

Comparative Heritage Project
Reading Series
Reading Africa 2025
June 4 – July 30
Bi-Weekly Summer Discussion Group
comparativeheritage.org/summer

SESSION SCHEDULE & THEMES

I. **June 4** — The Imperial Gaze: How Europe Invented—and View—Africa and Africans

Suggested Readings:

- Rudyard Kipling – “The White Man’s Burden” (1899, poem)
- H. Rider Haggard – *King Solomon’s Mines* (1885, selected chapters)
- Joseph Conrad – *Heart of Darkness* (1899)

Discussion Prompts:

- How is Africa imagined by imperial writers?
- What racial hierarchies or myths are reinforced?
- Where do we see silence or erasure of African voices?

➤ Rudyard Kipling

“The White Man’s Burden” is a poem written by Rudyard Kipling in 1899, originally published in the context of the U.S. annexation of the Philippines. It is widely seen as an articulation of imperialist ideology.

Thesis

The central thesis of the poem is that it is the moral duty (“burden”) of white Western nations, particularly the United States and Britain, to civilize and govern non-Western peoples—depicted as “half-devil and half-child.” Kipling frames this mission as a selfless and noble endeavor, albeit thankless and difficult.

Argument

Kipling argues that imperialism is a benevolent enterprise in which Western powers sacrifice their own comfort and glory to bring order, education, and Christianity to colonized peoples. He presents empire as a burden that white men must endure for the supposed betterment of others. However, the poem reflects and promotes deeply racist and paternalistic views, assuming the inherent superiority of white Westerners and the supposed backwardness of colonized populations.

Critical perspective: While Kipling intended the poem as a pro-imperialist exhortation, it has since been widely criticized for its racial assumptions and justification of colonial exploitation. Many scholars and writers (including postcolonial critics) read it as a quintessential example of the ideology that underpinned colonialism.

- H. Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* (1885) is one of the earliest examples of the “lost world” adventure genre and a significant text in the context of British imperial literature.

Thesis

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The novel promotes the ideology of British imperialism by portraying Africa as a mysterious, dangerous, and exotic land that can only be explored, understood, and controlled through the bravery, intellect, and moral superiority of European men.

Argument

Through the adventures of Allan Quatermain and his companions, Haggard argues—implicitly—that British masculinity, rationality, and technological advancement are not only superior but also necessary to bring order and meaning to the African interior, depicted as uncivilized and primitive. The search for King Solomon's Mines becomes both a literal quest for wealth and a metaphorical assertion of imperial dominance over the African continent.

Observations

- Exploration as Imperial Duty: The protagonists enter unknown territory, paralleling real-world imperial expeditions. Their mission justifies colonial intrusion as a civilizing or heroic act.
- Stereotypes and Racial Hierarchies: African characters are often shown as either noble savages (e.g., Umbopa/Ignosi) or superstitious and violent, reinforcing colonial stereotypes.
- Moral Superiority of Europeans: The European characters survive and triumph due to their courage, discipline, and modern tools (like guns and maps), while African societies are portrayed as needing their guidance or leadership.
- Adventure and Empire: The story romanticizes the adventure of empire-building, turning conquest and cultural dominance into thrilling entertainment.

Critical Perspective

While *King Solomon's Mines* was immensely popular and influential in its time, it is now often critiqued for its imperialist ideology and racial assumptions. It reflects and reinforces the colonial mindset of the late 19th century, even as it occasionally complicates it through more nuanced African characters like Ignosi.

- Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) is a complex novella that critiques European imperialism through the journey of Marlow into the African Congo. Though sometimes ambiguous, the text ultimately questions the moral and ideological foundations of colonialism.

Thesis

Heart of Darkness argues that European imperialism, far from being a civilizing mission, is driven by greed, cruelty, and moral hypocrisy, revealing the darkness not in Africa, but in the hearts of the imperialists themselves.

Argument

Conrad presents the imperial project as a façade—justifying exploitation and violence under the guise of progress and civilization. The deeper Marlow travels into the Congo, the more he encounters the brutal and absurd realities of colonial rule. Through the figure of Kurtz, a European who has completely abandoned moral restraint, the novella suggests that imperialism

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exposes the thin veneer of Western civilization and reveals a universal human capacity for savagery when unchecked by society.

Observations

- Critique of the "civilizing mission": European imperialists claim to bring enlightenment, but Marlow witnesses forced labor, senseless brutality, and widespread dehumanization of Africans.
- Kurtz as a symbol: Kurtz, once an idealistic emissary of progress, descends into madness and tyranny, demonstrating how power and isolation corrupt absolutely.
- Psychological darkness: The "darkness" in the novella is not just geographic (the Congo) or racialized, but existential and moral. It lies in the capacity for evil within all humans, especially when cloaked in ideology.
- Irony and ambiguity: Conrad uses irony and a layered narrative to destabilize the reader's trust in traditional imperial narratives, forcing us to question both Marlow's and the empire's perspectives.

Critical Perspective

Heart of Darkness is often praised for its anti-imperialist stance and psychological depth. However, it has also been criticized—most notably by Chinua Achebe—for its dehumanizing portrayal of Africans and for reproducing a Eurocentric worldview even as it critiques empire. The novella is thus a powerful but deeply conflicted text in the canon of imperial literature.

AUTHORS' BIOS

- Rudyard Kipling (UK): British imperial poet; often critiqued for racial paternalism.
- H. Rider Haggard (UK): Victorian adventure novelist; popularized imperial hero tropes.
- Joseph Conrad (Poland/UK): Modernist writer; *Heart of Darkness* remains controversial for its racial depictions.