

## A Critical Scrutiny on Moral Corruption in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: "The Horror! The Horror!"

**Mohammad Minhazul Islam**

Department of English

Bangladesh University of Professionals, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Email: [2015931054@student.bup.edu.bd](mailto:2015931054@student.bup.edu.bd)

Roll Number: 2015931054

### Abstract

#### Keywords

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This Paper aims to draw a Critical Study on Moral Corruption in the novella *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad where Kurtz goes to Congo to civilize the locals. However, he rises to the position of top agent for the business, helping to export ivory and steal the riches of the natives. He uses crooked methods to punish people who disagree with him and elevate himself to deity status in the process. Marlow observes numerous little agents engaging in the same activities at the other locations. Besides this, it examines the imperialistic attitude and greed of the colonizers who were responsible for moral degradation against the African people based on economic, cultural, political, and social intervention. The study employed a qualitative research method and an unstructured form of inquiry. This work was created in an exploratory and descriptive approach. The world could have been a better place if there was no imperialism and materialistic outlook at all, which are the clear findings of this work. Therefore, this paper allows an interdisciplinary as well as integrated understanding related to queer perspectives and its demonstration of Greed, Imperialism, and Horror of Evilness along with Darkness in Kurtz due to Moral Corruption.

### 1. Introduction

*Heart of Darkness*, Conrad's tale on moral corruption, was initially published in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1899 as a three-part series. It was further expanded into a novella and released in 1902. It is renowned for having a framing story,

or a story inside a story. It is an action-packed tale told from the viewpoint of Marlow, a seasoned sea captain who accepted a fresh exploratory voyage. However, delving into the story's depth will reveal the vastest and darkest region of the human heart as it is portrayed in the characters.

A good example of someone who has been morally and socially perverted is Kurtz. He began as an idealist, who was eager to provide a hand to Africans in need, but after a year he revealed himself to be a different guy; he turned out to be colonial and exploited the Africans he had at first intended to help. The narrative makes it clear that these developments have as much to do with the roots of Western colonialism as they do with the depravity of a single man. Western culture is self-centered when compared to the cultural orientation of other parts of the world. Along with this, there is the idea that there is no evidence that one race is superior to others. There is no such thing as a superior race; instead, this is a false standard that had spread like cancer into many peoples' heads, as in Kurtz's case. Kurtz's moral and social standing were damaged because of the delusions he allowed himself to believe. The *Hollow Men* is a poem by T.S. Elliot (1925). The article is extremely pertinent to the problem of moral and societal corruption.

"This is how the world will end."  
This is how the world will end.  
This is how the world will end.  
Instead of boom, thus a sigh"

Here, the final line suggests the degree of brutality a man with a darkened heart and mind can commit toward his fellow humans. For the sake of power and personal fulfillment, one can find a means to wipe off humanity with his or her own hands.

## Background of the Study

Many works had been done previously based on racism and colonialism in *Heart of Darkness*, but any critical work projecting Moral Corruption through Imperialism and Greed had not been done yet fruitfully.

This research paper examines Conrad's depictions of morally reprehensible characters in detail. We can associate moral decay with the materialistic mentality of power and dominance, according to several views of globalization. The novel's

revisionist anthropological findings will aid in the redefinition of the western project of modernity.

## Literature Review

Many important works were taking place previously and many are going on.

Zohreh T. Sullivan demonstrate the moral conflict of the westerners in name of civilizing the Africans and the darkness of their heart comparing the two text *Heart of Darkness* and *The Good Soldier*. (1976)

Nursel Icoz depicts Vagueness of Colonizers through economic and moral corruption. Further, it analyzes the pursuit of material interest of westerners reflecting the social disorders and ideological conflict contrasting these two texts *Heart of Darkness* and *NOSTROMO*. (2005)

Cedric illustrates notions of physical ill-health and moral fluctuation of the central fictional character in *Dracula* and *Heart of Darkness*. Morally, they had become corrupted by the opportunities for depravity that arose in that wild.(2012)

“WAUGH’S ‘HEART OF DARKNESS’” by EARL F. BARGAINNIER investigate the brutal and corrupt civilization. It also explores the morally corrupt London society of *A Handful of Dust* or the materialistic and ethically corrupt African trading company in *Heart of Darkness*. (1976)

Siba Grovogui has narrated the failure of postwar U.S. and European operations in the continent, including aid, has been attributed to "African dysfunctions," such as political violence and instability, tyranny and authoritarianism, state failure and civil conflicts. It focuses on the denial of the relational dynamics and historical variables that give the African predicament context and meaning.(2012)

In Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Dr. Fethi Haddouche studies several facets of moral

corruption and degeneration in relation to the management of the Belgian empire in Africa.

Thomson interprets the actions and character arcs, therefore it's critical to draw from his knowledge of human nature and real-world experience. (1986)

Benita Parry compares the title *Heart of Darkness* as the Heart of Africa. This Heart of Evil is nihilistic, corrupted and expedition carrying its freight to moral darkness. (2005)

'HEART OF DARKNESS' AND 'ALLAN QUATERMAIN': APOCALYPSE AND UTOPIA." by Linda Dryden, point out the catastrophe and utopia by reviewing these two texts. (1999)

"*Heart of Darkness*" by Cedric Watts provided a mystification of racism in addition to that of corruption. This book shows morality of westerners no longer seems to bear guaranteed validity. (2008)

## Research Gap

From the literature review, it was seen that many works had been done comparing political violence, instability, dictatorship, and authoritarianism of colonizers in *Heart of Darkness* with other texts. But the lust of Westerners and ethically corrupt African Trading Company; due to imperialism reflected through Kurtz's Horror was not shown yet prolifically.

## Problem Statement

Imperialism and moral decay in *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad are the main issues this study focuses on. In a historical context that might be interpreted as having a connection to "imperialism," it examines the issue of "domination and inequities of power and wealth." (Said 20). It focuses exclusively on the texts in which Kurtz loses control of his actual purpose and transforms into a shrewd businessman who utilizes dishonesty as a technique.

## Significance of the Study

This research is aimed at the connections between imperialism and moral degradation in *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad. This study examines Conrad's portrayal of morally corrupt individuals whose materialistic attitude is controlled by greed for wealth and vividly reveals their lack of moral integrity and spiritual strength. The paper also explores the connection between this moral issue and imperialism and discusses about Conrad's perspective on European imperialism.

## Research Questions

This paper attempted to achieve its goals by answering the following specific research questions:

1. How does the colonizers delineate the immorality through greed?
2. How Conrad projects the evil repercussions of imperial mastery?
3. What does the term "The Horror! The Horror!" signifies?

## Research Objectives

The general objective of this paper is to make a critical study of the Moral Corruption represented in the novella *Heart of Darkness* and the Specific objectives are:

1. To scrutinize the Greed responsible for moral degradation in *Heart of Darkness*.
2. To identify the imperialistic attitudes which foreshadow moral degeneration.
3. To examine the literary sense of "The Horror! The Horror".

## Theoretical Framework

Collin Sparks in "Globalization, Development and the Mass Media" have shown this framework of Imperialist power where direct control of Colonizers is invaded by Military, Political and Economical intervention, and indirect control is practiced by Technology, Language, Programme, and Commerce.

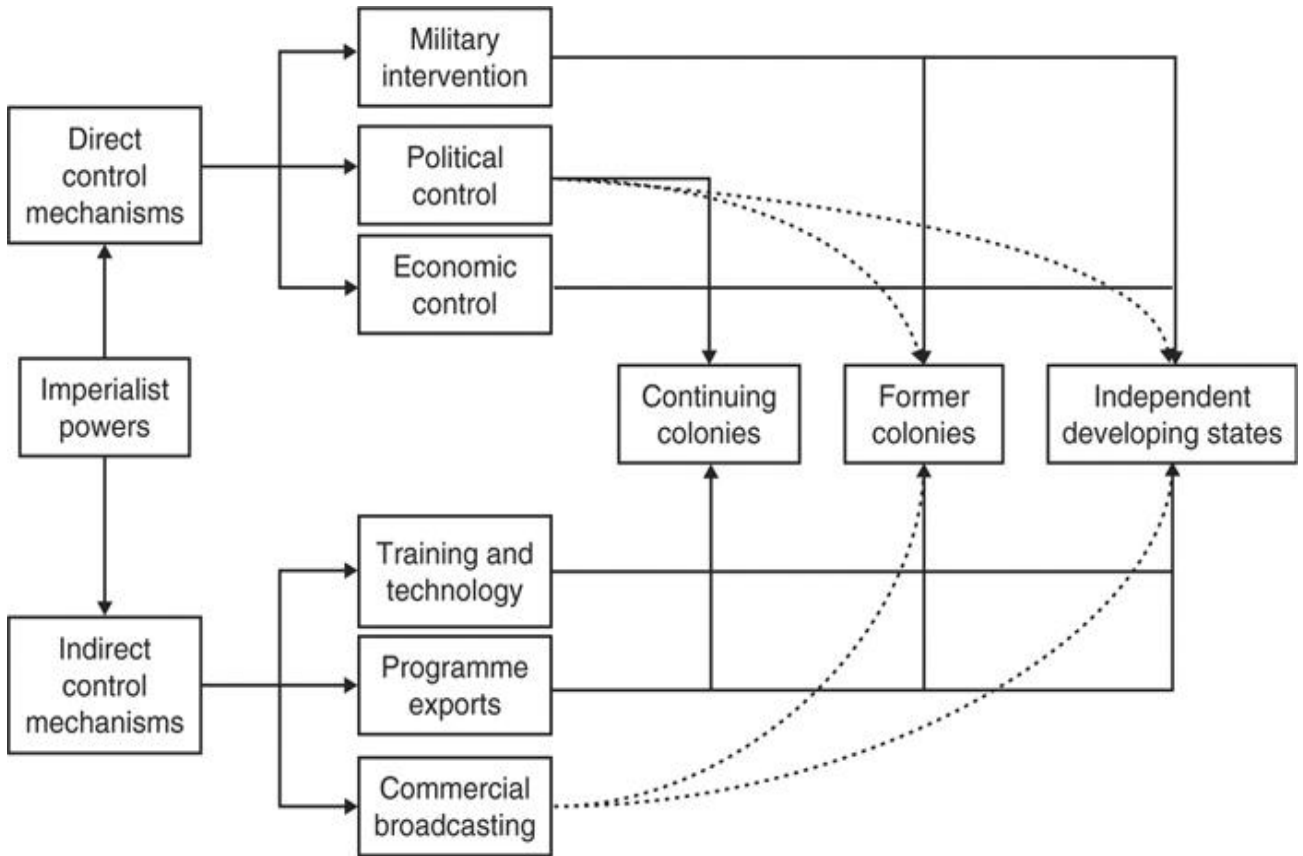


Figure: Imperialist Powers

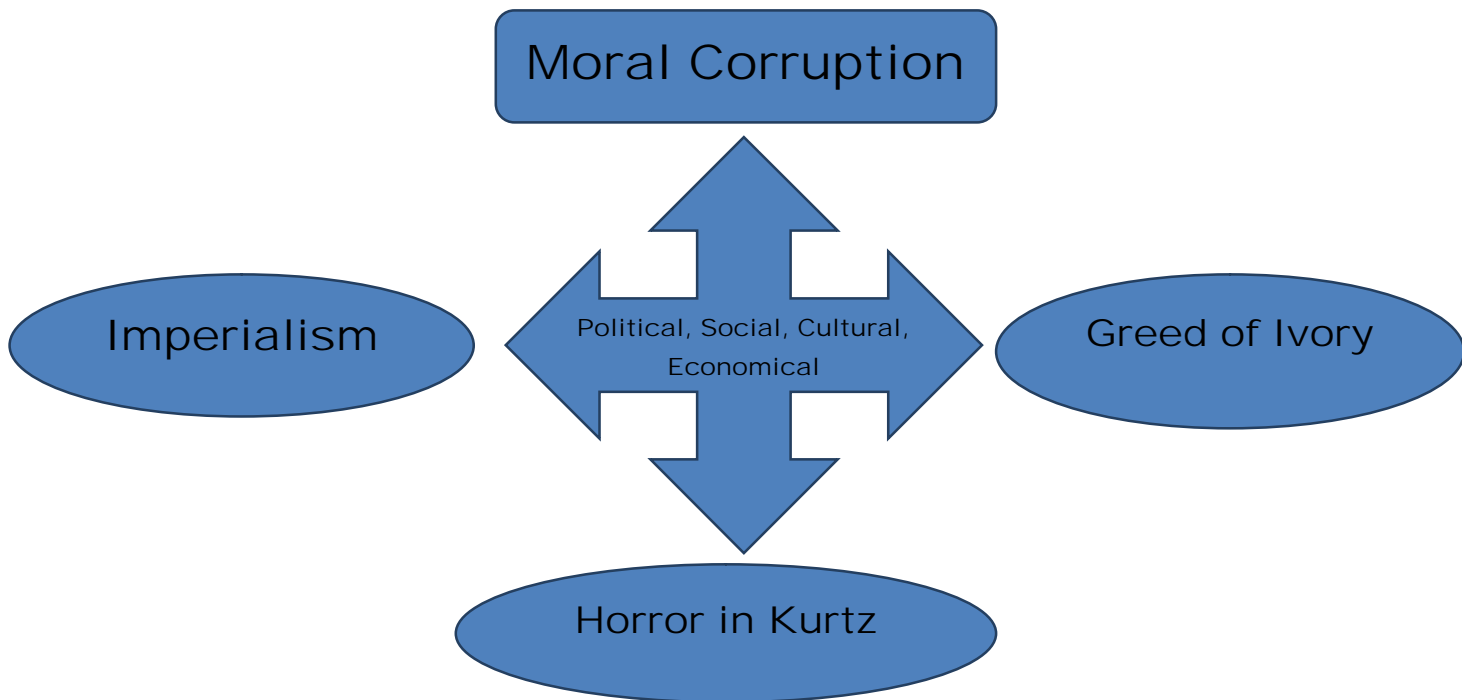


Figure: Theoretical Framework of this paper

This paper shows the Moral Corruption of Colonizers due to Imperialistic attitude and Greed which is further reflected by the inner darkness and Horror of the central character Kurtz on his deathbed. Political, Social, Cultural and Economical dominance are correlated in this research work to demonstrate the moral degradation of Westerners over the Africans.

## Research Methodology

This study has been conducted using qualitative research and exploratory method where all information and data has been collected from secondary sources. Secondary data, and information collected from various books, journals, and articles helped to detect the Moral Corruption in *Heart of Darkness*.

## 2. Discussion

Morality is a major theme in Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad wants to cause moral confusion by utilizing morality. Charlie Marlow, the main character, travels to Africa as part of the European Ivory Trade. On this journey, he comes into a perilous moral conundrum. After succumbing to imperialism and greed, Marlow discovers for himself how easy it is to lose one's humanity in the absence of a structured society of civilization.

### 2.1 Moral Corruption due to Greed in *Heart of Darkness*

In this novella, morality is abandoned in large part due to greed. In this tale, ivory represents greed and evil. The white European males travel to Africa not only in search of ivory but also for power. Kurtz, a character from the tale, obtained more ivory than the other stations combined. He became a robber and a killer due to his power and greed. He felt as though all his greed had overcome him "my intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my everything belonged to him." (Conrad, 1999). Ivory rules the characters in the book's actions; "You would think they were praying to it" (Conrad, 1999). The colonists'

moral principles are destroyed by greed, and they stop caring about the harm they are causing to the natives in favor of solely thinking about how to make money.

They have shamelessly prioritized their own interests and fortune over the health and humanity of others they want to exploit. It was believed by Conrad, "behavior is effectively structured and censored by the policing mechanisms of civilization." (Brown, 2000). Their rigorous morals and beliefs were based in Europe, but greed has destroyed them.

Although, Europeans entered Africa with the intention of civilizing the locals, they instead colonized the continent and corrupted the inhabitants. Imperialism led to the victimization of the Congo. To "ontologize themselves as God's chosen people and to ontologize the non-selected other as sub-human," they were "building epistemic supremacy." (Lackey, 2005). *Heart of Darkness's* portrayal of imperialism, however, places more emphasis on what it does to Europeans than it does to the people it colonizes, "perverting the West's vision of itself as the bearer of light and civilization." (Brown, 2000). Imperialism ruins Europeans by detaching them from civilization and their values, leading them into violent, irrational behavior. Exploratory life-like "cold, fog, tempests, disease, exile, and death - death skulking in the air, in the water, in the jungle" poses several risks. (Conrad, 1999).

The main moral conundrum in this novella is the lack of a solid moral framework with a guiding central authority. The white colonists take their morality with them when they depart from Europe and its established society. When a society's behavioral norms are disregarded, people frequently act like savages to achieve power and money. If the colonialist becomes overcome by darkness, as Kurtz did, it is because of close contact with the wild, lawless nature, which awakens a quality that was before dormant and hidden deep within him. (Brown, 2000). Due to his prolonged isolation from society, Kurtz loses his sense of self and permits himself to be adored

as a deity. He can no longer completely express his humanity as a result, and nature continues. The wicked wilderness, which has "consumed his flesh" and "locked his soul," has caused him to grow "impressively bald." (Conrad, 1999). Being cut off from the rest of humanity has caused him to lose both the physical and spiritual aspects of what it means to be a human, leaving him "empty at the heart." (Conrad, 1999)

When they left civilization, the Europeans were exposed to imperialism, avarice, and the worst sides of human nature. As a result of everything, morality was disregarded. I think Conrad intended for Heart of Darkness to do that. When someone is removed from that "safe zone," they transform into savages and almost entirely lose any moral sense, he argued, showing that morality is only an imagined set of norms constructed by civilization. About a year before Conrad completed the novella, Conrad says: "There is no morality, no knowledge, and no hope; there is only the consciousness of ourselves which drives us about a world that whether seen in a convex or a concave mirror is always but a vain and fleeting appearance" (Lackey, 2005).

## 2.2 Imperialism responsible for Moral degeneration

The term "imperialism" in the modern sense refers to a historical process. It has been linked to politics during the 20th century. It carries a bad moral implication. It has been associated with progress and seen as a crucial stage in human growth, which has led to Europe's dominance in the globe and the eradication of other cultures' traditional ways of life.

"Imperialism describes both a historical process and an abstract concept or category of understanding. It synthesizes various histories and practices that developed over several hundred years and resulted in Europe's global domination by the penetration and spread of the capitalist system into non-capitalist or primitive capitalist areas of the world." (Collits, 2006).

Imperialism and colonialism have a connection to one another. Colonialism led to imperialism, which is the ultimate form of colonialism that may be attained through the imposition of economic, social, and political reliance that guarantees both the labor force and the market for European industry and goods. Even without any direct governmental authority, it is possible. This imperial process is unaffected by political changes. It is founded on financial exploitation.

For instance, the United States engages in this type of imperialism since it has great economic, and military might globally without exerting any actual political authority.

Conrad's most sophisticated novella, Heart of Darkness, tells a masterful fictional story of the horrific extortion unleashed by the empire under the pretext of progress. In the book, a journey into the Congo, deep inside Africa, and into human nature is described. It tells the tale of Kurtz, an idealistic journalist who uses his eloquence to corrupt both himself and others. Kurtz travels to the Democratic Republic of the Congo to learn about the natives' conditions of living and offer solutions. His plan is to publish a book on his discoveries, but when he gets to Congo, he discovers that the region is ripe with business opportunities. He disregards his duty and turns into a ruthless white lord who exploits the abundant resources by importing elephant tusks and subjugates the natives. He ultimately completely disregards his former objective, becomes dangerously ill, and passes away while traveling back to Europe. The novel is intimately related to "the waste and horror, of Europe's mission in the dark globe," according to Edward Said. (Said, 1994).

The narrator of the book, Marlow, makes us to believe that the Africans are powerless against imperialism and its accompanying vices, such as avarice, which cause moral decay. Marlow hammers home the severity of white imperialism's ruthlessness as well as the reality and truth found in the Congo's dense jungles and among its people. Conrad's work depicts the dreadful

impacts of imperial hegemony, including those of white Europeans over black Africans, their ivory, and that of western dominance over the undeveloped continent. As Conrad says:

“The conquest of the earth, which mostly means taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than us, is not a pretty thing when you investigate it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretense but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea- something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to....” (Conrad, 1999).

Kurtz, the protagonist of the book, is a metaphor for contemporary European society in general and everything that is wrong with it. Kurtz had received some of his education in England. He has influences from all of Europe because he has a combination of French, English, and German ancestry. He is a symbol of the flaws in European culture, specifically the lack of "discipline" in its quest for worldly wealth. His is a prime illustration of the moral degradation of a highly educated and idealistic Westerner who easily gives in to the temptations of political authority and wealth attained by exploitation of the poor and subservient indigenous. According to Raymond Williams,

“Congo is a world of darkness of many kinds, that this voyage explores, but among these kinds is the reality of colonial exploitation, the ambiguity of the civilizing mission into Africa-the reality of the criminality- of inefficiency and pure selfishness when tackling the civilizing work in Africa.” (Williams, 1970).

Williams was right when she said that Kurtz and Marlow's travels touch on the ambiguity of Kurtz's "civilizing mission" that sends him to the Congo as well as the reality of colonial exploitation. The immorality, incompetence, and selfishness of the civilized heroes, he continues, explain the protagonist's moral decline among the many different sorts of darkness that pervade the Congo.

### 2.3 Literary Analysis of ‘Horror’

The phrase can be found in "Heart of Darkness," a short story by Joseph Conrad. When Kurtz states in part three of the story, "The horror! The horror," he is making his final judgment on his own life, his own actions, and more broadly on humanity and imperialism. Kurtz also calls attention to his fate in this line, which appears to have been greatly influenced by the circumstances of his life in the Congo. Many academics disagree on the definition of this phrase. It alludes to the horror Kurtz perceives in Africa, yet the horror could also relate to human depravity, exploitation of Africa, his failing sanity, or a delusion of perception and hope. It simply explains the actions taken by the West during colonialism in the name of progress and under the guise of integrating the native populations into the modern world. Kurtz has consequently accepted the terrible reality of his existence since when he dies, darkness reigns, symbolizing the wickedness of his crimes. As Kurtz's closing remarks, this passage can be found in Conrad's short story "Heart of Darkness." Marlowe describes his last words as follows:

"I have never seen anything close to the shift that swept over his features, and I certainly don't expect to ever see it again. He shouted out twice in a whisper at a vision or an image—his cries were hardly audible breaths—and said, "The horror! "The horror!"(Conrad, 1999)

Kurtz becomes corrupt upon his arrival in Africa and declares, "Exterminate all the brutes!" In this line, he refers to the atrocities that he and his friends committed in Africa under the guise of advancement and civilization. He created rituals befitting of a monster or a tyrant and convinced the local Africans to revere and worship him. Kurtz has had time to reflect on his life, which is practically unfolding before his eyes at that same moment, by the time the book comes to a close. This allows readers to consider the significance of "the horror."

When Marlowe and Kurtz return to London and re-enter "civilization" after leaving Africa, the narrative comes to an end. On his yacht, Kurtz, who is not in excellent physical or mental health, is dying. He knows that he is about to die, so he says these profoundly meaningful parting words. He actually makes reference to what he experienced while in the Congo.

Through Marlowe's eyes, it recounts the brutality and experiences of Europeans. Additionally, it captures the sentiments and inherent evils that permeate the hearts of civilized people. Due of their hostility, they become unaware of their surroundings. Additionally, Kurtz's eventual demise was brought on by the horrible deeds he committed while working for the European Company in the Congo. This phrase represents Kurtz's frightened response and horrified outburst in response to seeing the wicked deeds and moral depravity of Europeans toward Africans.

### **Findings**

According to Conrad, imperialism has caused significant harm to the world. If there had been no imperialism at all, it could have been a better place. Conrad believes that the achievements made by the supposedly primitive tribes in their jungle are no different from those made by the imperial powers using their economic might, military force, and interstate struggle for the imperial enterprise. The growing commercial competition between the different industrialized countries in the last decades of the nineteenth century had an impact on Conrad's thoughts on imperialism. Regardless of their ethnicity, country, color, or other characteristics, all men appear to strive for financial success. Conrad depicts Kurtz's moral decline in *Heart of Darkness*; Kurtz is the result of this moral decline.

### **Recommendations**

If there was enough time, the research could be done in more depth. The colonialism in *Heart of Darkness* can be represented through further critical notions. Additionally, with more research, the concept of racism can be connected to this work.

### **3. Conclusion**

Although there is no immediate indication of an intent in constructing an empire at the beginning of *Heart of Darkness*, Kurtz, the protagonist, sets off on his noble quest to better the Congolese. He is however motivated by a desire to dominate, terrify, and force the Congolese to exercise political control over them and seize money through the sale of tusks for himself because he is a product of European imperialistic culture and education. Kurtz has given up on his previous, incredibly charitable aim in favor of this materialistic greed, and desire for riches and power. His steady degradation of ethical and moral values might be seen as abandoning a worthwhile goal.

In a way, the novel depicts Kurtz's moral decline throughout the course of the story, as seen by his final remarks, "The horror! The horror!" (Conrad, 1999). Other characters, like the Russians, also experience this. In this regard, we can contend that since European imperialism is characterized by an unquenchable need for power and wealth through the exploitation of the native population, it is the root cause of materialistic greed and immorality. In *Heart of Darkness*, these two forces lead Kurtz and other characters to lose sight of their admirable objectives and rule the Congolese.



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