion of whether scholars called humanists can or cannot be inserted in the field of political knowledge. Studies in Literature would then be pure, whereas studies in economics would be political. Said himself states the obvious: this dichotomy made by the Academies in the West is artificial. There is, in practical terms, an intersection between pure and political knowledge.

It is noticeable that, so as to confirm the European idea of civilization and, therefore, superiority in relation to the non-European countries, the Orientalist body of texts works two ways: to see the way Europe perceived the East and, also, the manner by which Europe perceived and defined itself. European superiority was constructed through the discourse of Orientalism, which in fact constructed the inferiority of non-European nations. This discourse was mainly based on the fact that Europe tried to understand the non-European cultures through an European perspective. This is the main reason why there is always a certain value judgement when Europeans deal with non-European cultures in their reports.

European nations saw the process of colonization as something not only inevitable, but also as a favor Europe was doing to the “non-civilized countries”. At the basis of this process, is what Said calls “Orientalization”, that is, the imposition of European ideas about the Orient upon the Eastern peoples. As he puts it, “[t]he Orient was Orientalized not only because it was discovered to be ‘Oriental’ in all those ways considered commonplace by an average nineteenth-century European, but also because it *could be* – that is, submitted to being – *made Oriental*” (Orientalism 6). In other words, the process of domination and colonization of the East was based on an European idea of Eastern peoples’ inability of ruling their own lives and making their own history. Therefore, the need for representation is justified: the Orientals are unable to represent themselves, and need to be represented, in this case, by the Europeans.

Orientals have no voice of their own, which leads us, again, to the view Europeans had of the Orientals as not capable of representing themselves. Thus, what we have is a fully biased view of Easterners through European perspectives, which preach colonialism and imperialism as the best Europe can offer to non-European countries. Said quotes a speech by Arthur James Balfour, a Member of Parliament who, in 1910, tried to justify British occupation of Egypt:

. . . Western nations as soon as they emerge into history show the beginnings of those capacities for self-government. . . having merits of their own. . . You may look through the whole history of the Orientals in what is called, broadly speaking, the East, and you never find traces of self-government. All their great centuries – and they have been very great – have been passed under despotisms, under absolute government. All their great contributions to civilisation – and they have been great – have been made under that form of government. Conqueror has succeeded conqueror; one domination has followed another; but never in all the revolutions of fate and fortune have you seen one of those nations of its own motion establish what we, from a Western point of view, call self-government. That is the fact. . . . Is it a good thing for these great nations – I admit their greatness – that this absolute government should be exercised by us [British]? I think it is a good thing. (Orientalism 32,3)

This speech is a good example of the ideology behind the European acts of domination: Europe was *helping* the non-European countries to develop and, as Balfour has mentioned, “emerge into history”. This “humanitarian” discourse led to the so called *mission civilisatrice*, civilizing mission. It means that “civilization”, as an European notion of everything that was European, should replace “barbarism”, i.e. everything that was non-European. This idea will be present, also, in the domination of Africa, which is the main point in this study. Amadou-Mahtar M’Bow, director-general of Unesco, in the Preface to the eighth volume of General History of Africa (1985), affirms that “[f]or a long time, all kinds of myths and prejudices concealed the true history of Africa from the world at large [and] African societies were looked upon as societies that could have no history.” (xix).

This view of the African natives as barbarians is necessary to justify the acts of colonization. And this view is perceived as “truth” when it is stated by someone who has lived

among them and observed them with prejudice. This is the case of Léon Rom, a Belgian officer who worked in Congo during the years of colonization. His book, Le Nègre du Congo (1899), was based on his biased observations of the natives. He states that “their feelings are grotesque, their passions hard, their instincts bestial and . . . they are proud and vain” (4 [my translation]²). What is never questioned is the fact that Rom is a Belgian agent, working for the imperial system. As such, his way of seeing the natives could hardly be different.

In fact, Conrad himself Orientalized Africa, before having the chance of going there. Ross C. Murfin, in the introduction to a critical edition of Heart of Darkness reminds us that

[b]y the age thirteen, [Conrad] recalls, he was ‘addicted’ to ‘map-gazing’, much as other people become hooked on star-gazing. ‘And it was Africa,’ Conrad writes, ‘the Continent out of which the Romans used to say some new thing was always coming,’ that seemed particularly fascinating. So much of that continent was unknown and unexplored that maps of whole regions of it would be covered by ‘exciting spaces of white paper.’ Thus, owing to its ‘regions unknown,’ the ‘heart of Africa’ as represented by maps was ‘white and big.’ (7)

This helps us perceive that Said’s notions of Orientalism apply, also, to other colonial societies, such as Africa, Australia and Ireland. And, basically, this is one of the arguments Said developed in another of his books, Culture and Imperialism (1993): the notion of Orientalism, applied to the Islamic part of the world in Orientalism could also be perceived in other parts of the world where colonialism and imperialism have taken place. The main point Said tries to make in this book is that colonialism and imperialism could only be made possible through a vast and complex cultural web laid by the empire upon the colonies. Ashcroft and Ahluwalia say that

² . . . ses sentiments sont grossiers, ses passions brusques, ses instincts bestiaux et . . . elle et orgueilleuse et vaniteuse. (4)

[t]he role of culture in keeping imperialism intact cannot be overestimated, because it is through culture that the assumption of the ‘divine right’ of imperial powers to rule is vigorously and authoritatively supported. . . . Culture and Imperialism begins from this premise, that the institutional, political and economic operations of imperialism are nothing without the power of the culture that maintains them. What, for instance, enabled the British in India to rule a society of hundreds of millions with no more than 100,000 people? (86)

The answer to that question is rather simple: by creating a system in which the use of brute force could be justified whenever needed. The imperial system stated that only by using these mechanisms, the “lazy ones”, i.e. the natives, could be managed to work towards what Europeans called progress. Thus, Said’s uses of “culture” have not only to do with high culture, but also with those tentacles of culture that affect directly the everyday life of ordinary people.

The author also states that it is impossible to think of Victorian novels and not think of the British Empire as a whole. Moreover, he affirms that the Victorian narratives as we know them could only have been possible *because of* the empire. Said also introduces an interesting technique in his reading of 19th century British novels: *contrapuntal reading*. To read a novel contrapuntally means to bring to the context of the narrative the context of the world that was surrounding it in order to perceive how one influences and is influenced by the other, to read “from the perspective of the colonised, to see how the submerged but crucial presence of the empire emerges in canonical texts” (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 92). By exercising contrapuntal reading, readers can have a different notion of the narrative. For example, we can “read [a text] with an understanding of what is involved when an author shows, for instance, that a sugar plantation is seen as important to the process of maintaining a particular lifestyle in England” (Culture 78).

The Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa claims that

[i]t constitutes a major historical injustice the fact that Leopold II, king of Belgium who died in 1909, does not figure, beside Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin, as one of the bloodiest political criminals of the 20th century. For what King Leopold did to Africa, during the 21 years of the so-called Congo Free State (1885 – 1906), as he called it, equals, in terms of genocide savagery and inhumanity, the horrors of the Holocaust and the Gulag. (A34 [my translation]³)

This statement was taken from Llosa's review of Adam Hochschild's book, King Leopold's Ghost (1998). Hochschild documents the period of colonialism in the Congo, the country where Conrad's Heart of Darkness takes place. During the period mentioned above, the Congo Free State could be anything but free. Unlike all other African colonies of the time, Congo did not belong to the metropolitan country (Belgium, in this case). Instead, the African colony was a personal possession of the Belgian monarch, King Leopold II who, because of the personal status of his colony, needed no special authorization of the Parliament to rule it. Also, all the profit that it generated (in the first years, the main source of income was ivory; later, it turned out to be rubber) went directly to the king.

The savagery mentioned above has to do not only with the number of black Congolese killed during the regime (this number is estimated in over 10 million people, which corresponds to, approximately, 50% of the original population of the region prior to the Belgian domination), but also with the cruel way these people were killed. Among other forms of cruelty, some blacks had their hands cut off as a punishment for refusing to enter the forest to gather rubber from the rubber trees, while others were whipped and abandoned to die.

³ Constitui uma grande injustiça histórica o fato de Leopoldo II, rei dos belgas que morreu em 1909, não figurar, ao lado de Adolf Hitler e Josef Stalin, como um dos criminosos políticos mais sanguinários do século 20. Porque o que o rei Leopoldo fez na África, durante os 21 anos de duração do chamado Estado Livre do Congo (1885 – 1906), forjado por ele, equivale, em termos de desumanidade, aos horrores do Holocausto e do Gulag. (A34)

Such cruelty could only happen if there was a cultural system in which such behaviors were allowed. The colonial system has powerful mechanisms in order to convince its agents that such deeds are not only allowed, but necessary in order to keep the engine running. In other words, cruelty is only seen as such by those who look at it from a different perspective.

This research finds its justification in the attempt to discuss the mechanisms used by the metropolis to make the system work properly, especially those regarding the construction of the identity of the Congolese natives. And, by doing that, the research will also contribute to a re-reading of the history of this period in Congo.

CHAPTER TWO

HISTORY AND HISTORIES: CONRAD AND THE CONGO

Joseph Conrad, in some of the many lines he wrote commenting on his own stories, stated that

An Outpost of Progress⁴ is the lightest part of the loot I carried off from Central Africa, the main portion being of course the Heart of Darkness. Other men have found a lot of quite different things there and I have the comfortable conviction that what I took would not have been of much use to anybody else. And it must be said that it was but a very small amount of plunder. All of it could go into one's breast pocket when folded neatly. As for the story itself it is true enough in its essentials. The sustained invention of a really telling lie demands a talent which I do not possess. (Notes 194)

Conrad had always been very critical of his own work. He has been involved in a constant dialogue, through letters, with the critics of his stories, and this has led him to a reflection about his position as a writer. Nevertheless, he has always been firm on his position about that which would become his masterpiece: he has always seen Heart of Darkness as truth, as a semi-fictional account of the atrocities he has witnessed during his six-month journey in Africa, working in an ivory-trade steamboat for a Belgian company. It is up to the reader, though, to perceive what is truth and what is invention in his narrative.

Conrad went to Congo in 1890, nine years before the writing and publication of Heart of Darkness. In many of his letters, he claims that the making of the novel was a difficult process that weakened even more his health, already shaken by his trip to Africa. In a letter dated 12 March 1899, he states that “[t]he finishing of Heart of Darkness took a lot out of me.

⁴ Another of Conrad's short stories that takes place in the Congo. It is considered by some critics as a much more ferocious attack against Belgian Imperialism in Africa than Heart of Darkness; yet Conrad himself does not seem to share that position.

I haven't been able to do much since" (Correspondence 209). The genesis of the novel was accompanied by the necessity of getting rid of a heavy burden he lived when he was in Africa. What one may question is what Conrad really saw during his journey and how he transformed what he might have seen into the form of what we know today as Heart of Darkness.

In order to identify these elements of actual history that are present, absent or have been modified by Conrad in the making of his narrative, one must be acquainted to the history of the Congo. But this involves another discussion, that of the concept of history. If one has to learn about the history of a colonial country, usually the sources are European. That is, Europe tells the history of those peoples who cannot represent themselves. The European narrative of the history of those non-European countries which have been dominated by European powers is what I have decided to call *official history*, for that is the way experts call the history that is told through the perception of the powerful.

On the other hand, one may find the history of the domination of colonies by European powers told by those very same peoples who have suffered the entire process of colonization and exploitation. These sources are not as abundant as the previous ones, but they can be even more revealing of all the details of the dominating system imposed by Europe. This way of writing history I have decided to call *alternative history*, for it is now being accepted, by several scholars – not necessarily historians – as a valid account of the facts brought by imperialism.

It was under this definition of history that Adam Hochschild started investigating the period of imperialism and colonialism in Congo. The results of his research can be found in the book King Leopold's Ghost (1998), in which he covers almost 700 years of Congolese history, paying close attention on the colonization period, roughly from 1860 to 1920.

The Belgian Congo was *sui generis* among the other European colonies in Africa mainly because, while all the other colonies belonged to the nation that controlled them, the

Congo was ruled directly by the Belgian monarch, King Leopold II, as his personal possession. The second half of the nineteenth century was a time of exploring the “blank spaces” of the maps. It was common to see expeditions going to India, Africa and the Pacific and, later, these expeditions, as well as their concrete results (i.e. the profit these lands generated for the metropolis) become best-selling books in Europe. Leopold was an avid reader of these reports, and he really believed colonialism as the only possible way for Belgium to be among the European powers at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century. This can be seen in Leopold’s interest in the Dutch West Indies, which surrounded the king’s mind for quite some time, especially in terms of profit the colony gave Holland:

[Leopold]’s interest in the Dutch West Indies was stimulated by a curious two-volume treatise called *Java; or, How to Manage a Colony*. Fascinated by the book, Leopold began corresponding with the author, an English lawyer aptly named J.W.B. Money. Money had been impressed by the coffee, sugar, indigo, and tobacco plantations of Java, whose profits had paid for railroads and canals back in Holland. Judging from Leopold’s later actions, we can guess which features of the book might have caught his eye. Money described, for example, a monopoly trading concession given to a private company, one of whose major shareholders was the Dutch king. To stimulate production, Dutch plantation owners paid bonuses to supervisors in Java in relation to the size of the crop harvested. And finally Money noted that the huge Dutch profits from Java depended on forced labor. Leopold agreed, remarking that forced labor was ‘the only way to civilize and uplift these indolent and corrupt peoples of the Far East.’ (Leopold 37)

Leopold’s “colony fever” did not sound appealing to most of the Belgians for a series of practical impediments, such as the non-existence of a merchant fleet or navy in the country. For the king, however, these were but petty problems; the *need* for a colony was the drive for

all of Leopold's political actions until the possession of Congo. Hochschild tells us that "[w]hen [Leopold] returned from one of his trips, he presented to the finance minister, a vocal opponent of colonialism, a gift: a piece of marble from the ruins of the Acropolis, with a locket holding Leopold's portrait, around which was the legend *Il faut à la Belgique une colonie* (Belgium must have a colony)" (38).

While working to convince the members of his government that Belgium (not him personally) did need a colony, Leopold also managed to work on a more concrete question: *where* would his colony be? According to Hochschild, Leopold considered establishing his colony in several places, including Fiji and the Argentine province of Entre Rios. But he soon had his attention driven to the African continent. This was the time of the exploration of the interior of Africa, the great "blank space" on the world map.

Africa already held several European colonies on the north (Saharan area) and all along the shore. The only place left was, indeed, the interior. Leopold decided, then, to take advantage of the enormous exploration drive the world was facing and Brussels hosted a conference of explorers and geographers in September 1876: the "Leopold Geographical Conference". This would be the opportunity Leopold was expecting to have people map that blank region and make his colony dream come true.

The most frightening element during the entire period of the conference was, perhaps, the veiled discourse of Leopold's real intentions in Africa. His entire discourse (and that of the conference, by extension) was marked by the idea of philanthropy, of taking civilization to the far regions of the globe, and this is seen in Leopold's opening discourse:

To open to civilization the only part of our globe which it has not yet penetrated, to pierce the darkness which hangs over entire peoples, is, I dare say, a crusade worthy of this century of progress. . . . It seemed to me that Belgium, a centrally located and neutral country, would be a suitable place for a meeting. . . . Need I

say that in bringing you to Brussels I was guided by no egotism? No, gentlemen, Belgium may be a small country, but she is happy and satisfied with her fate; I have no other ambition than to serve her well. (Hochschild 44-5)

Leopold has been acknowledged as a wonderful conversationalist. His rhetoric, perhaps, was his most powerful weapon to achieve his goals. Together with his use of words, Leopold also provided, during the conference, enormous banquets and a time of opulence. All efforts were made in order to convince those explorers and geographers that time had come to set sail to the heart of Africa.

The king's work was fruitful. Right before the end of the conference, the participants voted for the creation of the International African Association, a group devoted to the exploration and studying of all features held in Africa and whose primordial goal was to take civilization into the heart of the continent. Furthermore, he offered Brussels to be the headquarters of the association and, also, was given the position of first chairman of the association, which he thanked but stated that he would be in this post for one year only. Members from other countries should also run the group. In fact, that was exactly what the king wanted: he now controlled a group of people disposed to open up Africa for him to settle his own colony. Still, the question remained: where exactly could Leopold establish his territory?

At that time, one of the great mysteries in the African continent had to do with the Congo river. All chronicles involving it, since the times of the first Portuguese navigations in the 15th century, reported the origin of the river as a question mark. Things remained the same until August 1877, when an explorer called Henry Morton Stanley finally crossed the African continent from East to West. This fact called King Leopold's attention, and he sent two of his officers to intercept Stanley on his return to Europe, where he had been acclaimed as a real

hero. The king had a special interest in the man who was able to solve the mystery of the Congo river.

Stanley's role in the process of colonization was crucial. The explorer became the King's direct representative in the Congo and, while the King financed Stanley's expeditions, Stanley explored the region of the Congo and made contact with the Congolese tribes. With the aid of several contracts Stanley carried with him, he was able to convince the tribal chiefs to recognize Leopold's sovereignty over the lands inhabited by those very tribes. Convincing the chiefs (and the entire tribe) of the superiority of white men was not a difficult task. For example, by using magnifying glasses to setting up fire on dried leaves, the whites claimed to be intimate with the Sun God. But most of the times, such deeds were not needed; once the tribal chiefs could not read or write, any handmade symbol written down on the contract would be worth a signature and, thus, legally valid for Leopold's purposes.

In the meantime, Stanley named most of his geographical discoveries after the Belgian king: the main city and station of the colony was Léopoldville, near Lake Leopold II. Also, the steamer which connected the shore to the inner country through the Congo River was the *Roi des Belges*, the same one in which Conrad traveled on his journey to the interior of Africa.

What is actually intriguing is the fact that Stanley believed in the philanthropic character of the trades he helped sign. Leopold convinced Stanley that Belgium had the obligation to protect those tribes from the Arab and Moor slave traders from the Saharan portion of the continent. The explorer had made open criticisms to the slave-trading in Africa before and Leopold was aware of that. And this was exactly the discourse used to convince Stanley to help in the acquisition of the colony.

Also, the same discourse helped Leopold to gain recognition of his "social work" in Africa not only among the European powers, but also by the United States. Leopold's assistant in the US was Henry Shelton Sanford, a bankrupt Connecticut aristocrat who lived in

Belgium. Sanford lobbied the United States by saying that not only would the Congo be a Free State, but also a place of free trade. All countries would be allowed to have commercial representatives there. Some congressmen and many Presbyterian clergymen saw several opportunities in the US recognition of the Congo as a “sister nation”. The politicians – especially the whites from the south – saw the opportunity of sending the blacks back to Africa. Ironically, this idea was also defended by some of the blacks, who were tired of the prejudice against them, especially after the Civil War. As for the clergymen, it was the possibility of expanding their missionary work, taking the word of Christ and converting the Africans was appealing to them.

Leopold was not only interested in the lands of the Congo region themselves, but mainly in the richness the lands possessed: ivory. For the tribes, the elephant tusks were valueless whereas in Europe, they were sold as extremely valuable goods. From piano keys to tables to pens to picture hangers; everything made from ivory was worth a considerable amount of money. Money that Leopold could get with very little effort and financial investment. Before the whites’ arrival the ivory was usually collected from elephants that died naturally. As the interest was related to profit, the more ivory the agents could send to Belgium, the more money they would collect. Here, another irony takes place. In order to achieve high profits, each agent (responsible for one of the several stations Leopold had along the Congo river) had a vast number of slaves of all ages, taken from the same tribes where the stations were located, who were sent into the jungle in order to hunt elephants for their tusks.

So as to guarantee the order of the system, Leopold created a sort of police, called *Force Publique*, that had the authority of using any kind of apparatus to keep the slaves working. The most common artifact used in the stations was the *chicotte*, a whip made of animal leather, used whenever the blacks committed any misdoings (always according to the European concept of right and wrong). This helped intimidate other blacks and “encouraged”

them to keep doing their job, which was hunting for ivory. The whipping of blacks was a constant practice in the several stations Leopold had along the coast of the Congo river, for he really believed the use of brute force to be the only possible and plausible way in which the whites could “take civilization” to the Africans. This “encouragement” was done with profit in mind: the agents responsible for the stations which gathered large amounts of ivory were given an extra contribution in cash. And all the money in which the ivory was transformed went directly to Leopold’s pockets.

The *Force Publique* also acted in case of rebellions the Africans might make. In this case, due to the difficulty in sending supplies from Europe to Africa (all sorts of goods, from ammunition to food), the officers were warned not to spend more than one bullet per black killed. And, besides, the officers needed to take to the station some proof that the number of bullets spent was the same number of blacks killed. Such proof was taken by cutting the hands of the blacks killed and taking them back to the captain of the station. What was common, though, was the use of bullets for other purposes, such as hunting, and the justification happened by the cutting of the hands of living black people.

Such abuses were only brought up by missionaries from several protestant churches (especially from the US), who went to Congo on evangelistic missions, and were able to photograph all the atrocities committed by the Belgian agents during the period of colonization. Those pictures were shown all over Europe and the US, and caused great commotion. As for practical changes, nothing really happened, for Leopold was still the sovereign over the Congolese lands and his will was law.

This is the Congo Conrad certainly found on his six-month journey up and down the river, as an assistant on the steamer *Roi des Belges*. The first image that Marlow sees when he leaves his steamer on the Company’s station is representative of how the system had to function:

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 on a rope, each had an iron collar on his neck and all were connected together with a chain whose links swung between them, rhythmically clinking. (Heart 19)⁵

This was the way blacks were treated in Congo. Marlow (or Conrad) is not overreacting in the portrayal he has made on the conditions imposed by Belgians upon the Congolese. In this scene, what Marlow was speaking of was the construction of the Matadi - Leopoldville railway. According to official figures, this railway cost the lives of 1,800 Congolese slaves, though reviewed estimates raise this number to nearly ten times the official figure (Hochschild 171). As a matter of fact, the use of brute force was, as mentioned before, justifiable, because Africans were supposed to be lazy, insolent and barbarians, according to the common sense (and Naturalist trends of science) at the time.

It is interesting to see the image presented to Marlow of the African continent, by the doctor who examines him before his trip:

The old doctor felt my pulse, evidently thinking of something else the while. 'Good! Good for there,' he mumbled, and then with a certain eagerness asked me whether I would let him measure my head. Rather surprised, I said Yes, when he produced a thing like callipers and got the dimensions back and front and every way, taking notes carefully. . . . 'I always ask leave, in the interests of science, to measure the crania of those going out there,' he said. 'And when they come back too?', I asked. 'Oh, I never see them,' he remarked, 'and, moreover the changes take place inside, you know.' He smiled as if at some quiet joke. . . . (Heart 15)

⁵ All quotes from the novel hereinafter refer to the 3rd Norton Critical Edition (ed. Robert Kimbrough).

Africa, here, is not only a land of financial opportunities, but also a place where savagery takes place, and affects white “civilized” minds. The process of “going native” by being in contact with utmost savagery and its representatives was inevitable. The narrative brings several details in which this process can be perceived, before Marlow gets to meet Kurtz. Before reaching the first station, Marlow hears from his Swede sailor:

‘The other day I took up a man who hanged himself on the road. He was a Swede too.’ ‘Hanged himself! Why, in God’s name!’ I cried. He kept on looking out watchfully. ‘Who knows! The sun too much for him, or the country perhaps!’ (18)

The narrator, also, could not close his eyes to what kept the entire system running: ivory. The main goal of Marlow’s trip up-river was to collect the ivory from the several stations and take the load safely to Europe, where it was worth much more than was actually paid to the administrators and guards who worked in Africa. Ivory collecting was an almost-religious activity for those who would actually earn something from it: “[t]he word ‘ivory’ rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed. You would think they were praying to it.” (26). Marlow also exposed the interest whites had in being placed in one of the many stations where there was ivory: “[t]he only real feeling was a desire to get appointed to a trading-post where ivory was to be had, so that they could earn percentages.” (27).

Nevertheless, there are some questions that one who is aware of the actual facts of colonialism in Africa (more specifically the one held in the Congo) may have while reading Heart of Darkness. One of these questions has to do with a material paradox Marlow creates while describing some of the colonial agents, and, later, the agencies themselves. The first encounter Marlow has with an agent reads:

. . . When near the building I met a white man in such an unexpected elegance of get-up that in the first moment I took him for a sort of vision. I saw a high, starched collar, white cuffs, a light alpaca jacket, snowy trousers, a clean necktie,

and varnished boots. No hat. Hair parted, brushed, oiled, under a green-lined parasol held in a big white hand. . . .

. . . I respected his collars, his vast cuffs, his brushed hair. His appearance was certainly that of a hairdresser's dummy, but in the great demoralisation of the land he kept up his appearance. (21)

Materially speaking, it would be almost impossible for anyone to maintain such an appearance in the middle of an African tropical forest. A first reading of this passage suggests that, even in the jungle, the European presence was, above all, European, in the sense of being untouched by the environment. But Marlow mentions two other passages that suggest the opposite of this idea. The first deals with one of the agents in the first station, who was in charge of making bricks for constructing the buildings:

. . . The business entrusted to this fellow was the making of bricks - so I had been informed; but there wasn't a fragment of a brick anywhere in the station, and he had been there more than a year - waiting. It seems he could not make bricks without something, I don't know what - straw, maybe. Anyway it could not be found there, and as it was not likely to be sent from Europe it did not appear clear to me what they were all waiting for. (27)

The second passage deals with Marlow's difficulty in getting rivets in order to fix the steamer, damaged while journeying up-river:

I slapped him on the back and shouted 'We shall have rivets!' He scrambled to his feet exclaiming 'No! Rivets!' as though he couldn't believe his ears. . . . 'After all,' said the boiler-maker in a reasonable tone, 'why shouldn't we get the rivets?' Why not, indeed! I did not know of any reason why we shouldn't. 'They'll come in three weeks,' I said confidently.

But they didn't. . . .

I had given up worrying myself about the rivets. One's capacity for that kind of folly is more limited than you would suppose. . . . (33)

These two passages demonstrate that, even though the agents had tried to maintain European standards in the Congo, they were unable to do so due to physical difficulties, such as the immense distance separating the two continents and the difficulties in keeping frequent lines connecting them. Nevertheless, if Europe could not be in Africa *physically and materially*, then it could, at least, be present *culturally*. The problem appears exactly in the attempt to preserve culture without having a material ground to support it.

What is, then, Conrad's position with regard to Colonialism? One could assume, on a first contact with his biography, that Conrad would be a fierce critic of colonialism, as he himself had been a victim of the system, while living in Poland. After the Russian invasion and conquest of the region, Conrad and his family were exiled to Siberia due to his father's involvement with revolutionary pro-independence groups. However, this position is not clearly taken by Conrad throughout Marlow's narrative in Heart of Darkness. What we find is a juxtaposition of different visions and feelings with regard to the colonial system. Frances B. Singh, in "The Colonialistic Bias of Heart of Darkness" (1978), divides Marlow's impressions of colonialism into three categories. The first category "is a direct, straightforward attack" (269) against the system. The best passage to illustrate this view is Marlow's speech about the Roman domination of England:

. . . these chaps [the Romans]. . . were no colonists, their administration was merely a squeeze, and nothing more, I suspect. They were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force - nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others. They grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. It was just robbery with

violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it as blind - as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness. (Heart 10)

This speech explains Marlow's first line ("And this also. . . has been one of the dark places of the earth") (9), in which a comparison is made between the Roman England and the Belgian Congo: both have been *conquered*, not colonized; no real advancements had been taken to either countries by their conquerors. But, most importantly, is the recognition that England itself had also been a victim of outer domination, part of an empire that was not its own.

The second category Singh discusses is the use of irony. He illustrates his point by analyzing the passage in which Marlow encounters the Eldorado Exploring Expedition, an example of the many expeditions set off to Africa in order to map its interior. Marlow is also ironic, according to Singh, whenever he makes references to the philanthropy that, supposedly, drove the civilizing mission in the colonies:

I avoided a vast, artificial hole somebody had been digging on the slope, the purpose of which I found it impossible to divine. It wasn't a quarry or a sandpit, anyhow. It was just a hole. It might have been connected with the philanthropic desire of giving the criminals something to do. (20)

The last - most important - category is the use of metaphors 'to lash out against colonialism' (Singh 269), out of which the title is the most expressive one. Singh explains that

[o]n one level it indicates merely the geographical location of the Belgian Congo and the color of its inhabitants. On another it refers to the evil practices of the colonizers of the Congo, their sordid exploitation of the natives, and suggests that the real darkness is not in Africa but in Europe, and that its heart is not in the breasts of black Africans but in all whites who countenance and engage in colonialistic enterprise. While on the first level the metaphor has a direct, factual,

and straightforward application, on the second it is ironic, for what is apparently black is really white, and what is apparently white is really black. (270)

Singh also analyses other aspects of the narrative, but his treatment of the issue of colonialism itself misses two very important points, one related to Marlow's straightforward attack to colonialism and the relation to Roman domination and colonization of England, and the other related to what Singh reads as irony. He affirms that Marlow is fiercely against this kind of domination, which is imposed by the colonizers and that has, as its objective, the gathering of profit. But a closer reading of that same passage reveals that Marlow is not so radically critical of colonialism:

. . .The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it, not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea - something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to. . . . (Heart 10)

What Marlow does here is to give the idea of colonialism a religious status. When this political, economical system becomes a quasi-religion, one cannot but fail to come to grips with the apparatuses and mechanisms involved. Rather, one must accept, and 'bow down before' Colonialism, and violence is ultimately redeemed by idealism.

This concept of colonialism and of imperialism may be perceived, also, in the passage where Marlow meets the Company officer in Brussels, before he sets off to Africa:

. . . on one end [of the room] a large shining map marked with all the colours of a rainbow. There was a vast amount of red - good to see at any time because one knows some real work is done there - a deuce lot of blue, a little green, smears of

orange, and, on the East Coast, a purple patch, to show where the jolly pioneers of progress drink the jolly lager beer. (13)

This comment is fundamental for one to understand Marlow's position as regards the colonial and imperial systems. If, on the one hand, he attacks the Romans and, by extension, the Belgians for the methods they use and the goals they look forward to achieving, on the other hand, the narrator praises one specific kind of empire, where "some real work is done". This empire, represented on the map Marlow notes by the "vast amount of red" is no other than the British Empire, the largest empire on Earth at the end of the nineteenth century. 'What saves us [the British] is efficiency - the devotion to efficiency' (10), Marlow states, in an attempt to justify British imperialism, which he believes has reached redemption because of its efficiency.

This belief leads us to the second point Singh misses in his reading of the novel. There certainly are several ironic passages in Marlow's narrative of his journey, and some of them may be connected to the imperial system as held in the Congo. As for the issue of philanthropy, Marlow (as well as Conrad) *did* believe that the real drive of European colonizers was to take civilization to the non-European barbarians, at least where England was concerned. Was Marlow unaware of the real dimensions of British colonialism, or was he merely justifying the redeeming idea that European imperialism was fate-driven? We cannot forget that the information and data that reached the metropolitan centers were controlled by official institutions, so that only a fabricated image of what was actually taking place in the colonies could reach each and every person in the Empire.

Edward Said states that both Marlow and Conrad are good representatives of the British imperial minds *par excellence*.⁶ It means that the imperial system was a part of their domestic

⁶ Conrad was born Pole, but ever since he had moved to England, he self-assumed an English identity, culturally speaking. Of course, this involves not only the learning of language - English was his third, next to Polish and French - but also the cultural and political aspects which would make him an Englishman.

sphere, and that of their daily lives. Like religion, to which Marlow so skillfully compared the colonial system, one could never imagine living in a world where colonialism or imperialism were absent. Said argues that

Conrad could never have used Marlow to present anything other than an imperialist world-view, given what was available for either Conrad or Marlow to see of the non-Europeans at the time. Independence was for whites and Europeans; the lesser or subject peoples were to be ruled; science, learning, history emanated from the West. True, Conrad scrupulously recorded the differences between the disgraces of Belgian and British colonial attitudes, but he could only imagine the world carved up into one or another Western sphere of domination. (Culture 27)

Said concludes that “[d]espite their European names and mannerisms, Conrad’s narrators are not average unreflecting witnesses of European imperialism. . . they think about it a lot, they worry about it, they are actually quite anxious about whether they can make it seem like a routine thing.” (32) As in Orientalism, which is a complex web of creations, recreations, interpretations and inventions of the Orient used to justify its inferiority facing the “civilized” Europe, it is clear that in Heart of Darkness there is a similar construction of Africa. Said calls this web “Africanism” (Culture 79), and claims that Conrad could not have written about Africa based *only* upon his personal experience in the Congo.

And yet, one must finally admit that Heart of Darkness is critical of Belgian imperialism. As a complex fictional work, it goes beyond a naive acceptance of European values.

CHAPTER THREE
FROM IDEA TO IMPERIAL IDEOLOGY:
RACISM IN HEART OF DARKNESS

As stated before, the seventies brought on a debate on whether or not Conrad was a racist and how this fact could interfere with possible readings of Heart of Darkness. The question is relevant, as the novel deals with Africans and their literary construction. But it does not have a simple answer, given the complexities of Conrad's style, which many critics have classified as misty, gloomy and uneasy. Conrad's construction of his black characters during Marlow's journey up river is no different.

In the Congo, during the Belgian colonization, blacks were brutally treated as black slaves. This treatment was part of a larger plan of Imperial domination. As Hannah Arendt puts it, "[r]acism was neither a new nor a secret weapon, though never before had it been used with thoroughgoing consistency" (38). What makes the Imperial system *sui generis* as regards the use of racism is its use of racial-social theories. It is no accident that the apogee of Naturalistic theories coincided with the establishment of empires around the globe.

One of the main consequences of such theories is the proposal for a clear distinction between class and race, two forces that are not only complementary, but related in terms of cause and effect. Race becomes a major element, in the Imperial web of ideologies, to justify the political and social division of class. In other words, a group of a given race is destined (or even doomed) to belong to a given class, and by no means can a certain individual migrate from one class to another.

Arendt points out that the idea of race-thinking was responsible for the denial of the notion that identity was to be defined for national-political factors, such as geography, language, religion, tradition, and others (41). In other words, it mattered no more whether one

would belong to this or that nationality or religion; race, the color of the skin, facial trends and other distinctive features were the dominant categories to perceive otherness.

Racism has gained strength throughout the 18th century, when the statements about the inequality of races in all aspects (physical and psychological first, and political and social later) gained the status of science, due to all Naturalistic researches being done at the time. It was Count Arthur de Gobineau who set the ground for all racist theories when, in 1853, he published his Essai sùr l'Inégalité des Races Humaines (Essay on the Inequality of Human Races), in which he stated his belief in the superiority of the white race (which he called “a race of masters”) over the other “inferior” races. Gobineau believed the master race *par excellence* would be the Aryan race, exemplified by the Germanic peoples, for they would not be as inclined to miscegenation as the other races.⁷ Gobineau also stated that race-mixture was a direct consequence of democracy and, for that reason, this political system should be banned, for it allowed total individual freedom, including the freedom of miscegenation.

Under these ideas, biological-racial determinism gained room as a science and several other theses appeared, mostly agreeing with Gobineau's. Cranial and facial measurement in order to determine how intelligent a person would be, or whether he/she would have criminal tendencies became rather common. All these practices had as a goal to lower the social position of individuals who did not belong to that elite race and to give a series of pre-conceptualized, pre-established notions and ideas a scientific status. All these theories helped Europe to develop a justified basis for Colonialism and Imperialism overseas, as the native peoples of distant territories were defined as inferior races (i.e. non-white, non-European). They would never be able to make any “progress” (meaning by that “European progress”), or

⁷ Gobineau did, indeed, define the Aryan race as being the superior among the superiors. For that reason, his theses have been used for the creation of the 3rd Reich in Germany. Thus, Gobineau is wrongly connected to anti-Semitism, for he never promoted any acts of anti-Semitism in any of his writings.

to achieve Darwinian evolution. All inferior races would be classified under a constellation of adjectives such as “inept”, and “grotesque”.

In the particular case of Africa, the organization of tribes and the observation of its customs had always been done under an Eurocentric perspective, with the purpose of reaffirming Europe’s superiority over the rest of the globe. The European powers had always known the potential for profit Africa held, in terms of jewels (mostly gold and diamonds), ivory, and slaves for trading. Whatever the source for profit would be, the blacks were an essential part for the maintenance of the Imperial machine in Africa, even if that meant acting against their will. The most widespread excuse to justify forced labor was that it would “tame” the blacks’ savage instincts and change their lazy nature into something productive.

These ideas, which were accepted as scientific fact, are present in Léon Rom’s Le Nègre du Congo (1899). Rom was a colonial agent representing the Belgian monarch in Congo and, according to several documents, was one of the cruelest members of the *Force Publique*. Based on his biased observations of the natives, Rom wrote the book with the following disclaimer at the introduction: “I have not wished, in writing these lines, to write a work of literature” (2)[my translation]⁸. In his first chapter, “Du Nègre en général” (“Of the blacks in general”), Rom makes clear how he sees blacks:

The main occupation of the blacks, the one on which they spend most of their time, consists of lying in a hammock, under the hot sun rays, like a crocodile on the sand. . . . The blacks have no idea of time. . . . The blacks’ overreaction is proverbial. . . . The blacks usually have no idea of what a good deed is: to their eyes, being good means being weak and foolish. . . (4-8) [my translation]⁹.

⁸ Je n’ai point, en traçant ces lignes, voulu faire oeuvre de littérature. (2)

⁹ La principale occupation du noir, et celle à laquelle il consacre la plus grande partie de son existence, consiste à s’étendre sur une natte, aux chauds rayons du soleil, tel un crocodile sur le sable. . . . Le noir n’a aucune idée du temps. . . . L’exagération du noir est proverbiale. . . . Le noir ne se fait généralement aucune idée de ce qu’est un bienfait: à ses yeux, être bon c’est être faible et bête; aussi ne manquera-t-il pas, quand l’occasion se présente, de vous prouver ses sentiments. . . (4 – 8)

Although Rom's words are not new to the racist rhetoric of the time, they bring an important view of the blacks from the Congo. This perspective is not entirely absent in Conrad and Marlow, although it has to be qualified. The Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe, in his famous essay "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness" (1977) states, among other things to be discussed further on, that Conrad constructed Marlow as "a thoroughgoing racist" (257) and therefore, Conrad himself would not escape the label.

Achebe argues that Africa is presented as the utmost antithesis of Europe in all aspects. On the one hand, we may picture Europe as the cradle of Western civilization, on the other hand, Africa is the cradle of Western barbarism. Europe is the present, as well as the future, whereas Africa is a distant, pre-historical past. Therefore, all African natives are also portrayed as savage, barbarian, pre-historical men. Achebe takes a radical standpoint, and even questions "whether a novel which celebrates [such] dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art" (257). And he answers this question by stating that Heart of Darkness cannot be considered a great narrative because of its racism.

The Nigerian writer does have a point in affirming that, in the narrative, Africa is the antithesis of Europe. However, simply accusing Conrad of being racist is, perhaps, oversimplifying the ambivalence, uncertainty and anxiety that follows Marlow during his journey. It is also interesting to mention that, even though the novel is set in the heart of Africa, it does not have many black characters.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the few blacks that do appear in the narrative have a strong impact on Marlow. The first glimpse Marlow takes of blacks is a good example of how he sees the natives throughout the narrative:

. . . Now and then a boat from the shore gave one momentary contact with reality.

It was paddled by black fellows. You could see from afar the white of their

¹⁰ By "character" I the major character of the narrative. There are references to black people throughout the novel, but they do not differ much from a reference to, for instance, the landscape.

eyeballs glistening. They shouted, sang; their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks – these chaps; but they had bone, muscles, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast. (Heart 17)

The way Marlow perceives and, therefore, constructs the blacks in his narrative is, most of the times, not characterized by mere bias, as one could think, given the scientific trends of the time. Instead, the feature that most likely identifies his perception of the natives would be *ambiguity*. As quoted above, Marlow compares their faces to “grotesque masks”, but right after, he acknowledges the physical power of the blacks, by noting their “wild vitality”. This back-and-forth movement is the tone of the narrative. Yet, the issue of savagery is still present. Even in the short descriptions, the choice of words and the construction of metaphors makes clear that Marlow does see the blacks as inferior. They are presented, early in the novel, as “[a] lot of people, mostly black and naked, [that] moved about like ants” (18).

Typical of the Imperial system, the blacks were treated as inferior beings, but they also were a fundamental piece of the system, for they were the providers of physical labor. In other words, there would be no material development, nor profit without the presence of African labor power:

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. Another mine on the cliff went off followed by a slight shudder of the soil under my feet. The work was going on. The work! And this was the place where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die.
(20)

Most of Marlow’s references to the blacks are dehumanizing: they (the blacks) are little more than shapes, noises, grotesque masks. The natives are compared to prehistoric men.

“The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us – who could tell? We were cut off from the comprehension on our surroundings. . . .” . This passage shows us that, even being unable to understand the natives from a white, European perspective, the narrator recognizes, in those black shapes, the genesis of men. The “prehistoric men”, of course, are the forefathers of civilization.

Nevertheless, Marlow is frightened not by the blacks’ inhumanity, but by their *humanity*. The acknowledgement of kinship between white Europeans and black Africans is too much for Marlow to bear:

The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there – there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly and the men were. . . . No they were not 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. (37-8)

It would be impossible to believe – even imagine – that Civilization (the idea, of course, is European) would have derived from Barbarism (as Africa is constructed), and that Europeans and Africans share a common origin and are, therefore, similar.

In order deny the Imperialist perspective, it was necessary to impose “civilization” upon “barbarism”. This can be seen, for example, in the sequence in which Marlow’s steamer is attacked by a tribe of blacks while journeying upriver. Part of Marlow’s crew is made of Africans, some of whom surprise him for their sailing abilities. The fireman, in particular, catches his attention:

And between whiles I had to look after the savage who was fireman. He was an improved specimen; he could fire up a vertical boiler. He was there below me and, upon my word, to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of

breeches and a feather hat walking on his hind legs. A few months of training had done for that really fine chap. . . . He ought to have been clapping his hands and stamping his feet on the bank, instead of which he was hard at work, a thrall to strange witchcraft, full of improving knowledge. (Heart 38-9)

In fact, this is one of the rare passages where we see Marlow humanizing one particular native, and only because this native was actually working for the progress of the colony, one way or another. He was not simply a savage who would only be good to work in the carrying caravans; he was a person who “could fire up a vertical boiler”. He was much closer to “civilization” than those natives who worked at the stations, digging holes and performing most types of hard labor, which did not need much use of the mind.

Nevertheless, blacks who become “civilized” (i.e. those who accept the good deeds of “progress”) – and here, “civilized” may be read as “acculturated” – will never achieve the status of Europeans. In the same passage, Marlow explains that the blacks have been starving as their supply of hippo meat had partially rottened. And during the attack they suffer, we read the following passage:

Their head-man, a young broad-chested black, . . . stood near me. ‘Aha!’ I said, just for good fellowship’s sake. ‘Catch ‘im,’ he snapped with a bloodshot widening of his eyes and a flash of sharp teeth – ‘catch ‘im, Give’im to us.’ ‘To you, eh?’ I asked; ‘what would you do with them?’ ‘Eat ‘im!’ he said curtly. . . . I would no doubt have been properly horrified had it not occurred to me that he and his chaps must be very hungry, that they must have been growing increasingly hungry for at least this month past. (44)

From the perspective of European civilization, cannibalism has always been a major sign of barbarism. Yet, two points can be drawn from the passage above. The first one has to do with the nature of cannibal actions among Congolese tribes. Most African tribes practiced

cannibalism as a ritual, rather than as a mere display of primitivism (Hochschild 73). This ritual was held, usually, after a battle where a member of the enemy tribe was captured. The meaning of the ritual was both to acquire the enemy's strength (only the strongest prisoners were eaten) and to reaffirm the superiority of the tribe. Therefore, it is not impossible that cannibalism in the novel is presented in terms of the European imagination, and that the real Africans, as opposed to Conrad's Africans would not consider eating the assaulting blacks on the coast of the river.

The second - and , perhaps, most intriguing - question is the fact that Marlow acknowledges - and even sympathizes with - the cannibal desire expressed by his crew. He confesses that his reaction would have been much worse had the situation been different; in other words, at the moment Marlow leaves his possible biased judgement aside, he stands closer to those "pre-historic" beings. It is as if he himself could justify cannibalism in this situation if he - Marlow - would eat human flesh. It follows that civilization cannot very easily be separated from barbarism.

One interesting argument about the issue of cannibalism is discussed by Patrick Brantlinger. In his essay "Heart of Darkness: Anti-Imperialism, Racism or Impressionism?" (1996), he affirms that all passages in which cannibalism is mentioned, in the novel, are derived not from Conrad's actual experience in Africa, but from Conrad's contact with books that chronicled the major events - such as expeditions and wars - in Africa. Brantlinger points out that the major event that might have led Conrad to have contact with actual cannibal practices in Congo was the conflict against the Arabs, who were notorious slave-traders and were a threat to Belgium's profit.

Both Belgians and Arabs had Congolese soldiers in their armies, and both sides practiced cannibalism after the battles. But such practice was a much more effective weapon for the Belgians since the Arabs, as Muslims, believed that Heaven could only be reached if

their bodies were intact (Brantlinger 282-3). The conflict lasted four years (1891-95) and was keenly observed in Europe: the news that arrived in the continent was full of details, such as the means of preparation of human flesh and the festivities prior and after the feast. Conrad was notably aware of all this scenario, and it has definitely played a part in Marlow's narrative. Cannibalism might well be, in the novel, a way for Europeans to orientalize (or africanize) the native Africans.

Brantlinger points out that Conrad/Marlow construct Africa (perhaps unconsciously) as being the root and source of evil. If we could speak of evil in the novel, it would be impersonated by Kurtz; more specifically, it would be impersonated by the process of "going native" (i.e. of losing the sense of "europeness", of civilization). Returning to a pre-historical, barbaric state means to leave aside all sense of goodness and humanity, and to embrace its opposites (285). The author affirms that "[t]he 'imperialist imagination' itself. . . works with the 'manichean' irreconcilable polarities common to all racist ideology" (285).

This leads us to another of Marlow's ambiguities (which Brantlinger – quoting Fredric Jameson's study of the novel – calls "schizophrenia") (287). He recognizes human (and humane) features in the blacks surrounding him, but he is unable to perceive the Africans as whole individuals. Instead, Marlow devotes his descriptions to the parts of their bodies (arms, legs, hands, faces) as well as on certain dehumanizing elements (shapes, shadows). In addressing that question, Achebe states that

[c]ertainly Conrad had a problem with niggers. His inordinate love of that word itself should be of interest to psychoanalysts. Sometimes his fixation on blackness is equally interesting as when he gives us this brief description: 'A black figure stood up, strode on long black legs, waving long black arms. . . .' as though we might expect a black figure striding along on black legs to have white arms! But so unrelentlessly is Conrad's obsession. (258).

Achebe does have a point in stating that Conrad has a certain “obsession” with the word “black” (and some variations, such as “nigger”), for the occurrences of such word in the narrative are numerous. Nevertheless, C.P. Sarvan affirms that “[t]he reference in Heart of Darkness is not to a place (Africa), but to the condition of European man; not to a black people, but to colonialism. The crucial question is whether European “barbarism” is merely a thing of the historical past” (283).

Another interesting point of discussion is the analysis of the only black female character shown in the narrative: a woman, presented as Kurtz’s mistress in Africa. She is constructed in such a way that the narrator acknowledges the fact that she is a woman rather than the fact that she is black; he works as if gender would redeem race:

[d]ark human shapes could be made out in the distance, flitting indistinctly against the gloomy border of the forest. . . . And from left to right along the lighted shore moved a wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman. She walked with measured steps, draped in striped and fringed cloths, treading the earth proudly with a slight jingle and flash of barbarous ornaments. . . . She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress. (Heart 60)

Marlow does acknowledge her savagery; yet it seems to be made less aggressive by her female condition. This sort of treatment had not been given to the natives up to that moment: Marlow seems to choose the black woman to present a somehow unbiased description. From a different perspective, this description only corroborates the black woman’s role: to please Kurtz sexually. This explains the need Marlow has to stress her sensuality.

Yet, she is black and, as such, she has to behave and be perceived as a savage. The following passage shows the only indication of savagery related to this black woman:

Suddenly, she opened her bared arms and threw them up rigid above her head as though in an uncontrollable desire to touch the sky, and at the same time the swift shadow darted out on the earth, swept around on the river, gathering the steamer in a shadowy embrace. . . . ‘If she had offered to come aboard I really think I would have tried to shoot her,’ said the man of patches nervously. (60-1)

Even her moment of “savagery” is not as savage as the ones Marlow had mentioned before. The savage men are beast-like creatures, and function only to dig holes and grunt in language-like noises (to the Europeans). This woman, on the other hand, tries to reach the sky. Nevertheless, the other member of Marlow’s crew does not seem to see her as a woman first and a native later; he does the opposite. In this aspect the “man of the patches” seems to be more coherent than Marlow.

Perhaps the major issue of savagery in the narrative is the “going native” of Kurtz, the European agent who becomes the utmost savage by throwing away his “civilization” and his European values. “Going native” was not unusual among Europeans in Africa: being away from all the values they cherished was more than these people could bear. It was the victory of “barbarism” over “civilization”, here impersonated by Kurtz. The first glimpse of Kurtz’s barbarism is Marlow’s view of poles with black people’s heads stuck on them, in front of Kurtz’s house, as ornaments:

Now I had suddenly a nearer view and its first result was to make me throw my head back as if before a blow. Then I went carefully from post to post with my glass, and I saw my mistake. . . . They would have been more impressive, those heads on stakes, if their faces had not been turned to the house. Only one, the first I had made out, was facing my way. . . . (57)

Kurtz is also presented as a paradoxical image throughout Marlow’s narrative. The agent of the Inner Station had definitely taken the path back to a pre-historic state.

Nevertheless, he is most of the times seen as a quasi-God, a person who is able to make everyone perceive reality in a different way. Marlow's encounter with a Russian sailor in the Inner Station illustrates this particular power of Kurtz:

. . . 'We [Kurtz and the Russian man] talked of everything,' he said quite transported at the recollection. 'I forgot there was such thing as sleep. The night did not seem to last an hour. Everything! Everything!. . . Of love too.' 'Ah, he talked to you of love!', I said much amused. 'It isn't what you think,' he cried almost passionately. 'It was in general. He made me see things – things.' (55)

This epiphanic moment reveals to us that, even being lost in the "wilderness", and being closer to the natives than to Europeans, Kurtz is not just "one of them"; he is not a mere savage. His "condition" was interpreted by Marlow as madness, but to the Russian man, as well as to the tribe who collected ivory for him in the Station, Kurtz was a god. Not only was he the officer who got the largest amounts of ivory, but he was also an enlightened being, capable of causing fear and adoration at the same time.

"Exterminate all the brutes", Kurtz post-scripted on his report on the "Suppression of Savage Customs". It is odd to imagine someone gone native willing to exterminate his own kin. We can read this as a conflict Kurtz has gone through: he was not one of those "naked, . . . bronze bodies. . . bunch of black feathers. . . [who] shouted . . . amazing words that resembled no sound of human language", whose "deep murmurs . . . were like the responses of some satanic litany" (66). Yet, Kurtz has given away his European condition but has not fully internalized a native identity. Not "fully", but almost: one night Marlow narrates how he and Kurtz went to the woods and the latter performed, with a local tribe, some "savage" rituals, not thoroughly explained in the narrative (62-3). The agent was neither European nor African.

Even though going native was a rather common condition to European agents on duty in Africa (Hochschild 141-9), Conrad decided Kurtz should have a non-violent ending: he died while journeying back to Europe. He had lost his status and, therefore, the only solution for him was to die; yet the common occurrence for people who had gone native was suicide.

In the novel, racism is portrayed in many different ways, some of them subtle, some not. There are several levels in which the racist thought appears, different from the stereotyped “whites against blacks” bias. Conrad shows the paradox he faces himself as both a victim and a supporter of Imperialism.

CONCLUSION

Heart of Darkness is, as seen, both an attack and a praise to colonialism; a defense of racial theories in fashion at that time and a questioning of these same theories. Ultimately, Conrad was able to translate in literature the entire paradox of colonialism held in Africa during the time of the “scramble”, when Europe decided to divide the continent among its nations. Perhaps, this is the reason why the novel is considered a major masterpiece after over one hundred years past its publication.

Marlow is a product of a paradoxical, ambivalent era, in which the open colonial discourses and practices were rather distant from each other. Besides, he is also the product of an ambivalent *being*, Conrad himself. The author himself had been a victim of imperialism and colonialism, being forced to leave Poland. Contrary to what one might obviously believe, Conrad did defend colonialism, but only the English system. This has been the way found by Conrad to try to achieve a thoroughly English identity. The first great moment in which we can perceive such a paradox is when Marlow discusses the fact that England itself had been a Roman colony (Conrad 9). The narrator gives us his first impressions about colonialism, by saying the Romans “were no colonists, their administration was merely a squeeze. . . [t]hey were conquerors” (10). We are led to believe that Marlow (and, up to a certain extent, Conrad himself) will stand thoroughly against the system, once the first association we have is that of colonization as conquest. This view is further developed by Marlow’s theory of colonial redemption through idealism.

This idealism is soon shaken when we realize that Marlow’s position as related to the system is not so clear. Marlow’s ambivalence emerges, for example, in the episode when Marlow is at the Company’s office and he stares at the world map, where all the colonies are shown. The comment he made while looking at the English colonies (“. . .one knows that

some real work is done there. . .”) reveals a certain ambivalence, later confirmed: colonialism as conquest is intolerable, but colonialism as a means for the colonies to achieve progress (which, according to the colonial ideal, would not be done without external aid) is to be encouraged. In other words: Marlow is defending the “civilizing mission” and, together with that, the colonial system itself. Or, it would be correct to say that Marlow defends the colonial *idea* of civilization, but not the colonial *practice*.

The colonial system held in the Congo was, according to several historians, one of the cruelest displays of power of an European society in Africa. The colony remained in the hands of one single person – the Belgian king Leopold II – for several years. Because of his convincing discourse of philanthropy, his “project” of leading civilization to the barbarian, inferior peoples, Leopold had been the sole profiteer of the immense wealth the Congo had to offer – mainly ivory and rubber. And the imposition of physical punishments for those natives who either refused to work for the system, or did not collect the necessary amount of ivory or rubber included exhaustive whipping, and the cutting of hands. It was the exposure of such a scenario, made mainly by American and English missionaries, that made Leopold sell the control of his personal colony to the Belgian Parliament. And it was this was the scenario Conrad may have seen on his journey upriver.

There is a second paradox related to the aspects of European presence in the Congo. During the episode in which Marlow’s steamer has to be fixed but it cannot because there is a lack of rivets, which would have to be sent for all the way from Europe (33), we realize that Europe is included in the colony in a very peculiar manner. Bringing civilization to the colonies proved to be impossible because the only real presence imposed by the metropolis was cultural, rather than material. In other words, Europe imposed its society upon the colonized peoples – especially as referred to social class and divisions, but materially the colonies were just as they used to be prior to the colonization.

This problem may also be exemplified by the first contact Marlow has with an agent in Africa. The man is – surprisingly – impeccably dressed in a white suit. This situation would be almost impossible in a tropical country such as the Congo. It proves that Europe was present in the Congo mostly in the manners of the colonizers and the way they organized an European-like society in the colony, rather than in actual material deeds.

The third paradox is related to the “civilizing mission” itself, which has always been the official drive of European colonialism worldwide. In a passage of the narrative, Marlow comments he had seen a black man digging a hole, apparently with no practical purpose, to which he states “[i]t might have been connected with the philanthropic desire of giving the criminals something to do”. The “civilizing mission”, according to all the orientalist discourse developed throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, had to do with helping the “barbarian” peoples to evolve, through the establishment of an European government (given the fact that the colonized peoples were not able to run an effective form of self-government). Digging holes with no explicit purpose has little – or nothing – to do with helping African peoples to govern themselves. The goal of philanthropy is not clear in this specific image. Also, the official discourse of the “civilizing mission” did not mention the accumulation of wealth through the exploitation of native labor and, in the case of Congo, the killing of elephants for the removal of their ivory tusks (and, in a later age, the collection of rubber from rubber trees); yet, this was exactly what happened.

The fourth – most striking – paradox deals with the representation of African natives throughout the narrative. Marlow is rather ambivalent in his discourse regarding the blacks. On some occasions, he does follow the trends of the Naturalistic science of the 19th century, affirming that blacks were not human and, therefore, inferior. This is seen when, on his descriptions of blacks, Marlow is unable to focus on the natives as a whole. Instead, he looks on the parts of the whole (arms, legs, torso) which, according to Chinua Achebe, is a major

indicative of dehumanization (Achebe 258). But, on other occasions, Marlow seems to be appalled at the fact that these “black shapes” are actually human after all. This epiphany works either to approximate blacks and whites – in the sense that they all share a common origin – and to separate them – in the sense that only one race was able to evolve into something civilized (from an European perspective).

Conrad was able to bring together both praise and critique to a system that seemed solid and unbeatable. A postcolonial reading of his masterpiece enables us to perceive these subtle ambivalences and paradoxes the novel presents. The fact that these paradoxes are ultimately unresolved is, certainly, one of the major strengths of the novel.

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