THE EVILS OF IMPERIALISM

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*Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad is a book that deals with various aspects of imperialism. Imperialism has been ongoing for centuries. All world powers find a way to justify their imperialism. All imperialistic nations believe that in some form they are superior to others and their superiority gives them the right to rule over those who are inferior. These justifications can vary from having a superior religion to being part of a superior race. This allows the conquerors to make it seem as if they are going to help the less fortunate when in reality they are going for their own selfish reasons. The most recent form of imperialism has been Western imperialism, practiced by the United States and much of Europe. In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad seems to tell us that people are often deceived into believing that imperialism is beneficial, when in reality it is not; in fact, it is downright evil and has very detrimental effects on both the colonizers and the colonized.

Many European nations were going to Africa in the 1800’s due to the plethora of natural resources available and the lack of a strong resistance by the Africans. However, much of the European population believed that they were invading other countries to bring civilized culture to savage societies. Conrad describes this mentality when Marlow goes to visit his aunt before he leaves for the Congo. His aunt describes him as “Something like an emissary of light, something like a lower apostle” (Conrad 76). While she makes Marlow out to be some sort of holy figure, she demonizes the Africans and talks about “…‘weaning those ignorant millions off their horrid ways’” (Conrad 76). However, through Marlow, Conrad points out that the purpose of imperialism wasn’t to help those that were being colonized. Marlow scoffs at his aunt’s thinking and thinks that since she is a woman, she can’t understand how the world really works. In reality,
both men and women bought into this way of thinking. At the time, majority of the people in the West believed themselves to be better than others. Some thought it was Christianity that needed to be brought to have any chance of saving the savages while others thought that by being white, they were inherently superior to all other human beings. The famous English author and poet Rudyard Kipling was a believer of the latter ideology. In 1899, the same time *Heart of Darkness* was published, Kipling wrote one of his poems, *The White Man’s Burden*, in which he tries to convince the Western nations to “Take up the White Man’s burden” and go to civilize the rest of the world. Kipling made imperialism seem like a very noble act and was able to convince many people to believe that the West was doing a great service to the world through imperialism. While imperialism was motivated by power and greed, majority of the people at the time were convinced that it was helping to better the world.

Despite the fact that many held a distorted view of imperialism, there were some people who could see that imperialism was a method of exploitation and injustice. In spite of seeing the truth, majority of these people didn’t look at the non-western populations as equals. While it can’t be argued for certain whether Joseph Conrad thought of the Africans as beneath him, Marlow definitely thought of them this way. “…they shouted periodically together strings of amazing words that resembles no sounds of human language; and the deep murmurs of the crowd, interrupted suddenly, were like the responses of some satanic litany” (Conrad 145). Marlow doesn’t view the language of the savages as human and goes as far to think of it as satanic. Conrad shows that even the moderate people thought of themselves as above the Africans. While some of the colonizers believed they were better than the Africans and treated the Africans accordingly, there were some who went even further. Kurtz was one of these people and was so obsessed with his greed that he believed it was correct to suppress the Africans. As
Hunt Hawkins notes “The ‘idea’ espoused by Kurtz that Marlow seems to admire, then, is not joining the natives but rather improving them” (Hawkins 288). In Kurtz’s pamphlet, International Society of the Suppression of Savage Customs, Marlow reads, “we whites, from the point of development we had arrived at, 'must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings -- we approach them with the might of a deity,’ and so on, and so on.' By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded” (Conrad 123). Conrad uses Kurtz as an example of people, like Kipling, who used their brilliant linguistic ability to convince others to follow their way of thinking. While Marlow isn’t as extreme in his views on Africans as Kurtz is, Marlow can’t help but be intrigued by what Kurtz has to say. Kurtz is able to mask his greed by presenting himself as a superior figure trying to help the less fortunate. It is not known whether Kurtz’s pamphlet shows what he truly believes or is something he made to fool others into helping him. While it would be natural to assume that the natives detest being invaded, used, and abused, Kurtz blankets the feelings of the natives by saying they hold the same view as the whites. He goes on further to convince those who have any doubt in this mindset that what the imperialists are doing is beneficent. Imperialism involves deception and twisting peoples’ views. Things that people care about such as religion and race are used to cover for darker motives.

Imperialism deceived many of the people in Europe and America but it had devastating effects on those who were involved in it. In Heart of Darkness, the colonizer who was affected the worst was Kurtz. In “At the Heart of Darkness: Crimes against Humanity and the Banality of Evil”, Kurtz is described as “…a cultured man, gifted in music, art, and rhetoric, a born leader with great potential. There was every expectation that he would rise in corporation and in European society” (Maier-Katkin 588). Kurtz wasn’t a bad person when he arrived in Africa. By
Western standards, he was an incredible man: well rounded, intelligent, and charismatic. He is described by others as one who “Men looked up to...— his goodness shone in every act” (Conrad 156). His mistress thought of him as an incredible person, as did the manager of the company. “A first class agent...a remarkable man” (Conrad 84). This description by the manager was enough to ignite Marlow’s interest in him. When Kurtz arrived in the Congo, he realized his brilliance and it corrupted him. When a person thinks of themselves as superior to another, it can affect their personality and treatment of others. Psychologist Philip Zimbardo conducted the Stanford Prison Experiment to prove this. He had one group pretend to be the guards of a fake prison and one group pretend to be the prisoners. He himself acted as the warden. Zimbardo found himself being too involved in the experiment and treating the prisoners horribly. The people acting as the guards started abusing the prisoners and the prisoners became afraid of the guards. Zimbardo wasn’t even able to realize the change in himself and a friend needed to tell him to stop the experiment and the fake prisoners ended up needing therapy to return to normal. The experiment, which was supposed to last for two weeks, only lasted for six days before it was discontinued. With such detrimental effects after only six days of a fake scenario, we can only imagine the destructive psychological effects on both the colonizers and the colonized after going for years with a mentality of superiority and inferiority. Zimbardo’s experiment proved that having power over someone else can bring out the worst in people. Kurtz was a brilliant man but when he started believing he was better than the savage Africans, he started turning into an evil person. He became greedy and started craving ivory. He was cruel to the savages and was willing to kill as many of them to get more ivory. Ironically, Kurtz himself was the one who turned into a savage. Through Kurtz, Conrad shows the extent of evil that imperialism can unleash.
While the colonizers were hurt, the people being colonized were hurt far worse. Many Africans lost their lives from the brutal treatment of the imperialists. According to Maier-Katkin, “…during the reign of King Leopold, when murder, disease, famine, forced labor, torture, maiming, and sadistic cruelties were elements of international trade in ivory and rubber. As many as ten million Congolese may have been victims of crimes against humanity in the period between 1885 and 1908…” (Maier-Katkin 591). Further atrocities included the hands of children being cut off as punishment for their parents trying to resist the imperialists. As shown by Zimbardo’s Stanford Prison Experiment, there was bound to be a lot of psychological effects. A widespread fear and feeling of inferiority is bound to destroy the very core of any society. A once very proud people were reduced to people who were afraid of the imperialists. They felt degraded and ridiculed. Aside from being treated horribly and mass deaths, those being colonized lost their culture. Imperialism imposes the traditions of the colonizing country on the ones being colonized. This causes the people to lose touch with their own traditions. The future generations think their own culture is inferior to that of the colonizers. A lot of people were forcibly converted to Christianity which further removed them from their beliefs, traditions and culture. They also had their borders rewritten for them which caused very different tribes to come together, thus creating conflict among the indigenous people. When Great Britain created Nigeria, they grouped together three tribes: Hausa, Yoruba, and Ibo. The Hausa is comprised of mainly Muslims while the Yoruba mostly worship spirits. The Ibo also have their own god and rituals. All three groups are very different and struggle to get along. Nigeria is but one example of a country that was created to suppress the people long after the imperialists left. The imperialist powers purposely left the colonized nations in a state of chaos and ensured the chaos would continue for many years to come. This way, these countries would never be able to rise up
and eclipse the nations that once colonized them. Sadly, the horrendous effects of imperialism still affect much of Africa and other parts of the world to this day.

There are some people who will argue that imperialism has the ability to bring some good to the world. Marlow is one of these people. He thinks of how the Romans came to the uncivilized British Islands and civilized the people. It is argued that imperialism has the ability to connect the world together and is able to improve the countries being occupied. New technologies are brought to occupied countries through imperialism. When the British Empire took over many countries across the world, the built new roads, canals and railways. New medications were brought and so were new foods. However, this wasn’t done because of the good will of the imperialists. It was done because colonizers would move from the imperialist country to the country that was being colonized. To help these people, the occupied countries were improved and in turn, the native people also benefitted. The construction of schools was quite possibly the most beneficial to the natives. It allowed them to see that they were being exploited and they were given the ability to voice their distress to the imperialists. However, the few benefits provided by imperialism pale in comparison to the destruction it causes.

Imperialism is a horrible system that has brought a lot of destruction, pain, and suffering throughout the years. People were deceived into thinking that imperialism was actually a force for good. Many influential authors were vital in convincing the majority of people into thinking this way. Imperialism had terrible effects on both the colonizers and the people being colonized. Many colonizers were initially good people but they became evil due to colonialism. The poor Africans who were being colonized were forced away from there peaceful lives. Many were killed and others were forced away from their culture. The dehumanization of the colonized ends up harming the colonizers, the colonized, and ultimately the world.
Works Cited


