



## An Analysis of Conrad’s Colonial Thoughts From *Heart of Darkness*

LÜ Shan<sup>[a]</sup>, LI Changbao<sup>[b]</sup>,\*

<sup>[a]</sup> MA student, School of Foreign Languages, Zhejiang University of Finance & Economics, Hangzhou, China.

<sup>[b]</sup> Ph.D., Professor, School of Foreign Languages, Zhejiang University of Finance & Economics, Hangzhou, China.

\* Corresponding author.

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### Abstract

Conrad is a famous British pioneer of modernist novels, and his masterpiece *Heart of Darkness* is recognized as one of the best novellas in literary history. It is regarded by many readers and critics as an important anti-colonial work, and Conrad is also viewed as an anti-colonial writer. But in fact, Conrad’s praise and defense of colonialism is evident in his work. The cultural hegemony and the distortion of the image of Africa and African indigenous people in the novel just meet the needs of colonial ideology, provide the cultural support for the colonialists, and make Conrad an accomplice of other colonialists. This paper will focus on the analysis of Conrad’s colonialist identity based on the text of *Heart of Darkness*.

**Key words:** *Heart of Darkness*; Conrad; Colonialism

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### INTRODUCTION

Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) is a legendary figure in the history of world literature. He is acknowledged as one of the great English novelists of the late 19th century. He had been on the sea for twenty years before his literary creation, and thus became a great writer who was good at taking sea life as the subject of his novels. *Heart of*

*Darkness* is his most well-known novel and it is also the first work in the history of modern English fiction that deals with overseas colonization, which is unique in the world of literature for its profound meaning and complexity. The work, written in 1899, is based on Conrad’s “disastrous trip to the Congo” in 1890, and records the story of the Congo River as told by Captain Marlow on a ship docked outside London. In addition to Marlow’s own experiences in Africa as a young man, Marlow mainly told the story of Kurtz, a white colonist whom he met during his time in Africa. At first, Kurtz was an idealist who was determined to bring “civilization and progress” to Africa and later debased into a greedy colonist.

Since its publication, *Heart of Darkness* has attracted the attention of critics and readers. A few people believe that Marlow’s journey to Africa is actually a journey to explore his inner world; Some people think it is a jungle novel; But more people see it as a progressive novel against colonialism (Liu, 2006: 93). The vast majority of critics advocate that Conrad, through Marlow’s narration, not only described the European colonists’ destruction of African people’s spiritual culture and cruel plunder of material wealth in the late 19th century, but also revealed the anti-colonial consciousness of some European intellectuals through direct criticism. They tend to hold the view that Conrad exposed and criticized the brutal acts of the colonialists with the peculiar acuity as a novelist and thinker, and thus they consider Conrad as a complete anti-colonialist. However, through repeated reading of the text, I find that Conrad not only criticized colonialism, but also showed his defense of colonialism. We cannot simply conclude that Conrad is an anti-colonialist, nor can we ignore his colonial character. Conrad lived in the British Empire in the Victorian era and was rightly influenced by the ideology of the time. He was a member of the “Empire on which the sun never set”, so he also embodied the idea of colonialism. This paper attempts to analyze Conrad’s

colonialist image from the vilification of Africa's image, the contempt for indigenous Africans and Marlow's defense of Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*.

## 1. THE VILIFICATION OF AFRICA'S IMAGE IN HEART OF DARKNESS

Conrad (1966: 15) first described Africa as a black zone, believing that there were no other colors on the African continent except black, such as "black woods", "black limbs" and "black mountains" and so on. Secondly, in Conrad's writing, Africa was closely linked to the plague. Huang (2007: 14) pointed out that almost all Europeans who set foot in Africa suffered from the African plague in the novel. At the same time, African beliefs and ethics also appeared evil and had the power to fascinate the white people. This portrayal objectively serves the expansion of colonialism. Because the European colonists claim to "rescue Africans from the darkness", the image of Africa needs to be vilified to justify the necessity for European colonization and to exonerate European colonists from some of their guilt. When Marlow first set foot in Africa at the beginning of the novel, he "passed various places--trading places--with names like Gran' Bassam, Little Popo; names that seemed to belong to some sordid farce acted in front of a sinister back-cloth" (Conrad, 1966: 19). Conrad here expressed his obvious contempt for the continent of Africa. In his eyes, the land of Africa was stupid, ugly, mysterious and incomprehensible.

In addition, through the description of Conrad in the article, we can see he considered Africa as a primitive, dark, dangerous and brutal land, and it needed European conquest and enlightenment. As the title of the novel "*Heart of Darkness*" suggests, the heart-shaped continent of Africa, especially its heart region, the upper Congo River, is dark. This dark region is believed by white colonists to require the help of white people as "lightbringers" to obtain light. Darkness also represents chaos and backwardness. Let's look at the author's depiction of two rivers in Britain and Congo. In the author's eyes, the River Thames has a long history and brilliant achievements. As the author wrote in his novel, "The old river in its broad reach rested unruffled at the decline of day, after ages of good service done to the race that peopled its banks, spread out in the tranquil dignity of a waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth" (Conrad, 1966, p.4). It is well known that the River Thames is the symbol of Britain, and Britain is called as the "Empire on which the sun never sets", the author described it as "leading to the uttermost ends of the earth", the colonial ambition is clearly revealed here. However, the Congo River, which is the symbol of Congo, cannot be compared with the Thames in Conrad's eyes. The Congo River is by no means a river of honorary retirement. It does not make contributions and enjoys no pensions.

Influenced by cultural relativism, Conrad supposed that Africa in its infancy could not be compared with Europe in its adult age. The river, as a symbol of African civilization, had not nurtured developed civilization and made no contribution. It should be retired and replaced by "advanced and civilization" Europe. "Enjoys no pensions" suggests that the European colonists see no need to leave anything to Africa, and thus, from their point of view, their wanton aggression against Africa is also justified. All these embody Conrad's thoughts of colonialism.

## 2. THE CONTEMPT FOR INDIGENOUS AFRICANS IN HEART OF DARKNESS

Africans are also ignorant in Conrad's writing. Let's focus on the following passage in the original text. "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. 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. He was useful because he had been instructed" (Conrad, 1966, p.59). Here the educated black man is alienated into a specimen and compared to a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, indicating that black people are depersonalized in the eyes of European colonists. Moreover, this educated black man is portrayed so foolish. While he was doing this simple task, he still seemed clumsy. He apparently summoned up the courage to look at the steam pressure gauge and the water gauge with a squinty eye. All he knew was that if there was no water in the transparent tube, the devil in the boiler would be so thirsty that he would lose his temper and immediately take terrible revenge. A Chinese scholar thought that if the educated black man knew nothing about the boiler of the industrial age, how much less did the uneducated man? (Zhou, 2006: 89). This shows the ignorance of Africans and the backwardness of Africa. Conrad, through this depiction, showed that Africa was in great need of European conquest and enlightenment, and then all colonial expansion seemed reasonable.

In addition, Conrad wrote the indigenous people of the African continent in terms that were obviously discriminatory, such as "some black shapes crouched", "the black bones reclined at full length with one shoulder against the tree", "a whirl of black limbs" and so on. From these words, we can see Conrad's colonial ideology. Zeng (2003, p.56) believed that although Conrad's sympathy for the Africans was present in the book, a closer examination revealed that it was the sympathy of a superior, supposedly civilized man for the supposedly uncivilized, fatuous, incompetent and primitive savages.

He depicted Africa as a wild and Dark Continent with no history and no civilization, where the indigenous people were portrayed as a group of croaking savages and even cannibals. Throughout the novel, the author's disdain for the blacks is evident in the way he addresses them, rarely using the basic neutral word "black people" (Liu, 2011, p.53). From beginning to end, the author calls them "savages", "brutes" and "cannibals", which shows his discrimination against black people.

At the beginning of the novel, Conrad (1966, p.8) wrote: "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..." In this text, Conrad made it clear that the only thing that could atone for Europe's conquest and colonization of other peoples was the idea that supported it, that is, to spread the "sacred fire" of European civilization to other so-called "lower" races, to educate them, to make them gain progress and brightness. These words indicate exactly how foolish, ignorant and incompetent Conrad thought Africans were as primitive savages. In the view of the white man, they were as ridiculous as dogs walking in human clothes. They became useful only because they were civilized, trained and directed by "civilized white Europeans". Descriptions such as these in *Heart of Darkness* encouraged Europeans to further reinforce the idea of "occupying Africa and civilizing the African barbarians", manifesting Conrad's identity as a colonialist.

### 3. MARLOW'S DEFENSE OF KURTZ IN HEART OF DARKNESS

Marlow continued to revere Kurtz throughout the text, and even after he recognized the depraved nature of Kurtz, he still remained faithful to him. He thought Kurtz had more "imagination" or colonialist ideals, than any other colonizer on the continent. He called Kurtz's dying cry "The horror! The horror!" as a victory. He deemed that the colonial ideal was still a noble one. As a result, Marlow finally chose to side with Kurtz and still had a strong sense of identity with him. What's more, some scholars such as Wang and Ji held the view that Marlow tore up the words "exterminate all the brutes" in Kurtz's report on the "Suppression of Savage Customs" in order to maintain Kurtz's perfect image (Wang & Ji, 2008, p.57). We guess that Marlow disapproved of this extreme measure. But he would not have brought it back to Europe if he had not been in favor of the report "Suppression of Savage Customs". This shows that in the depths of Marlow's consciousness he did not oppose the

colonial idea of civilizing barbarians, so when he finished reading this report full of flowery words, he was thrilled and impressed. Some would argue that this is Marlow's colonialist attitude rather than Conrad's. In response to this question, first of all, Marlow is nothing more than a character created by Conrad, which is a writing technique to tell a story through his mouth. Marlow did not exist in real life and his ideas were endowed by the author. Second, if Conrad disagreed with Marlow, he should do so structurally, linguistically, and in fact there is a lack of convincing language or structure in the book to suggest that he is different from Marlow's attitude. Instead, Marlow is more like a spokesman for Conrad himself. Furthermore, Conrad himself does not deny that there is something of himself in the novel. He once wrote that a novelist lived in his work. There he stood, in the only reality he had created, in the midst of things, events and people he had imagined. To write them is to write himself. It is hard to deny that every novel contains an autobiographical element, because the creator only explains himself in his own work. As a result, Marlow's defense of Kurtz reflects Conrad's defense of colonialism. Although he witnessed the ugliness of colonial activities, he still chose to close his eyes and accept the reality.

Another powerful piece of evidence in the text is Marlow's lie. At the end of *Heart of Darkness*, when Kurtz's intended, a pale head European woman in black clothes, asked for Kurtz's last words, Marlow answered with her name after some hesitation. Here, Marlow's action of changing Kurtz's last words "The horror! The horror!" into "your name" was not an easy lie, but something with deeper connotation. After Kurtz arrived at the forest, he killed and raided the natives, committed all crimes he could to the natives for the purpose of getting more ivories. What he had done in the colonies was in fact exactly the same with what the imperialists and the colonialists had done in the colonies. Kurtz's last word—"The horror! The horror!" was his conclusion to all his crimes he committed in the colony. This conclusion also had some meaning of confession. However, a Chinese scholar put forward that "Conrad the writer made Marlow tell a lie, which deprived Kurtz's Intended, and also all westerners who had trustfully believed in the colonial discourse, of the rights of getting to know the truth of their 'remarkable fellowmen' in the colonies and the real situation of the colonies" (Dong, 2008, pp.32-33). They could only get the relative news from the governments and the Medias, all of which had been prettified and glorified. They believed in the lies of the governments and the Medias and planned to continue to devote themselves to the "holy missions" of the imperialism and colonialism for not knowing their real purpose. Therefore, Conrad successfully blinded the westerners with the help of Marlow's lie and made it possible for these people to work for the new phases of imperialism and colonialism.

Instead of exposing the reality in Europe, Marlow defended Kurtz's image. By this way, Conrad showed us a truth that colonial activities need to be embellished by colonial lies, and it is under colonial lies that colonial activities can continue.

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## CONCLUSION

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In short, the novel *Heart of Darkness* embodies Conrad's image as a colonialist. First of all, the novel portrays Africa as the opposite and foil of civilized Europe, imposing on Africa an "image" of the other. Although Africa is also one of the birthplaces of human civilization, boasts beautiful natural scenery and rich and splendid culture, in the eyes of Westerners, Africa is only synonymous with barbarism, ignorance, backwardness, poverty, disease and crime. Secondly, in *Heart of Darkness*, the author makes a demeaning, almost defamatory description of the original indigenous people in Africa, which reflects the discrimination of the Western white people against the African black people. For example, black Africans are depicted as barbaric, cannibalistic, ugly, nonverbal and dehumanized animals, in sharp contrast to the white people of European civilization. Finally, the author shows Conrad's stance of defending colonialism through Marlow's defense of Kurtz, and even tries to beautify the white man's colonial expansion under the pretext of "bringing civilization to Africa". From the above, I conclude that Conrad was a colonialist. But Conrad should not be blamed, because he was the creature of his times and the European civilization. He lived in the western world, and received the education of the western culture. Therefore, there was a close relationship between him and the European civilization. The environment he had grown

up in and the education he had received made it inevitable for him to be affected by the western colonial discourse. Therefore, in his works, he looked on the colony from the point of a westerner, just like the other western writers did. The colonialism of *Heart of Darkness* is a by-product of the story. It reveals the limitations of Conrad as a man living in history. Only clear with this could readers understand Conrad's works better, and could he be accepted by more readers.

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