

Sciences et sociétés



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Violence and Cruelty in *Heart of Darkness* (1973) by Joseph Conrad

La Violence et la Cruauté dans Heart of Darkness (1973) de Joseph Conrad

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Abstract: This study investigates themes of violence and cruelty in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. It raises the issue of how the absence of laws and the descent into moral chaos reveal the darkest facets of human nature. This work aims to analyse Conrad's portrayal of violence used by the European Imperialism in Congo, and how their brutality reveals the cruelty in human psyche. To reach this goal, Freud's Psychoanalytic approach, based on his id, ego, and superego concepts has guided us in characters' criticism. Besides, the Marxist theory, focusing on Base and Superstructure, has been adopted for a revisitation of how the economic exploitation of Imperialism is achieved. In terms of findings, we realise that the exploitation of resources like ivory, has led to the psychological destruction of some characters including Kurtz, indicating how the economic exploitation and human unconsciousness are mutually reinforced strategies.

Keywords: Violence, Cruelty, darkness, Imperialism, Unconsciousness.

Résumé : Cette étude examine les concepts de violence et de cruauté dans le roman *Heart of Darkness* de Joseph Conrad. Elle cherche à élucider comment l'absence des lois et le chaos moral, puissent révéler des facettes les plus sombres de la nature humaine. Ce travail vise à analyser la violence dépeinte par Conrad, et dont a fait preuve l'Impérialisme Européenne sur le Congo, et à faire ressortir comment ces actes ont pu révéler la cruauté cachée dans la nature humaine. Pour y arriver, l'approche psychanalytique de Freud, mobilisant ses concepts du ça, du moi, et du surmoi, a permis d'analyser quelques personnages dont Kurtz. Ensuite, la théorie Marxiste, s'appuyant sur Base et Superstructure, a été adoptée pour une relecture de la stratégie économique mise sur pieds par l'Impérialisme Européenne sur le Congo. Les résultats attendus ont révélé que l'exploitation des ressources comme l'ivoire a conduit à la destruction psychologique de certains personnages dont Kurtz, indiquant comment l'exploitation économique rime avec l'inconscience humaine en vue de l'atteinte des objectifs.

Mots-clé: Violence, Cruauté, obscurité, Impérialisme, inconscience.

Introduction

Violence and cruelty are among the most persistent and destroying forces in human history, deeply rooted in systems of power, domination, and exploitation. In the context of European colonialism, these phenomena took on systemic forms, institutionalised through racial hierarchies, forced labour, and the subordination of colonised peoples. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1973) stands as one of the most powerful literary commitments with these realities, offering a critique of European imperialism through a harrowing journey into the Congo Free State under Belgian colonial rule. Written at the height of colonialism, the novella depicts the psychological, moral, and socio-economic dimensions of imperial violence with unsettling clarity (Conrad, 1973, pp. 23). Its enduring relevance to postcolonial studies, literary criticism, and ethical debates about colonialism justifies renewed scholarly attention.

Scholarly commitment with Conrad's novella has been rich and varied. From a postcolonial standpoint, Achebe (1977, p. 788) famously challenged Conrad's representation of Africans as dehumanising, while Said (1993, p. 25) situated the text within broader patterns

of imperial rhetoric that rely on violence to justify domination. Psychoanalytically, Smith (2025, p. 42) reads Kurtz's descent as a manifestation of the id's uncontrolled desire, while Giroux (2024, p. 12) frames imperial violence as a systematic destruction of both land and bodies. From a Marxist perspective, Johnson (2023, p. 38) argues that the capitalist drive for ivory reflects a deeper economic imperative that legitimises ideological and political violence. However, despite this extensive scholarship, few studies have systematically combined Freudian psychoanalysis with Marxist socio-economic theory to reveal how psychological destruction and economic exploitation mutually reinforce each other in the novella. This gap constitutes the scientific problem this study seeks to address.

This study therefore raises the following research question: how does Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* reveal the interconnection between psychological forces and economic structures in the perpetuation of violence and cruelty under European imperialism? More specifically, how does the absence of legal and moral constraints expose the darkest facets of human nature, and how do psychoanalytic and Marxist frameworks illuminate this dynamic?

The objective of this study is to analyse Conrad's portrayal of violence and cruelty in *Heart of Darkness* by examining how psychological disintegration and economic exploitation interact as mutually reinforcing mechanisms of imperial domination. It also aims to assess how Conrad's denunciation of imperialism remains relevant to contemporary discussions on colonialism, human rights, and the roots of systemic violence.

The primary corpus of this study is Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness*, based on the 1973 Penguin edition (Conrad, 1973). This edition is selected for its wide critical accessibility and its status as a standard reference in anglophone literary studies. The novella is chosen because it is directly concerned with themes of colonial violence, psychological collapse, and moral ambiguity, making it an ideal literary text for a combined psychoanalytic and Marxist analysis. Supporting sources include critical works by Freud (1962), Marx (1859), Said (1993), Achebe (1977), and recent scholarship by Giroux (2024), Smith (2025), Johnson (2023), and Taylor (2024).

Methodologically, this study adopts a qualitative and textual approach. Key passages from the novella are selected and analysed through two complementary theoretical frameworks. Freud's psychoanalytic model, specifically the concepts of the id, ego, and superego, is applied to examine characters' psychological trajectories and the unconscious drives underlying their violent behaviour (Freud, 1962, pp. 25, 28, 30). Marx's theory of base and superstructure (1859, p. 63) provides the socio-economic lens through which the novella's colonial exploitation is interpreted. These two frameworks are justified by their complementarity: Freud illuminates the internal psychological dimension of violence, while Marx contextualises it within the material conditions of capitalist imperialism. The study's main limitation is the restriction of the corpus to a single literary text, which constrains the generalisability of conclusions.

This work is organised as follows: Section 1 presents the Historical and Socio-Political Contexts of Violence and Cruelty, followed by the Theoretical Frameworks in section 2. The section 3 displays the literature review, and the Section 4, presents the main findings of the study. Section 5 moves from fictional representation to historical realities, proposing strategies for peace promotion, and a conclusion closes the discussion.

1. Historical and Socio-Political Contexts of Violence and Cruelty

Violence and cruelty have long been agents shaping human history, taking many forms such as wars, political domination, social oppression, and cultural subjugation. Particularly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, European colonialism institutionalised these violent practices in Africa. Systems of forced labour, brutal punishments, and mass killings were deployed systematically as tools of colonial domination and economic exploitation.

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* reflects and criticises these realities by offering vivid depictions of cruelty that mirror the exploitative and often brutal nature of the colonial project.

The novella emphasises that colonialism not only exploits African land and populations but also morally corrupts both the colonised and the colonisers. Conrad's narrative situates these representations within the broader socio-political dynamics of European imperial expansion, revealing how imperial ideology normalises domination and violence while masking its human consequences (Conrad, 1899; Said, 1993, p. 26). This context is crucial for understanding the forms and justifications of violence that lead to the narrative. The novella displays the physical atrocities and psychological coercion within a historical framework where power, greed, and racial ideology intersected to sustain imperial control, thus making reading the novella an opportunity to reflect on historical legacies that continue to resonate today. In fact, in which historical context can we locate the novella?

1.1. Historical Context of *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad

Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad was written in the late 19th century, a period marked by intense European imperial expansion known as the "Scramble for Africa." This historical context deeply influenced the novella's themes and setting. The Congo Free State, controlled personally by King Leopold II of Belgium, was notorious for brutal exploitation and atrocities committed against the indigenous population to extract ivory and rubber. Conrad's experience as a steamship captain on the Congo River in 1890 inspired much of his depiction of imperialism's violence and moral corruption (Conrad). The novella was first published in 1899, amid growing European debates about the legitimacy and ethics of colonial rule. It reflects both contemporary imperialist attitudes and early critical perspectives questioning the dehumanising effects of colonisation on both the colonised and the coloniser (Hawkins, 1979, p. 4). Conrad's realistic yet symbolic narrative puts in question the hypocrisy behind the "civilising mission" and reveals the dark psychological toll of imperialism. This context locates *Heart of Darkness* within the exploitative imperialist history of the Congo Free State and the larger European colonial enterprise, grounding literary analysis in historical realities. Now, what can be the impact of Conrad's life on the novella?

1.2. Joseph Conrad's Life Experience and its Impact on his *Heart of Darkness*

Joseph Conrad's life experience had a profound influence on his novella *Heart of Darkness*, particularly his time in Congo. In 1890, Conrad took up an assignment with a Belgian trading company as a steamboat captain on the Congo River, part of the Congo Free State, which was controlled by Belgium's King Leopold II. During this journey, Conrad witnessed firsthand the brutal realities of European colonialism in Africa, including exploitation, violence, greed, and moral depravity inflicted on the native population. His experience in the Congo deeply leads to the themes and narrative of *Heart of Darkness*. The novella's protagonist, Marlow, mirrors Conrad's own role as a steamboat captain navigating the Congo River. As Marlow travels deeper into the jungle, he confronts not only the geographic wilderness but also the psychological and moral darkness engendered by imperialism. The story reveals the hypocrisy of the civilising mission with its underlying greed and cruelty, symbolised by the figure of Kurtz, an ivory trader whose descent into madness represents the moral decay of European colonialism. Conrad's narrative also explores the ambiguous boundary between civilisation and savagery, drawing on his observations of the Congo's harsh colonial environment. His writing communicates his disillusionment with the imperialist project and a deep reflection on human nature and ethical ambiguity. The novella serves both as a denunciation of imperialism and a psychological journey into the darkness within humanity, inspired directly by Conrad's real-life Congo experiences. For Conrad, how does he perceive imperialism?

1.3. Joseph Conrad and his Philosophy of Imperialism

Joseph Conrad's philosophy of imperialism, particularly expressed in *Heart of Darkness*, is deeply critical and complex. Conrad condemns imperialism in all its forms, like efficient or wasteful, benevolent or malevolent, British or non-British, showing its exploitative and destructive nature. He distinguishes between "conquerors" who selfishly exploit colonies and "colonists" who adhere to an "idea" or a higher moral commitment to civilisation, though he remains sceptical about whether such an idea can redeem imperialism. Conrad's narrative shows imperialism as a façade for selfishness and brutality, especially illustrated by characters such as Kurtz who symbolise the corruption and savagery underlying imperial venture. He denounces the hypocrisy of imperialist rhetoric about "civilising missions," exposing the exploitation and inhumanity particularly in Congo. While he at times appears to see British imperialism as less harsh compared to others, his opposition remains fundamentally against all colonial domination for its inherent violence and moral bankruptcy. His fiction reflects the ambiguities, contradictions, and moral dilemmas of imperialism, often revealing its dark psychological and metaphysical impacts.

2. Research Methodology

Qualitative and textual analysis is adopted in this study. It enables us to collect data from reading of the novella, by pointing out key passages that portray evidences of violence and moral malpractices hidden in human soul. This will be possible thanks to the application of psychoanalytic and Marxist theoretical frameworks to guide the analysis. Through these approaches, the study examines character psychology, narrative structure, and thematic elements to interpret how Conrad represents the relationship between economic exploitation, psychological collapse, and brutality.

2.1. The Psychoanalytic Approach

The psychoanalytic approach, based on Freud's foundational theories, examines unconscious desires and conflicts that reflect character behaviour and narrative themes. This method uses concepts such as the id, ego, and superego to analyse psychological tension and repression in literary texts. Clarifying and applying these concepts in this work, allow me to resort to Freud's definitions. He considers the id, representing the primal, instinct-driven part of the mind seeking immediate gratification without concern for reality or morality (Freud, 1962, p. 25). In *Heart of Darkness*, the character Kurtz illustrates this when he succumbs to unchecked desires, as Conrad notes,

"You can't judge Mr. Kurtz as you would an ordinary man" (Conrad, 1973 p. 135). As for the ego, it acts as a rational mediator balancing the id's impulses with reality, controlling and regulating urges (Freud 30). In the novel, Marlow embodies this part, attempting to negotiate imperial realities: "I ventured to hint that the Company was run for profit" (Conrad, 1973, p. 77). Dealing with the superego, it embodies internalised moral values that inhibit the id, functioning as conscience (Freud, 1962, p. 28). Marlow's moral judgments reflect this internalised denunciation of imperial brutality. Together, these three parts interact constantly: the ego balances the id's desires with the superego's moral standards within a realistic social context. Psychological conflict arises when balance is disrupted, affecting personality and behaviour. Having explained this approach, what about the Marxist one?

2.2. The Marxist Approach to the Study

The Marxist approach in this context examines how material economic conditions impact social and cultural structures, showing the relationship between the economic base and

the superstructure. According to Marx, the base (or substructure) comprises the means of production and relations of production and the economic foundation of society. As for the superstructure, it consists of the legal, political, cultural, and ideological institutions and practices built upon this economic base (Marx, 1859, p. 63). In the context of *Heart of Darkness*, the capitalist exploitation of Congo's ivory resources forms the economic base that reinforces and constructs the imperialist superstructure, which is represented by colonial authority, ideology, and cultural justifications for domination. Marx states, "The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general" (Marx, 1859, p. 67). Conrad's narrative exposes how imperial brutality is not an aberration but a manifestation of this material base, as Marlow observes the imperial enterprise is "run for profit" (Conrad, 1973, p. 77) and Kurtz embodies the tragic collapse produced by this economic exploitation (Conrad, 1973, p. 135). Thus, applying the Marxist base-superstructure model reveals how imperial violence and psychological disintegration are rooted in the capitalist economic system, where the superstructure serves to justify and perpetuate exploitation. Thus, we can review now what some previous works have revealed about the issue?

3. Literature Review

Defining the two pervasive concepts of the study, is crucial to understand how they operate. Thus, violence, broadly understood, goes beyond physical acts to include structural and symbolic forms. Cruelty is linked to violence but focuses on the deliberate infliction of suffering, often legalised within systems of power (Giroux, 2024, p. 12). These critical distinctions provide a foundation for analysing imperialism in *Heart of Darkness*, where economic exploitation and psychological domination converge.

Recent scholarship interprets Conrad's work through postcolonial and psychoanalytic approaches to point out the multifaceted nature of violence and cruelty: Giroux argues that Conrad reveals imperialism's violence as a "systematic destruction of both land and indigenous bodies" where cruelty functions as a "tool of dehumanisation" (Giroux, 2024, p. 15). This confirms the portrayal of the Congo as a site of relentless exploitation and moral descent. From the psychoanalytic perspectives, Smith reads Kurtz's descent as a "manifestation of the id's uncontrolled desire" producing cruelty born from internal psychic conflict (Smith, 2025, p. 42). This supports the application of Freud's id-ego-superego dynamics, explaining how internal drives motivate outward brutality.

As for the Marxist criticism, it focuses on the economic base as the foundation that produces the superstructural violence. Johnson points out that the capitalist "drive for ivory reflects a deeper economic imperative that legalises political and ideological violence" (Johnson, 2023, p. 38). Marlow's ambivalent narration reveals the tension between profit motives and moral disillusionment (Conrad, 1973, p. 77). Summarising these ideas allows me to analyse how *Heart of Darkness* displays how violence and cruelty are both psychological and structural phenomena. In this context, Taylor notes the novel's "intertwining of personal and political violence offers a nuanced criticism of imperialism's human cost" (Taylor, 2024, p. 59).

Furthermore, Chinua Achebe (1977) argues that Conrad gives the impression that Africans are insignificant beings. Achebe believes that the view of imperialism in the novella is morally reprehensible, stating that the conquest of land is not a very beautiful thing when you look at it closely (Achebe, 1977, p. 788). Adam Hochschild (1998) argues that Conrad was right about history, depicting the cruel acts committed under Leopold II in Congo, such as forced labour and limb amputation (Hochschild, 1998, p. 144).

As for Patrick Brantlinger (1985, p. 263), he perceives the novella as a symbol of Western civilisation descending into savagery, with violence being central to imperialism. Thus, he

interprets it as "a parable of Western civilisation's descent into barbarism" (Brantlinger, 1985, p. 263), demonstrating how violence is an inherent product of imperial ideology. Kurtz's famous line, exterminate all the brutes! symbolises a colonial mindset of eradicating an entire group of people. Edward Said's (1993, p. 25) postcolonial perspective shows that the dishonesty in imperial rhetoric that relies on violence and claims of superiority.

After analysing some recent scholarly works on violence and cruelty in *Heart of Darkness*, I have identified some gaps which this study intends to fill in, in order to change the mindset of people. Indeed, Freud defines the psyche's parts as the id, which "demands immediate satisfaction" of primal urges, the ego that "controls and regulates the demands of the id," and the superego as internalised moral rules (Freud, 1962, pp. 25, 28, 30). However, Marx explains that "the mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general," linking economic base and ideological superstructure (Marx, 1859, p. 67). Integrating these ideas deeply, can reinforce the analysis of imperial violence in *Heart of Darkness* by showing how psychological drives and capitalist exploitation work together.

In the same context, Said insists on the marginalisation of colonised voices in Western literature: "The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies," urging attention to indigenous perspectives (Said, 1993, p. 3). As for Levenson, he observes that Conrad's "narrative fragmentation and shifting perspectives heighten the reader's experience of disorientation, mirroring the psychological and physical chaos of imperial brutality" (Levenson, 1980, p. 42). Exploring these narrative strategies could enrich understanding of how the message of violence and cruelty are conveyed. An attempt to fill in these gaps could introduce fresh approaches which can improve subalterns' perspectives, engage contemporary relevance, and reinforce aesthetic analysis by pushing forward literary criticism of *Heart of Darkness*, and imperial violence. This is briefly what some previous works have displayed about violence and cruelty in *Heart of Darkness*. The next issue concerns the historical and the socio-political of violence and cruelty.

4. The Main Findings of the Study

4.1. Portrayal of Violence and Cruelty in the Congo Setting

In *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad portrays violence and cruelty in the Congo setting as pervasive and intrinsic to imperial domination. The Congo River and the surrounding wilderness symbolise a space where the danger of civilisation collapses, revealing raw brutality. One vivid portrayal of violence is at the Outer Station, where Marlow witnesses the "grove of death", a clearing with dying and dead Africans left untreated, symbolising colonial neglect and cruelty. Conrad writes: "A black rock, almost bare, stood up in the sea, a monstrous thing, a huge stone image" (Conrad, 1973, p. 43). Thus, this image reflects the severe, indifferent violence inflicted upon the local population by the colonial enterprise, illustrating how imperialism treats human lives as expendable. In other words, The "black rock" image metaphorically embodies colonial death and desolation.

Besides, Marlow's description of the Company's agents points out this cruelty: "They were nothing earthly now, nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom" (Conrad, 1973, p. 44). This dehumanising depiction exposes how cruelty manifests not only physically but as a systemic degradation of human dignity. It also symbolises the loss of humanity under oppressive conditions.

Moreover, Kurtz's ruthless control reinforces the extreme violence of imperialism. His chilling report to Brussels includes the phrase "Exterminate all the brutes!" (Conrad, 1973, p. 84), directly revealing the genocidal intent behind colonial cruelty. This harsh command criticises the ideological justification of imperial violence as a civilising mission. Throughout

the Congo, violence is both overt and structural, involving physical suffering and psychological torment. Conrad's narrative style with fragmented, haunting imagery, immerses us as readers in the chaos and horror, compelling a critical reflection on the costs of colonialism. As a result, these instances show how Conrad uses setting and characters to represent violence and cruelty as endemic to imperialism in Congo. His depiction challenges the prevailing narratives of colonial benevolence by unflinchingly exposing its horrific realities. This dual focus on physical and psychological violence enhances the novella's criticism of empire, foregrounding the devastating human toll of colonial exploitation.

4.2. The Psychological Impacts of Imperialism on some main Characters

In *Heart of Darkness*, the psychological effects of imperialism on characters are profound, revealing moral ambiguity, inner conflict, and mental destruction. Marlow, one of the protagonists and the narrator, experiences deep psychological turmoil as he confronts the brutal realities of colonialism. He reflects on the "sordid greatness" of imperialism, revealing his growing disillusionment: "I had to wait in the station for ten days, an eternity" (Conrad, 1973, p. 19). This waiting symbolises his psychological suspended state, marked by confusion and moral chaos. In fact, Kurtz represents the extreme psychological consequences of imperialism's unchecked power. His descent into madness is illustrated by his frenzied speech and dictatorial behaviour. His chilling final words: "The horror! The horror!", express a profound recognition of the darkness within himself and the imperial project (Conrad, 1973, p. 154). This phrase points out the psychological failure precipitated by imperial cruelty and absolute power. Colonial agents and Company employees also suffer mental chaos. Marlow describes them as "hollow at the core" and living in "moral wilderness," focusing on the alienation and dehumanisation wrought by imperialism (Conrad, 1973, p. 44). Obviously, the above quotations from the novella, illustrate vividly how imperialism inflicts deep psychological damage on individuals. Marlow's narrative journey reflects alienation and moral uncertainty as he witnesses colonial abuses firsthand. Kurtz's madness and self-awareness dramatise the devastating internal effects of absolute power and violence. The depiction of colonial agents as psychologically hollow reveals the broader erosion of human values during imperial exploitation. Thus, we realise that Conrad's psychological portrayal denounces imperialism not only as a physical and economic system but as a corrosive force on human consciousness and morality.

4.3. Relationship between Economic Exploitation and Psychological Destruction

In *Heart of Darkness*, economic motives drive imperial expansion and directly contribute to the psychological destruction of characters, revealing a link between material exploitation and mental destruction. The novella exposes how profit obsession leads to imperial violence. Marlow reflects on the Company's merciless quest: "I ventured to hint that the Company was run for profit" (Conrad, 1973, p. 77), illustrating greed as the primary motive behind colonial ventures. This ruthless pursuit of wealth explains physical brutality and moral corruption throughout Congo. The character Kurtz illustrates the psychological toll of this economic-driven imperialism. Once an idealistic man, Kurtz becomes consumed by power and greed, ultimately descending into madness. His famous last words, "The horror! The horror!" (Conrad, 1973, p. 154), represents his catastrophic recognition of the moral and psychological devastation wrought by imperial avarice. As for Marlow's observations, they reveal how the economic base, the drive for ivory and profit, produces a superstructure of cruelty and madness: "The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much" (Conrad, 1973, p. 27). This critical insight links economic exploitation with the psychological and ethical disintegration mentioned above.

In short, Conrad's novella reveals the inseparable relationship between economic greed and psychological destruction. The capitalist imperative to extract wealth leads to imperial violence and cruelty, which in turn corrode the moral and mental stability of individuals, especially Kurtz. Marlow's critical reflections connect the economic motivations (the base) with the ideological and psychological consequences (the superstructure), illustrating how colonialism's material ambitions engender profound human destruction.

4.4. How Does Imperialism's Lawlessness reveal Human nature's Moral Darkness?

Imperialism's lawlessness in *Heart of Darkness* reveals the moral darkness at the core of human nature by exposing how the absence of societal restraints unleashes greed, cruelty, and madness. Conrad points out the colonial enterprise as a facade masking brutal exploitation and dehumanising. Marlow observes the deep gap between the imperialist "civilising mission" and its violent reality: "The conquest of the earth... is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much" (Conrad, 1973, p. 27). This reveals imperialism as representing ruthless greed and cruelty. Kurtz's descent represents the moral issues imperialism opens: his pamphlet ends with the chilling command, "Exterminate all the brutes!" (Conrad, 1973, p. 84), exposing genocidal impulses masked by imperial ideology. His final words, "The horror! The horror!" (Conrad, 1973, p. 154), capture the nihilistic recognition of this inner darkness unleashed by lawlessness and unchecked power.

The barbarism setting represents the absence of law-and-order dismantling moral boundaries, allowing imperial agents to act with impunity. Marlow notes the agent's "hollow at the core" humanity, revealing psychological and ethical collapse produced by imperial violence (Conrad, 1973, p. 44). As a result, Conrad relates imperial lawlessness to a profound moral darkness within human nature, activated when societal norms dissolve. The novella suggests imperialism reveal an inherent potential for cruelty and madness masked by civilisation. This exposes the thin danger of morality dependent on law and order and indicts imperialism's dehumanising violence as a catalyst for psychological and ethical ruin.

4.5. Relationship between Freud's Psychoanalysis and Marx's Socio-economic Theory

The relationship between Freud's psychoanalysis and Marx's socio-economic theory in *Heart of Darkness* provides a rich framework for understanding how imperialism simultaneously engenders psychological trauma and perpetuates economic exploitation. Freud's psychoanalysis reveals how imperialism unleashes repressed primal instincts and moral contradictions within individuals. Conrad's characters, particularly Kurtz, illustrate the collapse of the ego's capacity to regulate the impulses of the id when social and moral restraints disappear. In such circumstances, latent destructive drives emerge and lead to cruelty and moral disintegration. Kurtz's final utterance, "The horror! The horror!", symbolises this moment of psychological revelation and inner collapse, exposing the darker impulses that lie beneath the façade of European civilisation (Conrad, 1902, p. 154). From a psychoanalytic perspective, this moment can be interpreted as the eruption of the unconscious and the recognition of repressed desires and moral failure (Rivkin & Ryan, 2004, p. 119).

However, Marx's socio-economic theory contextualises these psychological dynamics within the material base of imperialism's economic motives. Conrad's depiction of the Congo as a site of merciless capitalist exploitation: "I ventured to hint that the Company was run for profit" (Conrad, 1973, p. 77), shows how economic imperatives create the structural conditions fostering violence and moral decay. Marx's concept of the base and superstructure explains how economic exploitation forms the foundation producing ideological justifications and cultural violence (Marx, 1859, p. 67). As a result, the invocation of Freud and Marx in the novella demonstrates that imperialism's psychological horrors are inseparable from its socio-economic foundations. The repression of internal destructive drives in the formation of society

mirrors the repression of exploited peoples and environments under capitalist imperialism. The novella illustrates how an unchecked economic base can reinforce the psychological instability of individuals such as Kurtz, producing a cycle of violence that disrupts both the individual psyche and the broader social order.

5. From Fictional View to Realities: Conrad's Portrayal of Violence and Cruelty

Conrad's fictional account closely parallels documented colonial atrocities, especially those in the Congo Free State under King Leopold II, where forced labour, mutilation, and execution were rampant (Hochschild, 1998). The striking image of chained Africans and Kurtz's godlike dominance points to the real structures of violence embedded in European colonisation. Thus, *Heart of Darkness* serves as much more than a literary work; it is a representation of the cruelty and moral failure of colonial systems.

The findings reveal that violence in *Heart of Darkness* is not merely external subjugation but is deeply rooted in psychological forces. Colonial ideology, greed, and racial arrogance intersect with institutional hierarchies and social systems to create a cycle of cruelty. Conrad's depiction shows that violence dehumanises both oppressors and victims alike, perpetuating itself through political, social, and psychological mechanisms that sustain these abusive structures over time (Conrad, 1899; Said, 1993, p. 26).

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* presents violence and cruelty not merely as literary devices, but as reflections of historical realities during European colonialism in Africa. In the novella, the white colonizers are depicted as inflicting extreme physical and psychological suffering on the African natives. Conrad writes: "Six black men advanced in a file, toiling up the path. each had an iron collar on his neck, and all were connected together with a chain whose bights swung between them, rhythmically clinking" (Conrad, 1973, pp. 42-43). This vivid image of chained labourers illustrates the physical oppression faced by the natives. Conrad's detailed description conveys the harshness and inhumanity of colonial exploitation, transforming fictional narrative into a representation of real historical brutality. Psychologically, the colonizers' attitudes reflect a dehumanizing ideology that justified their violent actions. The manager's boy is described as "his insolent black head in the doorway" (Conrad, 1973, p.109), while the natives are called "savages" (Conrad, 1973, p. 44), reducing human beings to mere objects of racial hierarchy.

Conrad's language exposes the mindset showing systemic violence: it is both racialised and legalised within the colonial system. The novel's fictionalised depiction parallels historical accounts of colonial atrocities, such as those in the Congo Free State under King Leopold II, where forced labour, beatings, and executions were rampant. By portraying Kurtz as a "little god" to the natives, Conrad points out the power dynamics that enable such cruelty (Conrad, 1973, p. 68). Conrad's narrative thus bridges fiction and reality, revealing that violence in colonial contexts is not imaginative exaggeration but grounded in historical truth. Moreover, the persistence of violence beyond the colonial era can be traced to the psychological and societal patterns that Conrad illustrates. External factors, including social hierarchies and systemic oppression, combined with internal factors, such as the desire for dominance and greed, perpetuate cycles of violence (Achebe, 1977, p. 783). Conrad's work therefore encourages readers to reflect on the continuity of these patterns in contemporary contexts, showing how literature can illuminate real-world injustices. In short, while *Heart of Darkness* is a fictional narrative, Conrad's portrayal of violence and cruelty is deeply linked with historical realities of colonial exploitation. Through vivid imagery and exploration of psychological and social dynamics, Conrad presents violence as both a personal and systemic phenomenon, compelling readers to understand the human consequences of colonial domination.

5.1. Critical Analysis of the Findings

The findings demonstrate that violence and cruelty are caused by a combination of internal psychological forces and external environmental influences. Consistent with Freud's psychoanalytic theory, the novella reveals that many violent actions are motivated by unconscious desires and conflicts. For example, characters like Kurtz embody unchecked greed, a craving for absolute power, and deep-seated racial arrogance. These psychological impulses, often hidden beneath the surface, drive many of the brutal acts seen in the story.

At the same time, the environment portrayed in *Heart of Darkness* is one of systemic colonial domination, marked by rigid racial hierarchies and institutional violence. This social context reinforces and permits violent actions, making them part of wider oppressive practices rather than sporadic individual behaviours. This interaction of mind and environment confirms that the root causes of violence are complex and multifaceted, involving both personal psychological elements and collective social conditions.

Also, Conrad's depiction of violence is deeply tied to the historical context of European colonialism, which serves as the broader framework of the novella. Colonialism institutionalised violence on multiple levels: physically, through forced labour and brutal punishments; psychologically, by dehumanising Africans and reducing them to stereotypes; and symbolically, through the imposition of racialised identities. The study finds that violence in the novella reflects this systemic cruelty enforced to maintain white supremacy.

The character of Kurtz personifies this systemic violence by exercising unchecked authority and cruelty. His actions demonstrate the moral and psychological collapse that imperial power can produce, aligning with Edward Said's critique that Conrad exposes the imperialist project's reliance on force and domination masked by civilising rhetoric. Marlow's point of view complicates readers' moral response, embodying the internal complexities and ambiguities of colonial violence, as argued by Ian Watt, who notes the refusal of a stable moral position in Conrad's narrative.

5.2. Promoting Peace in a Context of Violence and Cruelty in Today's World

Violence and cruelty, as depicted in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, are not merely historical phenomena; they continue to persist in contemporary society. The novel highlights how systemic oppression, dehumanization, and the abuse of power can perpetuate cycles of violence. In today's world, similar patterns are visible in conflicts, domestic violence, racial discrimination, and human rights abuses. Understanding the psychological and social roots of violent behaviour is essential for promoting peace. Conrad's portrayal of the psychological dimension of cruelty emphasizes the role of both internal and external factors in violent actions. The internal factors include anger, desire for power, or lack of self-control, whereas external factors involve oppressive environments and societal inequalities (Conrad, 1973, p. 68; Achebe, 1977, p. 783). Modern peacebuilding initiatives, therefore, need to address both individual and structural contributors to violence. Education and awareness-raising are crucial in fostering a culture of peace. By learning about the consequences of violence and the historical injustices of colonialism, societies can cultivate empathy and critical consciousness. As Edward W. Said argues, understanding the cultural and historical context of oppression is a necessary step toward reconciliation and justice (Said, 1993, p. 91).

Similarly, promoting literacy, dialogue, and conflict resolution skills among communities can reduce the normalisation of cruelty and violence. Legal and institutional measures are equally important. Governments and organisations must enforce laws against abuse, discrimination, and human rights violations, while supporting victims of violence. International cooperation, exemplified by treaties and humanitarian interventions, can help mitigate systemic violence and create conditions conducive to peace. Finally, personal responsibility and psychological support are key to preventing the escalation of violent

behaviour. Counselling, social services, and community support systems can assist individuals at risk of engaging in violence, much as Conrad illustrates that the environment heavily influences human behaviour (Conrad, 1973, p. 53). Recognizing the interconnection between individual psychology and societal structures allows for a holistic approach to peace promotion.

Thus, promoting peace in a context of violence and cruelty requires a multifaceted strategy that combines education, religions, legal measures, psychological support, and cultural awareness. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, though a work of fiction, provides valuable insights into the dynamics of cruelty and the necessity of addressing both the roots and manifestations of violence to build a more just and peaceful society.

5.3. Practical Strategies to Reduce Violence and Cruelty in Today's World

Violence and cruelty remain persistent challenges in contemporary society, affecting individuals, families, and communities. While Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* exposes the psychological and societal roots of violence, practical strategies are needed to address such behaviours in today's world. These strategies can be grouped into psychological, educational, legal, and community-based approaches.

Individuals exposed to violence or exhibiting violent behaviours require professional support. Counselling, therapy, and psychological interventions help individuals understand and manage anger, trauma, and aggression. As Conrad illustrates, environmental and internal factors influence violent behaviour (Conrad, 1902, p. 53). Modern psychological approaches, including cognitive-behavioural therapy, focus on reshaping thought patterns and emotional responses, thereby reducing the likelihood of violent actions (Blume, 2005, p. 15).

Education and religions play a critical role in preventing and reducing violence. Promoting awareness about human rights, empathy, and conflict resolution equips individuals to respond non-violently in stressful situations. Teaching about historical injustices, such as colonial oppression depicted in *Heart of Darkness*, helps cultivate a culture of respect and understanding across racial, social, and cultural divides (Achebe 785).

Conclusion

This study examined how Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* portrays violence and cruelty as interconnected phenomena rooted in both psychological disintegration and economic exploitation under European imperialism. It raises the central research question of how the novella reveals the relationship between psychological forces and economic structures in perpetuating colonial violence, through a combined psychoanalytic and Marxist framework.

The main findings confirm that imperial violence in the novella operates on multiple levels simultaneously. Psychologically, characters like Kurtz and Marlow illustrate the devastating effects of unchecked power on individual consciousness, as the id's primitive drives overwhelm the ego's regulating function (Freud, 1962, pp. 25, 28, 30). Economically, the capitalist drive for ivory constitutes the material base that produces and justifies a superstructure of cruelty, dehumanisation, and ideological violence (Marx, 1859, p. 63). Conrad's denunciation of imperialism is most powerfully expressed through Marlow's growing disillusionment and Kurtz's chilling final words, "The horror! The horror!" (Conrad, 1973, p. 154), demonstrating that colonial violence is neither accidental nor marginal, but systemic and self-perpetuating.

The scientific contribution of this study lies in its integrated application of Freudian and Marxist frameworks to *Heart of Darkness*, offering a dual-lens analysis that bridges the psychological and socio-economic dimensions of imperial violence. This approach enriches postcolonial literary criticism by showing that Conrad's text is not merely a historical document but a profound meditation on the human capacity for darkness when institutional

constraints collapse, a theme of enduring relevance to contemporary discussions of systemic violence, decolonisation, and human rights.

This study has certain limitations. The analysis is restricted to a single literary corpus, which limits the generalisation of its conclusions beyond Conrad's novella. Future research could extend this dual framework to other colonial literary texts or compare Conrad's portrayal with postcolonial African writers' responses to the same historical period, thereby broadening the scope of the analysis and enriching the field of comparative colonial literature.

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