

HEART OF DARKNESS

Conrad depicts an unequal access to power in Heart of Darkness. Discuss.

In the novella 'Heart of Darkness' by Joseph Conrad, the author depicts strong levels of inequality in the accessibility of power through the presentation of the European male who wields power over others deemed inferior. Conrad further enhances the inequality of this degrading imagery of those in power to infiltrate, exploit, and destroy the power system of others.

Conrad directly portrays the unequal power systems of his time through the use of a frame narrative structure. The reader is introduced to the story solely through the perspectives of two unreliable European and masculine narrators – the anonymous narrator on board the *Nellie* and the protagonist Marlow. The audience, whose identities are purely reduced to mere titles of 'lawyer', 'accountant' and 'director' establishes them as a physical embodiment of the most empowered demographic within the socio-economic structure of the late 19th century. Through this, Conrad establishes a solely colonial and patriarchal representation of the audience to Marlow's tale. The author further depicts the power of European society through the descriptions of the office in Brussels. Marlow describes two women 'knitting black wool feverishly' in the waiting room, a reference to two of the three 'fates' of Greek mythology who have control over life and death. The action of Europeans knitting black wool possibly alludes to the power Europe has over Africa, as it is a physical embodiment of Europeans exerting their control over the African natives who are powerless against this system of exploitation and abuse. Conrad paints any opposition to European control as futile, as the black people do not have the same access to power as Europeans do. Conrad further enforces the power of European colonists through the description of the office in Brussels, which is described to have 'double doors, archways right and left' and 'two waiting rooms'. The floorplan of the office bears a striking resemblance to the structure of a heart, with the two waiting rooms indicating the two chambers of the heart, archways corresponding to the pulmonary valve and the double doors as flaps on the opening of the valve. The parallels between the office and a heart enforces the idea of the white colonists' power over the people in Africa, and also possibly paints Europe as having the power to 'pump out' European culture and colonists into Africa as they please, and the natives are powerless in stopping this infiltration due to the inequality within the power systems of the time.

Conrad pushes the idea of inequality in the distribution of power by presenting those in power to be undeserving of this privilege. The anonymous narrator paints an image of Marlow as 'a Buddha preaching in European clothes without a lotus flower'. The lotus flower is a symbol of achieving wisdom, thus by drawing the audience's attention to the lack of a lotus flower, Conrad suggests the unreliability of Marlow by portraying him to be lacking in the insights to the significance of his experience. Marlow's degrading and unflattering portrayal of the natives was argued by Achebe to be dehumanising, as he says that 'the very humanity of black people is called in question', however, the unreliable nature of Marlow which Conrad has established allows the reader to question Marlow's commentary and to see that while Marlow holds power over the natives, he is unable to assess his situation and perceive it objectively. Furthermore, Conrad depicts the unequal access to power through an unorthodox portrayal of a powerful figure – the manager at the station. The manager was described as a 'common trader with no discernible skill' who inspired 'neither love nor fear nor respect'. These descriptions portray the manager to be undeserving of his title, as he has 'no learning nor intellect'. Yet the manager is able to keep his job as well as the power that come along with it, as he was 'never ill'. This suggests that the Europeans are reverting back to their primitive, natural instincts of survival of the fittest rather than through intellectual

ability, as 'triumphant health is a power in itself', hence exposing the inequality of the accessibility of power.

Conrad, through the perspectives of Marlow, dehumanises characteristics of native Africans to directly portray the power colonists wield. Marlow, who sees the native Africans as 'nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation' and 'bundles of acute angles' rather than humans, becomes accustomed to the horrendous treatment of Africans at the hands of Europeans. He casually notes that 'a nigger was being beaten nearby' and 'the beaten nigger groaned somewhere', and his casual and repetitive use of profane words such as nigger have caused critics such as Achebe to label *Heart of Darkness* as 'offensive and totally deplorable', who believed that Conrad was a 'thoroughgoing racist'. However, critic Hawkins believed that 'far from condoning genocide, Conrad clearly saw humanity's horrific capacity and gave it a name'. While Africans were directly degraded through Marlow's comments, Marlow himself is also dehumanised as he is seen to have normalised this violent, barbaric, and brutal treatment of those deemed inferior due to their inability to be granted access to power.

Conrad condemns the inequality of power through portraying the power of Europeans to be 'hollow at the core' through depicting Brussels as a 'whited sepulchre', a biblical allusion to the Book of Matthew, suggesting that European imperialist power is dark, rotten, and unclean below its impressive surface, and that just like the Pharisees in the bible, the agents of colonialism are anxious to appear outwardly righteous, altruistic, and full of enlightenment, progress, and development, yet below this façade their intentions are by dark, egotistical, and iniquitous, and driven solely by profit. Conrad makes multiple allusions to the 'hollowness' of European expansion, an instance of which is when Marlow notes that if he 'poked his forefinger through [the manager], there would be nothing to find but loose dirt'. Marlow also notes that the brick maker at the station had 'no straws to make breaks' despite waiting for years, symbolising the futility and inefficiency of colonialism. Hawkins, a critic of 'heart of Darkness', notes that Kurtz's final words 'the horror, the horror' indicates him finally seeing the 'devastating vision' of the utter 'emptiness and futility' of imperialism. By the negative portrayal of European power, Conrad leads the reader to question the fairness of this system, thus depicting the inequalities that European systems of power stem from.

Finally, *Heart of Darkness* further portrays the unequal access to power in society by rendering African systems of power as weak in contrast to Europe's. Conrad displays African systems of power to be weak and vulnerable to European invasion through the character of Mister Kurtz, who was able to exert himself as a demigod and infiltrate the power systems of the natives. Kurtz, despite being an outsider and being sick both physically and mentally, could exercise his power through ways such as teaching the natives a broken form of English dialect. Marlow notes that the natives 'shouted words that resembled no sounds of the human language' and in the two instances where they speak, such as the iconic phrase of 'Mistah Kurtz, he dead' shows the power of the Europeans to 'downgrade' language to a dialect in order to maintain their power. Achebe says that the 'introduction of dialects is caused by an instinctive desire of the writer to downgrade the discussion to the level of Africa by withholding language from his rudimentary souls'. This demonstrates the unequal access to power of the late 1800s as those with power within the socio-political structure have the ability to infiltrate and invade other societies and maintain this control by introducing their subjects to a simplified and downgraded version of the 'civilised' culture.

Heart of Darkness offers a sophisticated insight into the unequal access to power of the late 19th century by accurately depicting its power systems of the time as solely European and patriarchal, and challenging the equality of this traditional and socially accepted interpretation of power by negative portrayals of European colonial power. Conrad scathingly indicts European colonial power as immoral, empty of substance, uncivilised, and invasive,

which strongly condemns those wielding power over inferiors as those with a heart full of darkness.