

Heart of Darkness

- Imperialism is a policy or ideology of extending a country's rule over foreign nations, often by military force or by gaining political and economic control of other areas. Well-known examples of imperialism arguably include the American invasion of Vietnam (1950s to 1970s) and Britain's occupation of India (17th to 20th centuries).
- In historical contexts, New Imperialism characterizes a period of colonial expansion by European powers, the United States, and Japan during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.[1] The period featured an unprecedented pursuit of overseas territorial acquisitions. At the time, states focused on building their empires with new technological advances and developments, expanding their territory through conquest, and exploiting the resources of the subjugated countries. During the era of New Imperialism, the Western powers (and Japan) individually conquered almost all of Africa and parts of Asia. The new wave of imperialism reflected ongoing rivalries among the great powers, the economic desire for new resources and markets, and a "civilizing mission" ethos. Many of the colonies established during this era gained independence during the era of decolonization that followed World War II. The qualifier "new" is used to differentiate modern imperialism from earlier imperial activity, such as the so-called first wave of European colonization between 1402 and 1815.[1][2] In the First wave of colonization, European powers conquered and colonized the Americas and Siberia; they then later established more outposts in Africa and Asia.
- Shadow government
- A novella (1899). The peak of the British empire. Victoria died two years later.
- Kurtz: an idealistic man of great abilities.
- Marlowe: a sailor who sails up the Congo River to meet Kurtz. For this purpose, he takes a job as a riverboat captain with the Company, a Belgian concern organized to trade in the Congo.
- His journey to Africa exposes him to the brutality with which the Company forces the natives into service.
- The Jungle: impassive and majestic
- The Company (tiny settlements) contrasts with the Jungle (huge and powerful, containing the tiny settlements)
- With the ship's steam whistle, Marlow frightens away the natives who attack the ship with arrows.
- The narrators in the novel use the first-person plural pronoun to create the impression that they represent conventional perspectives and values of the British establishment.
- The Thames (journey outward) versus the Congo (journey inward into the heart of darkness)
- The British explorers described by the narrator as the knights of the sea. The narrator's attitude is that these men promoted the glory of Great Britain, expanded knowledge of the globe, and contributed to the civilization and enlightenment of the rest of the planet.
- At the time *Heart of Darkness* was written, the British Empire was at its peak, and Britain controlled colonies and dependencies all over the planet. The popular saying that "the sun never sets on the British Empire" was literally true. The main topic of *Heart of Darkness* is imperialism, a nation's policy of exerting influence over other areas through military, political, and economic coercion. The narrator expresses the mainstream belief that imperialism is a glorious and worthy enterprise. Indeed, in Conrad's time, "empire" was one of the central values of British subjects, the fundamental term through which Britain defined its identity and sense of purpose.
- Throughout his story, distinctions such as inward and outward, civilized and savage, dark and light, are called into question.
- Journey into himself
- From the way Marlow tells his story, it is clear that he is extremely critical of imperialism, but his reasons apparently have less to do with what imperialism does to colonized peoples than

with what it does to Europeans. Marlow suggests, in the first place, that participation in imperial enterprises degrades Europeans by removing them from the “civilizing” context of European society, while simultaneously tempting them into violent behavior because of the hostility and lawlessness of the environment. Moreover, Marlow suggests that the mission of “civilizing” and “enlightening” native peoples is misguided, not because he believes that they have a viable civilization and culture already, but because they are so savage that the project is overwhelming and hopeless. Marlow expresses horror when he witnesses the violent maltreatment of the natives, and he argues that a kinship exists between black Africans and Europeans, but in the same breath he states that this kinship is “ugly” and horrifying, and that the kinship is extremely distant. Nevertheless, it is not a simple matter to evaluate whether Marlow’s attitudes are conservative or progressive, racist or “enlightened.”

- In the first place, one would have to decide in relation to whom Marlow was conservative or progressive. Clearly, Marlow’s story is shaped by the audience to whom he tells it. The anonymous narrator states that Marlow is unconventional in his ideas, and his listeners’ derisive grunts and murmurs suggest that they are less inclined to question colonialism or to view Africans as human beings than he is. His criticisms of colonialism, both implicit and explicit, are pitched to an audience that is far more sympathetic toward the colonial enterprise than any twenty-first-century reader could be. The framing narrative puts a certain amount of distance between Marlow’s narrative and Conrad himself. This framework suggests that the reader should regard Marlow ironically, but there are few cues within the text to suggest an alternative to Marlow’s point of view.
- After he hears that he has gotten the job, Marlow travels across the English Channel to a city that reminds him of a “whited sepulchre” (probably Brussels) to sign his employment contract at the Company’s office. First, however, he digresses to tell the story of his predecessor with the Company, Fresleven. Much later, after the events Marlow is about to recount, Marlow was sent to recover Fresleven’s bones, which he found lying in the center of a deserted African village. Despite his reputation as mild mannered, Fresleven was killed in a scuffle over some hens: after striking the village chief, he was stabbed by the chief’s son. He was left there to die, and the superstitious natives immediately abandoned the village. Marlow notes that he never did find out what became of the hens. (compare the manner of Fresleven’s death with Brown’s death in *Things Fall Apart*)
- With all formalities completed, Marlow stops off to say goodbye to his aunt, who expresses her hope that he will aid in the civilization of savages during his service to the Company, “weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways.” Well aware that the Company operates for profit and not for the good of humanity, and bothered by his aunt’s naïveté, Marlow takes his leave of her. Before boarding the French steamer that is to take him to Africa, Marlow has a brief but strange feeling about his journey: the feeling that he is setting off for the center of the earth.
- Marlow’s departure from the world of Belgium and women is facilitated, according to him, by two eccentric men. The first of these is Fresleven, the story of whose death serves to build suspense and suggest to the reader the transformations that Europeans undergo in Africa. By European standards, Fresleven was a good and gentle man, not one likely to die as he did. This means either that the European view of people is wrong and useless or else that there is something about Africa that makes men behave aberrantly. Both of these conclusions are difficult to accept practically or politically, and thus the story of Fresleven leaves the reader feeling ambivalent and cautious about Marlow’s story to come.
- They finally arrive at the mouth of the Congo River, where Marlow boards another steamship bound for a point thirty miles upriver. The captain of the ship, a young Swede, recognizes Marlow as a seaman and invites him on the bridge. The Swede criticizes the colonial officials and tells Marlow about another Swede who recently hanged himself on his way into the interior.
- This novel does not focus on the natives. It focuses on the Europeans

- The point of the novel is that the colonizer is spending so much money in Africa for nothing. Instead of wasting all this money and energy and time, the colonizer can make business at home.
- and the spectacle of European guns firing blindly into that facade seems to be a futile and uncomprehending way of addressing the continent.
- The hand of the “flabby devil” is apparent in the travesties of administration and the widespread decay in the Company’s stations. The colonials in the coastal station spend all their time blasting a cliff for no apparent reason, machinery lies broken all around, and supplies are poorly apportioned, resting in abundance where they are not needed and never sent to where they are needed. Given the level of waste and inefficiency, this kind of colonial activity clearly has something other than economic activity at stake, but just what that something might be is not apparent. Marlow’s comments on the “flabby devil” produce a very ambivalent criticism of colonialism. Would Marlow approve of the violent exploitation and extortion of the Africans if it was done in a more clear-sighted and effective manner? This question is difficult to answer definitively.
- Colonization according to the novel dehumanizes the colonizer. The colonizer will lose his human attributes such as compassion and pity and will kill the colonized.
- Marlow notices an unusual painting on the wall, of a blindfolded woman with a lighted torch; when he asks about it, the brickmaker reveals that it is Kurtz’s work. To the reader, the painting may seem somewhat heavy-handed, with its overtly allegorical depiction of blind and unseeing European attempts to bring the “light” of civilization to Africa.
- Because of its merciless environment and savage inhabitants, Africa itself is responsible for colonial violence.
- The use of religious language to describe the agents of the Central Station reinforces this paradoxical idea. Marlow calls the Company’s rank and file “pilgrims,” both for their habit of carrying staves (with which to beat native laborers) and for their mindless worship of the wealth to be had from ivory.
- Some critics have objected to Heart of Darkness on the grounds that it brushes aside or makes excuses for racism and colonial violence, and that it even glamorizes them by making them the subject of Marlow’s seemingly profound ruminations.