Chapter-III

THE EUROPEAN HOLLOWMAN
Conrad's ideas about imperialism and human exploitation which were only vague and tentative during his Malayan phase underwent a radical transformation in the later periods of his literary career. They took concrete and compelling forms in his African phase. The Malayan experience was very trivial compared to what the novelist observed in the interior of the Dark Continent. His awareness of the civilising work in Africa, of the cruelty and greed that lay behind the idealistic professions of the white people finds scathing expressions in "An Outpost of Progress" and Heart of Darkness. The unusual nature of the experience shocked him profoundly and made him aware of the fact that his earlier experiences regarding the imperial situation involving the Europeans and the natives were merely
peripheral. He also realised that the cultural and political implications of the interaction between the Europeans and the natives were immense.

In Heart of Darkness Conrad dealt with a subject most topical and of great significance to all civilised people. Conrad himself was greatly fascinated by the euphoria let loose by King Leopold II's International Association for the civilisation of Central Africa which was formed in 1875. Since its inception, the Association created great enthusiasm in public mind and the expedition of Stanley from Zanzibar to Lower Congo was followed in England with utmost interest and expectation.

This atmosphere of discovery and adventure rekindled Conrad's spirit of adventure and reawakened the geographical passion of his childhood. He was too eager to avail himself of an opportunity to get into the interior of Africa. He was promised the command of one of the Upper Congo steam boats. He also owed this appointment to the good offices of his aunt Madam Paradowska who took an active interest in Conrad's ventures. The fact that Conrad spoke French also contributed to his getting the assignment.
The theme of the story 'An Outpost of Progress' and that of the novel Heart of Darkness is twofold: colonialism which could take the form of human exploitation on a devastating scale and the unhealthy influence cast by native surroundings on the mind of the 'civilised' Europeans. They are the most acute analyses of the gradual deterioration of the white man's morale, when he is let loose from the civilised restraints of Europe and posted off in far off tropical countries as the emissary of knowledge and progress but wonderfully equipped to make trade profits out of the native people. The newly discovered state of Congo promised to white men enormous profit. He assumed the 'Whiteman's burden' of the civilising mission on him under the cover of which he freely indulged in rapacity, plunder and exploitation. His abysmal greed engulfed all his humanitarian feelings.

'An Outpost of Progress' is generally regarded as a sort of prelude to Heart of Darkness. In a way Conrad adumbrated in the story what he was going to do on a greater scale in Heart of Darkness. He himself liked the story and was 'pleased' with it. He also threw some light on its theme while writing about it to his publisher Fisher Unwin:
It is a story of the Congo. There is no love interest in it and no woman—only incidentally. All the bitterness of those days, all my puzzled wonder as to the meaning of all I saw— all my indignation at masquerading philanthropy have been with me again while I wrote... I have divested myself of everything but pity— and some scorn while putting down the insignificant events that bring on the catastrophe.

He also described 'An Outpost' as "the lightest part of the loot I carried off from Central Africa." It is a study of the degeneration of two characters -- Kayerts and Carlier in the isolated surroundings of Congo and their rapid disintegration when confronted with the overwhelming solitude and the unusual.

In an introductory essay to Conrad's Prefaces to His Works, Edward Garnett points out that 'An Outpost' is a tale of the Congo that "directly challenged the fashionable imperialistic propaganda and Kipling's gospel of the White man's burden." In this tale, Kayerts and Carlier, two amateur adventurers are asked to command a tiny trading station of the Great Civilising Company. They give up their jobs in England and join the company. They take it as an opportunity to distinguish

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themselves as pioneers of trade and commerce and to earn percentages on the trade. Of course, their pursuit was, at least in part, altruistic and involved an element of rationalized ideology, however suspect or insincere that may be. The 'masquerading philanthropy' that Conrad spoke of is evident in the very title of the post. While it is installed exclusively for the purpose of profit, it is named an outpost of 'progress'. Kayerts and Carlier become the agents of progress while thinking only of personal benefit. Their predominant motive in accepting the assignment was that it would offer them a chance to exercise their freedom and self-will. But when left with absolute liberty and no check, they do not know what to do with it. They are unable to impose any order on their lives.

Conrad's proposed theme is the unhealthy implications of petty trading on the fringes of the Empire. The author ironically refers to the 'print' entitled "Our Colonial Expansion" written in highflown language. Kayerts and Carlier find great consolation in this book and begin to 'think better of themselves'. To Kayerts this is a 'splendid' book as it speaks of 'the rights and duties of civilisation', of the sacredness

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4 Joseph Conrad, 'An Outpost of Progress', Tales of Unrest (London and Toronto: J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1923), pp.94-5. All references are to this edition.
of the 'civilising work' and extols "the merits of those who went about bringing light, and faith and commerce to the dark places of the earth"; Carlier hopes that in "a hundred years there will be perhaps a town here."5

The story is an example of sustained and pitiless irony that Conrad was to display in the treatment of some of his characters. The title itself is unmistakably ironic, playing off the conventional, lofty association of the phrase against the squalid, sordid reality. Kayerts and Carlier think themselves to be the vanguards of civilisation, bringing "quays and warehouses and barracks -- and all"6, but the writer tells us that they are two useless creatures:" They were two perfectly insignificant individuals, whose existence is only rendered possible through the high organisation of civilised crowds."7 Their physical feature itself symbolises the incongruity between their professed ideals and their mundane practice. Kayerts is short and fat. The image evoked by the term 'perched' suggests a spiritual attenuation and Carlier's 'very broad trunk' on 'a long pair of thin legs' is the very image of imbecility and greed.

5 Tales of Unrest, pp.94-5.
6 Ibid., p.88.
7 Ibid.
Kayerts and Carlier share many of the characteristics of Almayer and Willems. Each of them is morally weak, used to the comforts of Europe and is eager to compromise when an easy way to prosperity is offered him. Their compromise involves the acceptance of a life in isolation and savagery in the Outpost in the expectation of a future life of prosperity and fame. Conrad effectively brings out the tension of the two white men in a 'black' environment.

Though Kayerts and Carlier began smugly enough, their hollowness soon began to show itself when they discovered themselves to be totally ill-equipped to deal with the isolation and the inclement surroundings. They could hold out only for a short period after which the loneliness and wilderness began to tell on their nerves. Their tentativeness verging on fear and their helplessness have been brought into sharp relief by their excessive rosy talkativeness and garrulity:

"Slavery is an awful thing", stammered out Kayerts in an unsteady voice. "Frightful -- the sufferings", granted Carlier with conviction.

In less than six months, Kayerts and Carlier forget all about their pioneering work. Sick and demoralised, they spend time malingering and loitering about.

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8 Tales of Unrest, p.105.
Like Almayer and Willems before them, they began to disintegrate and like Kurtz they drift into a savage way of life which is the very opposite of what they originally set out to do. Carlier "talked about the necessity of exterminating all the niggers before the country could be made habitable." They shamefully connive at the selling out of their native helpers into slavery in exchange for six large tusks of ivory. Of course, Makola, the black caretaker of the Outpost is the real villain and Kayerts and Carlier had to capitulate in order to protect their station from the attack of the band of armed Blacks. Conrad shows that the black natives, though generally submissive, could become as ruthless and predatory as their white masters. Makola continually blackmails both Kayerts and Carlier. The slavery transaction is completely masterminded by him and when Kayerts threatens him with punishment, Makola sardonically says, "You are very red, Mr. Kayerts. If you are so irritable in the sun, you will get fever and die - like the first chief!" This is enough to send Kayerts into shivers and silence. Besides, both Kayerts and Carlier finally justify the act to themselves in the conviction that the European director must have often "seen worse things done on the quiet."  

10 Tales of Unrest, p.104.  
11 Ibid., p.109.
The gradual disintegration of Kayerts and Carlier is followed by Conrad graphically. Eventually they degenerate so much that they quarrel with each other bitterly over a spoonful of sugar. They get savage, chase each other round the hut and Kayerts, afraid that Carlier might point his gun at him, shoots Carlier in a state of nervous breakdown. When the full impact of what he has done to his mate is brought home to him, he hangs himself out of remorse and fear. The all-pervasive irony makes the story devastating in its effect. It was as if Conrad poured all his pent-up disgust and contempt against the irresponsible and imbecile adventurers who indulged freely in personal aggrandisement under the cover of pioneering philanthropy. The ending of the story is a fitting sequel to the whole drama:

His toes were a couple of inches above the ground, his arms hung stiffly down; he seemed to be standing rigidly at attention, but with one purple cheek playfully posed on the shoulder; and irreverently he was putting his tongue at his managing director.\(^\text{12}\)

Heart of Darkness, to a great extent, draws on the personal experience of Conrad in Congo but narrated in the first person by Marlow. According to the 'Author's Note', "the events are experience pushed a little

\(^{12}\) Tales of Unrest, p.117.
(and only a very little) beyond the actual facts of the case.\textsuperscript{13} Marlow's voyage has multiple dimensions. According to M.M. Mahood, "It denotes simultaneously a geographical location, a metaphysical state and a state of moral enlightenment."\textsuperscript{14} It explores simultaneously the exploitation of the Blacks by the Whites, the primordial human condition and the mind's proclivities towards self-aggrandisement and excesses. Above all, its aim is to suggest the horrifying possibilities of that great part of man's mind where doubt itself is lost in an unexplored universe of incertitudes. Conrad shows how some situations will force men back to uncivilised states where centuries of social and cultural achievements are lost in a great blackness of the mind. The very atmosphere in which the actions take place is one of darkness -- darkness that lies deep in human mind and vitiates our noble intentions and obscures our judgements.

It is a world of darkness of many kinds that this voyage explores, but among these kinds -- the reminder is still critically necessary -- is the reality of colonial exploitation, the ambiguity of the civilising mission into Africa.\textsuperscript{15}

The tone of the novel is set from the very beginning when Marlow, in connection with his appointment, gives the detail of his predecessor's death. Freselven, his predecessor picked up a quarrel with the native Africans about two hens. In order to assert his arrogance and power "he whacked the old nigger mercilessly" in the presence of a throng of native people. For Freselven, two hens were worth more than a native and his self-esteem counted even more. But the chief's son had also his self-respect and being greatly affected by the victim's groan, he threw a spear at Freselven which went straight between his shoulder blades. So far, the natives and the whites were even. But now the natives took to flight to forest, because they knew that the white man's anger would burst forth destroying them and their dwellings. To heighten the irony, the author tells us that Freselven was the gentlest and the quietest man that ever walked on earth. The only fault was that "he had been a couple of years already out there engaged in the noble cause."

This is the general trait of most of the Europeans engaged in the noble cause in Africa. Pursuit of

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17 Heart of Darkness, p. 57.
profit and ivory had turned even the quietest creatures into cruel brutes. Instead of making the natives more civilised, they made them more demoralised. Use of brute force indiscriminately and to make a discharge of firearms every now and then were their ways of impressing the natives. In fact these were a nice pastime with them. The white men used their force so indiscriminately that sometimes it had a touch of insanity. We find this insanity in the case of the French gunboats that went on firing blindly on the continent because they had come to know that there was camp of the natives and since the natives could not but be enemies:

It appears the French had one of their wars going on thereabouts. Her ensign dropped limp like a rag; the muzzles of the long six-inch guns stuck out all over the low hull; the greasy, slimy swell swung her up lazily and let her down, swaying her thin masts. In the empty immensity of earth, sky and water, there she was, incomprehensible, firing into a continent.18

Later on Marlow met a group of natives and by no stretch of imagination could he call them enemies. Yet these people, harmless and unprotected, were regarded as criminals and had to embrace the bursting bullets of the Europeans, "an insoluble mystery from the sea."19

18 Heart of Darkness, pp.65-6.
19 Ibid., p.69.
Curiouly, this is Marlow's first experience of the white 'progress'. As he advances along the river, he comes to know more and more about the mockery of progress and civilisation the white people were spreading out:

We called at some more places with farcical names, where the merry dance of death and trade goes on in a still and earthy atmosphere as of an over-heated catacomb.20

When Marlow lands on the first station, he is struck by the peculiar appearance of the surroundings. It is a scene of "inhabited devastation."21 The machines brought from Europe for 'progress' look entirely incongruous and out of place in an alien environment. Marlow comes across an undersized railway truck lying on its back, its wheels in the air: "The thing looked as dead as the carcass of some animal."22 A boiler wallows purposelessly in the grass, a stack of rails is gathering rust, a lot of drainage pipes tumbled up and abandoned in the ravine; pieces of decaying machinery are scattered all over the place. The whole project is a "wanton smash-up".23 Dull and heavy detonations shake the ground indicating the attempt to blast the rock,

20 Heart of Darkness, p.66.
21 Ibid., p.67.
22 Ibid., p.68.
23 Ibid., p.70.
but the explosion is feeble and ineffective. No change appears on the face of the rock: "They were building a railway. The cliff was not in the way or anything; but this objectless blasting was all the work going on." This feeling of continuous outrage invests the scene at Matadi with rich symbolic significance indicating the insanity and ineffectiveness of the Europeans.

At the same station, Marlow experiences another sight more horrifying and vivid. He runs into a grove, "the gloomy circle of some inferno" filled with dying and abandoned negroes. These negroes were collected from different parts of the country to make the station habitable for the white men. In extremely uncongenial surroundings, they were forced to do work that they were not familiar with. They had no way of escape but work. The Europeans extracted the maximum work out of them and paid them three nine-inch long brass-wire pieces a week, which were insufficient to buy them anything. Besides, the unusual food and the inclement climate ate into their vitals and within months most of them were transformed into human carcases. No medical treatment was given them and they were allowed to perish slowly and painfully:

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24 Heart of Darkness, p.68.
25 Ibid., p.70.
They were dying slowly—it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now—nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. Brought from all the recesses of the coast, in all the legality of time and contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened because of insufficient food and were then allowed to crawl away and rest.  

This is a telling instance of the enormous human wastage and human suffering inflicted on the native people of Africa by their European masters. One is filled with a sense of profound compassion for the sick negroes. Conrad's sympathy, mediated through the thought and action of Marlow secures his position permanently as a humanist and not, as alleged, a nihilist. While the pilgrims fire indiscriminately into the bush, Marlow disperses the natives by pulling the boat's whistle to keep them out of harm's way.

Marlow meets the general manager, a typical white trader, who is concerned with only material advantages. Himself a man of robust health, the manager used to express the view that the men who chose to come over to Congo "should have no entrails." He could as well have added that they should have no conscience. For the Europeans do not show the least sign of disconcertment

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26 Heart of Darkness, p.71.
27 Ibid., p.53.
at the spectacle of human suffering. The whole atmosphere at the station was one of sordid materialism:
"the word ivory rang in the ear, was whispered, was sighed. You would think they were praying to it. A tinct of imbecile rapacity blew through it all, like a whiff from some corpse." The devoted band of Eldorado Exploring Expedition were no explorers at all. Their talk was those of sordid buccaneers -- "It was reckless without hardihood, greedy without audacity and cruel without courage." They lacked even a modicum of foresight or of serious intention. They assumed the role of explorers, but had no idea about the rudiments of geographical exploration: "To tear treasure out of the bowels of the land was their desire, with no more moral purpose at the back of it than there is in burglar's breaking into a safe."

Conrad's corrosive irony can be seen in his designating the predatory Europeans as 'pilgrims'. The image of these pilgrims as gun-carrying traders becomes an apt metaphor for the tactics of colonialism which uses humanitarian platitudes to justify violent usurpation of other people's lands. The pilgrims go to Africa with weapons of war because they know that the

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28 Heart of Darkness, p.82.
29 Ibid., p.95.
30 Ibid.
natives will resist their intrusion and must be vanquished to bring them to submission.

The pilgrims not only conspire against the natives; they are also involved in a deep conspiracy and a fierce competition among themselves -- a competition to make for themselves a place in this highly lucrative trade of ivory. The doctor who showed a good deal of efficiency was not considered 'safe' by the manager. The manager was also deeply concerned about Kurtz. Kurtz seemed to him to have been motivated not by profit only but also by some higher ideals. He is full of anxiety because Kurtz did not conform to his idea of a white trader. The manager derides Kurtz's ideas of progress and humanity: "And the pestiferous absurdity of his talk", he bothered me enough when he was here." 31 To the manager, Kurtz's ideas and tendencies are positively detrimental to the interest of the company:

Each station should be like a beacon on the road towards better things, a centre for trade of course, but also for humanising, improving, instructing. Conceive you--that ass! And he wants to become the manager! 32

The doctor and Kurtz pose a threat to the manager's absolute sway over the place. He wants to hang

one of these 'for an example' so that he can go with
his exploitation unhindered. The only hitch in his way
is that the people brought for development work die too
quickly. "All sick, they die so quick, too, that I
haven't the time to send them out of the country --it's
incredible."33 Marlow who stealthily overhears the
conversation between the manager and his nephew is fi-
lled with disgust. The manager regards his labourers
and officers alike as mere tools for the furtherance
of profit and exploitation.

The Europeans greedily scrambling for ivory in Af-
rica are all hollow men. The chief accountant, tidy
to the point of fastidiousness, is called a "hairdres-
sser's dummy."34 In the land of man-made misery and
destitution, the accountant is an incongruity. He ha-
tes the natives because their tumult distracts him
from work. His unreflective devotion to work makes
him callous to human suffering. The manager, another
votary of work, "originated nothing" but "could keep
the routine going."35 Marlow wonders what sustains
such a man and says, "perhaps there was nothing within
him."36 He is never ill because, Marlow suspects, he
had no innards upon which the germs could catch. The

33 Heart of Darkness, p.99.
34 Ibid., p.73.
36 Ibid.
brickmaker never makes bricks and is called "a papier-mache Mephistopheles"\(^{37}\); he is the very image of banality and Marlow surmises that if he pokes his finger, he would find nothing but a little loose dirt. All these hollow men are suffering from death-in-life situations.

The character of Kurtz is the ultimate testimony to the corrupting influences of individual imperialism -- to both the natives and the Europeans alike. Writing in 1932, J.W. Beach adopted a wholly moral stance towards Kurtz:

Kurtz is a personal embodiment, a dramatization of all that Conrad felt of futility, degradation and horror in what the Europeans in Congo called 'progress', which meant the exploitation of the natives by every variety of cruelty and treachery known to greedy men.\(^{38}\)

A completely opposite view is taken by K.K. Ruthven who thinks of Kurtz as a hero. In an illuminating essay, "The Savage God: Conrad and Lawrence"\(^{39}\) he points out the way much twentieth century art is fascinated by primitivism. The new frontiers of knowledge supplied by Freudian psychology and Fraserian anthropology

\(^{37}\) Heart of Darkness, p.87.


extols the primitive qualities of consciousness. According to his view, *Heart of Darkness* is an attack on the effete and sterile values of western culture and a restoration of the wholeman Kurtz. However, as we follow Kurtz's advancement (or debasement), this view can not be sustained for a long time in the face of his continued rapacity and greed which are, in the scheme of the novel, particularly western vices.

There is no doubt that Kurtz begins as an emissary of science and progress. Imbued with the ideals of love and philanthropy, he came to Africa and wanted to campaign for them. He was appointed by the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs to study life and suggest ameliorative measures. He is a writer, musician, painter and political orator, apparently combining in himself the values of European culture. But when he reaches Africa and finds himself in a state of absolute freedom, something goes wrong with him. He shakes himself free from all restraints and becomes a law unto himself: "There was nothing either above or below him .... He has kicked himself loose of the earth .... he had kicked the very earth to pieces." Since there was no higher authority for Kurtz to be accountable to, his absolute liberty degenerated into absolute licentiousness.

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40 *Heart of Darkness*, p.158.
Kurtz's fault lies in his accepting for himself of a standard that denies human limitations and abandoning the discipline, the responsibilities and the requirements of the civilisation he came from. In carrying the imperialist exploitation to its furthest extreme, Kurtz demonstrates the absurdities of responsibilities and restraints which imperialism parades in public. The manager thinks that oppression and exploitation, carried with restraint and caution, makes for a sound method, which Kurtz rejects as "unsound". For Kurtz, any restraint is irrelevant. As the manager's uncle says, - with no higher authority to watch over one's activities, any action carries its own legitimisation. Ironically, the enlightened emissaries of imperialism, like Marlow's aunt, who want "weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways," are far away from the scene of exploitation and have little knowledge of the culture or the people they want to be civilised or the real nature of those they send out for the civilising work. S.Raval analyses the situation pertinently and points out the ambiguity in the role of these altruists:

Imperialism puts them in the service of goals they might have refused had they

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41 Heart of Darkness, p.137.
42 Ibid., p.63.
known the real nature of these goals. A characteristic Conradian insight here is that imperialism blinds those who serve its purpose to the real implications of their actions, so that ideals, seemingly altruistic, bring into being the practical realities of colonial exploitation.43

Kurtz's eloquent report to the International Society is a document, ironical in the extreme, exposing the grim reality behind his professed idealism. He starts the report with the excellent argument that the Whites must necessarily appear to the natives as supernatural beings; that they should approach them with the aspect of a deity. Only by raising themselves to a high pedestal to be worshipped by the natives can they fulfil their assumed role: "By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded."44 Kurtz's accustomed eloquence continues through seventeen pages of the report, touching on almost all the altruistic sentiments. But at the end of the report, comes the prescription, luminous and terrifying:
"Exterminate all the brutes!"45 Civilisation and progress, according to Kurtz, is possible only through the wholesale extermination of the natives. In other words, he becomes a serious advocate of the extermination of the people he had come to save. One of the striking

44 Heart of Darkness, p.129.
45 Ibid., p.130.
instances of irony in the narrative is the fact that the International Society appoints none other than Kur- tiz for the preparation of the report for its guidance. It demonstrates the kind of reputation Kurtz enjoyed in Europe. As Marlow says, "All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz." 46 

To Marlow, all colonialist experiences become one whole experience. The human exploitation which imperialism in Africa entailed reminds him of the conquest of Britain by the Romans and the voyages of Drakes and Franklins, "hunters for gold, or persuers of fame" 47, sailing from the light of England to the darkness of unknown seas, returning with the 'round flanks' of their ships bulging with treasure in the Elizabethan period. The same greed for power was at the root of those conquests and the application of brute forces characterised those too:

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 blind - as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness. 48

The conquerors bring with them their own darkness  

46 Heart of Darkness, p.117. 
47 Ibid., p.52. 
48 Ibid., p.53.
of ignorance, selfishness and recklessness. Secure in their superior power and shrewdness, the imperialists inflict untold sufferings on the natives who cannot but submit to the strange justice meted out to them. And all this is done in the name of making them more civilised, more humane. The painting by Kurtz - "A small sketch in oils, on a panel, representing a woman draped and blindfolded, carrying a lighted torch," has also this ominous implication. The torch is obviously the symbol of the light of knowledge against the darkness of ignorance. But the irony is that the torch-bearer herself is blindfolded having no concern to see what disaster her mission is leading her to. The rest of the painting is even more suggestive:

"The background is sombre - almost black. The movement of the woman was stately and the effect of the torch on the face was sinister." While marching against the sombre background of Africa, the civilisers may move with stately confidence, because they depend blindly on their own seemingly civilised values, on the lighted torch they carry with them. The effect of the torch on the face of the torch-bearer is sinister because what it ominously illuminates is not benevolence or sympathy but reckless cruelty and greed. Conrad rightly points out that these civilisers were no better

49 Heart of Darkness, p.79.
50 Ibid.
than racialist plunderers out to deprive the native people of their dignity and their treasures, because they have a "different complexion or slightly flatter noses from their own." Conrad directly condemned the rapacity of the Europeans in Africa as, "the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration."

The Russian, in his talk with Marlow tries make a clean breast of the enigma that Kurtz was. The recklessness with which Kurtz went about is amply demonstrated by the fact that, as a rule, he wandered alone, "far in the depth of the forest." The Russian also tells that Kurtz had discovered "lots of villages, a lake too", though he did not know in which direction it was situated and it was dangerous to make enquiries. But he is certain about one thing and that is - Kurtz's expeditions were conducted mostly for ivory. "But he had no goods to trade with by that time", asks Marlow. The Russian's answer to this query is immensely suggestive: "There is a lot of cartridges left even yet."

In other words, Kurtz raided the villages with firearms. He got the tribes to follow him. The natives

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53 Heart of Darkness, p.137.
54 Ibid., p.138.
55 Ibid., p.139.
had come to adore Kurtz. He had made full use of his superior intellectual gifts in making the natives believe that he was a god and was successful in getting their obedience and worship. Marlow was at his wit's end. He could not understand how a single man enslaves a whole community of tribal people. The Russian explains the mystery in the following way:

"He came to them with thunder and lightning, you know - and they had never seen anything like it - and very terrible. He could be very terrible. You can't judge Mr. Kurtz as you would an ordinary man."

Kurtz, in fact, was acting in accordance with his ideas propounded in his report for International Society for the Suppression of savage Customs. He succeeded in his assuming the role of a supernatural being and exercised unbounded influence on the natives. But even after becoming a virtual god, he could not give up his basic instincts of loot and plunder. His constant search was for more and more ivory. Ivory became a passion with him. The will to grab and possess got such a hold on him that even at the moment of death, we find his mind constantly thinking about them: "My ivory, my intended, my station, my river, my ...." Everything belonged to him. The irony, as Marlow points out, is

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56 Heart of Darkness, p.140.
57 Ibid., p.127.
that Kurtz did not realise what forces he belonged to, "how many powers of darkness claimed him for their own".⁵⁸

Kurtz was ready to shoot the Russian because of a small piece of ivory. This Russian was devoted to him and nursed him through several bouts of illness. Kurtz, being a god, had the absolute power to deal out this kind of instant justice, "because he could do so and had a fancy for it, and there was nothing on earth to prevent him killing whom he jolly well pleased."⁵⁹

In other words, he had the undisputed authority to give life to or take it from any one. He exercised this authority indiscriminately. He killed a good many of the natives. His 'unspeakable rites' involved the sacrifice of a human being and partaking of his flesh. He had decorated his house with a garland of human skulls.

The Russian tries to justify the action of Kurtz by saying that they were 'rebels'. Marlow could not help bursting out laughing at the commonness of the idea:

There had been enemies, criminals, workers - and these were rebels. Those rebellious heads looked very subdued to me on their sticks.⁶⁰

Kurtz's famous deathbed cry "The horror! The horror!"⁶¹ has created much confusion among readers and

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⁵⁸ Heart of Darkness, p.127.
⁵⁹ Ibid., p.128.
⁶⁰ Ibid., p.144.
⁶¹ Ibid., p.188.
critics. Lionell Trilling has expressed doubt about Marlow's interpretation that Kurtz was horrified to see, in a moment of epiphany, his abysmal degradation. Trilling says, "To me it is still ambiguous whether Kurtz's famous deathbed cry "The horror! The horror!" refers to the approach of death or to his experience of savage life." If we keep in mind the whole context of the exclamation, then our acceptance of the latter alternative becomes almost a reasonable certainty. Kurtz's horror is caused by the despair and disillusionment occasioned by the realisation at the moment of death of his 'fall'. For once Kurtz sheds all his deceptive pretensions and pronounces the "judgement upon the adventures of his soul on this earth." However, the important fact here is that the feeling of horror enunciated above extends from the mere personal to the universal. It extends to the cultural and political levels inasmuch as Kurtz's disintegration -- cultural, moral and otherwise, was necessitated by the demands of imperialism and political idealism, both of which are essentially products of western civilisation. The total mental vacuity of Kurtz becomes a powerful symbol of the spiritual attenuation and hollowness of the contemporary European civilisation. About two decades later, T.S. Eliot's selection of the phrase

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63 Heart of Darkness, p. 188.
"Mistah Kurtz - he dead", as the epigraph of *The Hollow Men* has added a fresh dimension to Kurtz's hollowness.

The cultural dimension in *Heart of Darkness* assumes utmost significance. We see the explorers and traders from Europe crowding in the Dark Continent. They undertook the voyage to Congo seeking to discover the savage communities and civilise them. Thus they were 'pilgrims'. Their voyage was a sacred voyage. But it is interesting to know how their values underwent a seachange when they stepped into Africa. Their mission went awry, they forgot all their professed values; they indulged in unmitigated savagery themselves.

It has already been pointed out that a good number of pilgrims made it for Congo for the purposes of trade and gain rather than for any less material purpose. Their search was for ivory, rubber and other cash crops. It is true that greed and lust for power are inherent in mankind. But this does not detract from the fact that all the pilgrims were Europeans and in their activities are shown the hollow sham those Europeans were, the enormous gap between their acts and their idealistic professions. As we have seen, without the imperialist conviction of his essential supremacy

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64 *Heart of Darkness*, p.188.
and without the means afforded by the colonial venture, Kurtz could not have become a ritual god. The culture which gave rise to imperialism and colonialism and displayed philanthropy and civilisation loses its bearings when it discovers its basis in the passions, when it sees its best emissary crawl on all fours to join some "unspeakable rites" that involve human sacrifice.

Marlow emphasises again and again the darkness of the African continent and by means of contrast it underlines the enlightenment of the white people who were making the pilgrimage. Going from Britain to Africa seemed like a journey from the modern age back to the beginning of history: "Going up that river was like travelling to the earliest beginnings of the world when vegetation rioted and the big trees were kings." The natives of Congo were living in pristine innocence and savagery when the white people first invaded them. The first Blacks seen by Marlow on his journey up the Congo had a wild and throbbing vitality: "They shouted, sang ... they had bones, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement, that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast." They wanted no excuse for being there in contrast to the pretensions of the

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65 Heart of Darkness, p.187.
66 Ibid., pp.92-3.
67 Ibid., p.65.
Europeans to civilise them. They were both surprised and fascinated when they saw steamships and firearms. When the ships blew the whistle, they used to flee away thinking the ships to be huge monsters out to devour them. The Europeans with their fair complexion, physical features and modern accessories of civilisation were so outside the pale of native experience that it was only natural that the natives came to regard them either as devils or gods. The Europeans did not try to undeceive them because that would have amounted to recognise them as equals and exposed their hypocrisy.

It is a debatable point whether the Europeans got corrupted because of the native surroundings or whether the corruption was inherent in the very motives of the Europeans which drove them to Africa. Some critics, including Guerard advance the theory of reversion to explain the metamorphosis. They argue that when the Europeans are let loose from a life of established rules and regulations, when they have no higher authority to be accountable to, the temptation of ignoring the rules is great. When they are exposed to primitive savagery, the desire to throw rules to the wind and indulge in irresponsible activities takes hold of them. Avrom Fleishman advocates the theory of 'going native'

which means that because of long exposure to the mores of native life, the Europeans came to be influenced by them unconsciously and inspite of themselves. He also shows that it is precisely the most destructive forces in native life which the primitivists acquired, rather than the positive and chivalric values that are to be found in some native societies.

These theories may have partial validity in explaining some of the aspects of the narrative. But if they are adopted to explain away the corruption of the Europeans, the effect will be disastrous. It will be tantamount to exonerating the European imperialist adventurers from the crimes of cruelty and irresponsibility and make the native people, who were the worst sufferers, responsible. These theories seem to suggest that the Europeans acted in defiance of all noble human values not because of the drive inherent in their own community but because they had been contaminated by their contact with the immense wilderness of the jungle and the savagery of the natives. It is only a travesty of truth, an excuse which the Great powers offer to rationalise their unlawful acts. The theory has great relevance in the present day politics too. The Great powers make every effort to justify the large-scale
devastation giving it the appearance of some legitimate form of self-defence.

The Belgian rulers in Congo tried their best to offer extenuating excuses 'for being there'. They tried to rationalise their cruelty giving it all the appearances of self-defence. Such barbarism and cruelty as they indulged in were, according to them, the prevalent and accepted code of conduct in the native societies. As a matter of fact, they were able to keep the whole civilised world befooled for a considerable period of time. The manager and his uncle reveal this fact in their talk too: "The danger is in Europe; but there before I left I took care to ..."70 Obviously they took all measures to stifle public opinion or revert it to their favour.

Thus, in Heart of Darkness, it is to the European traders-cum-explorers that Conrad shifts squarely the burden of responsibility. He made no bones about the fact that the degeneration and disintegration set in because of the errors committed by the Europeans -- 'errors of omission and commission'. No amount of polemics can justify their unwarranted exploitation and

70 Heart of Darkness, p.98.
acts of devastation. They did the greatest harm to the natives by destroying the primitive order of society without replacing it by an alternative one. The Belgians in Congo were in need of native labourers in places far away from where they were to be found. They frightened them into submission and took them away to the newly growing cities like Leopoldville and Elizabethville and thus created a rift between the newly created urban proletariat and their 'uncorrupted' brethren in the traditional society. The tribal chiefs found that the recruitment as labourers of their subjects by the Europeans would undermine their authority and they resented it. But they could not cope up with the superior might of the Europeans and were either subdued or extirpated. Eventually, the tribal structure of society totally broke down: "Unfortunately the destruction of the chiefly system had been so complete that by 1917 the Belgian officials stood face to face with a native rabble."\textsuperscript{71}

As late as 1958, when the Belgians thought of going back to the old system of tribal chiefs and wanted to delay independence, they were pathetically late.

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