

# Racism and the *Heart of Darkness*

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As I have shown elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> Conrad's setting, themes, and his triumph in writing major literature in his third language, have won him a special admiration in the non-European world. "The African writer and Joseph Conrad share the same world and that is why Conrad's world is so familiar. Both have lived in a world dominated by capitalism, imperialism, colonialism."<sup>2</sup> But African readers are also checked by, and disconcerted at, works such as *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* and *Heart of Darkness*. The case against the latter was most strongly made by Chinua Achebe in the course of a lecture titled "An Image of Africa," delivered at the University of Massachusetts on the 18th of February 1975.<sup>3</sup> He argued that Conrad sets up Africa "as a foil to Europe, a place of negations . . . in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest" (*I.o.A.*, p. 31). Africa is "the other world," "the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality" (*I.o.A.*, p. 32). Achebe commented on Conrad's comparison of the Congo and the Thames, and also alleged that the contrast made between the two women who loved Kurtz, one African, the other European, is highly prejudiced. Any sympathy expressed for the sufferings of the black African under colonialism, argued Achebe is a sympathy born of a kind of liberalism which whilst acknowledging distant kinship, repudiates equality. Conrad, continued Achebe, is a "racist"—and great art can only be "on the side of man's deliverance and not his enslavement; for the brotherhood and unity of all mankind and not for the doctrines of Hitler's master races or Conrad's 'rudimentary souls'" (*I.o.A.*, p. 38). Achebe concluded his attack on *Heart of Darkness* by describing it as "a book which parades in the most vulgar fashion prejudices and insults from which a section of mankind has suffered untold agonies and atrocities in the past and continues to do so in many ways and many places today. I am talking about a story in which the very humanity of black people is called in question. It seems to me totally inconceivable that great art or even good art could possibly reside in such unwholesome surroundings" (*I.o.A.*, p. 40).

I shall in the following pages attempt to narrowly limit myself to an examination of the charge of racism brought against Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>"Under African Eyes," *Conradiana*, 8, No. 3 (1976), 233-39.

<sup>2</sup>Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, "Writers in Politics," *Busara*, 8, No. 1 (1976), 5. Previously known as James Ngugi, he is the author of four novels (*Weep Not, Child*, 1964; *The River Between*, 1965; *A Grain of Wheat*, 1967; *Petals of Blood*, 1977), a play (*The Black Hermit*, 1968) and a collection of essays, *Homecoming*, 1972.

<sup>3</sup>*The Chancellor's Lecture Series: 1974-75*, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, pp. 31-43. Chancellor Bromery in introducing Achebe said *inter alia*, "The Scottish Arts Council has this year awarded him their second annual Neil Gunn International Fellowship. The Modern Language Association of America has voted Professor Achebe an honorary fellowship in their Association. . . . His first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, brought him to world-wide attention and acclaim . . . His works have now been translated into twenty languages and his literary reputation is secure" (p. 29). I am grateful to Professor Achebe for sending me a copy of his lecture. Future reference to this lecture will appear in the text after the abbreviated title *I.o.A.*

<sup>4</sup>The edition I have used and refer to is Dent's Collected Edition, 1961 reprint. Subsequent references will appear in the text after the abbreviated title *H.o.D.*

Let us begin with the fictional Marlow whose story was once heard and is now related by a fictional narrator. "It might be contended . . . that the attitude to the African . . . is not Conrad's but that of his fictional narrator, Marlow. . . . [But] Marlow seems to me to enjoy Conrad's complete confidence" (*I.o.A.*, p. 36). Marlow's portrait is drawn with quiet irony and, at times, a mocking humor which denotes "distance" between creator and character. For example, he is described as resembling an idol and he sits like a European Buddha without the lotus. Marlow claims to be deeply, almost pathologically averse to telling lies but we find that he prevaricates at least twice within this tale. He condemns the Roman conquest and contrasts it with the "superior" European colonialism:

What saves us is efficiency—the devotion to efficiency. But these chaps were not much account, really. They were no colonists; their administration was merely a squeeze. . . . They were conquerors, and for that you only want 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. . . . It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a large scale. . . . 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. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and unselfish belief in the idea. (*H.o.D.*, pp. 50-51)

A long quotation but necessary in that it again separates author from character. Significantly, this "idea" is presented in ambiguous "pagan" terms as "something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to" (*H.o.D.*, p. 51). What is more, the rest of the story shows that the European colonial conquest, contrary to Marlow's claims, was much worse than that of the Romans. One remembers that harrowing description of men waiting to die: "Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out . . . in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair. . . . They were not enemies, they were not criminals" (*H.o.D.*, p. 66). Immediately after this description, Marlow meets the elegant, perfumed, "hairdresser's dummy" and confesses that he "respected his collars," the collars of a man who comes out "to get a breath of fresh air," indifferent to the despair and death by which he is surrounded. It may be argued that Marlow is here speaking with irony and the description "hairdresser's dummy" may appear to make Marlow's attitude to the dummy as clear and unequivocal. But Marlow continues with unmistakable admiration that "in the great demoralization of the land he kept up his appearance. That's backbone" (*H.o.D.*, p. 68). He kept up *appearances*, and that points to one of the important thematic significances of this work, namely, the discrepancy between appearance and reality; between assumption and fact; between illusion and truth. Thus it is not correct to say that Marlow has Conrad's complete confidence, and even more incorrect to say that Conrad believed Europe to be in a state of grace. The glorious sailors proudly cited by Marlow were pirates and plunderers. This ironic distance between Marlow and Conrad should not be overlooked though the narrative method makes it all too easy. Nor can Conrad's very forceful criticisms of colonialism be lightly passed over as weak liberalism. What ships unload in Africa are soldiers and customhouse clerks: the one to conquer and the other to administer and efficiently exploit. The cannon pounds a continent and "the merry dance of

death and trade goes on" (*H.o.D.*, p. 62). This "rapacious and pitiless folly" attempts to pass itself off as philanthropy, and to hypocritically hide its true nature under words such as enemies, criminals, and rebels (*H.o.D.*, p. 132). The counterparts of enemies, criminals, and rebels are the emissaries of light, such as Kurtz!

As a critic has pointed out, "Africa *per se* is not the theme of *Heart of Darkness*, but is used as a locale symbol for the very core of an 'accursed inheritance'." At the risk of oversimplification, the story may be seen as an allegory, the journey ending with the sombre realization of the darkness of man's heart. But it may prove emotionally difficult for some to follow the allegory when it is thought that Conrad, casting about for an external parallel, for a physical setting to match the inner darkness, chose Africa. An argument may be constructed as follows: to the Romans, the people of Britain were barbarians; now when the Europeans come to Africa, the Africans in comparison seem savage, but deep down in the European breast there still lurks the old savagery. "It is not the differentness that worries Conrad but the lurking hint of kinship, of common ancestry . . . if [the Thames] were to visit its primordial relative, the Congo, it would run the terrible risk of hearing grotesque, suggestive echoes of its own forgotten darkness, and falling victim to an avenging recrudescence of the mindless frenzy of the first beginnings" (*I.o.A.*, p. 32). When the Romans looked down upon the people of Britain, and the Europeans upon "natives," it was because they felt they had achieved a much higher civilization than the people they were confronting and conquering. The contempt was not on grounds of race itself, and Conrad suggests that Europe's claim to be civilized and therefore superior, needs earnest reexamination. The reference in *Heart of Darkness* is not to a place (Africa), but to the condition of European man; not to a black people, but to colonialism. The crucial question is whether European "barbarism" is merely a thing of the historical past. Surely the contrast between savage African and "civilized" European, in the light of that greedy and inhuman colonialism, is shown to be "appearance" rather than reality. The emphasis, the present writer would suggest, is on continuity, on persistence through time and peoples, and therefore on the fundamental oneness of man and his nature. If a judgment has to be made, then uncomplicated "savagery" is better than the "subtle horrors" manifested by almost all the Europeans Marlow met on that ironic voyage of discovery. When Marlow speaks of the African in European service as one of the "reclaimed," it is grim irony for he has been reclaimed to a worse state of barbarism. Left to itself, Africa has a "greatness" that went "home to one's very heart" (*H.o.D.*, p. 80). As Marlow begins his story, the light changes as though "stricken to death by the touch of that gloom brooding over a crowd of men" (*H.o.D.*, p. 46): yet the gloom is very much over the Thames as well. The Thames as "a waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth" (*H.o.D.*, p. 47) is connected with and therefore a part of those uttermost ends. The river signifies what is abiding in nature, in man, and in the nature of man, even as "the sea is always the same" (*H.o.D.*, p. 48) and foreign shores and foreign faces are veiled not by mystery but by ignorance.

The immaculately dressed, fastidious, and sensitive hairdresser's dummy, a representative of civilized Europe and a part of the colonial machinery, is totally insensitive to the suffering he helps to cause and by which he is surrounded. (His extreme cleanliness is perhaps to be seen as compulsive, an attempt to keep clean in the midst of that moral dirt.) Even in the case of Kurtz, one must remember that all Europe had "contributed" to his making (*H.o.D.*, p. 117). As

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\*Robert Lee, *Conrad's Colonialism* (The Hague: Mouton, 1969), p. 49.

for pagan rites and savage dances, the Europeans with "imbecile rapacity" were "praying" to ivory, that is, to materialism, and one red-haired man "positively danced," bloodthirsty at the thought that he and the others "must have made a glorious slaughter" of the Africans in the bush (*H.o.D.*, p. 120).<sup>6</sup> The alleged primitiveness of the boilerman only serves to show the similarity between his *appearance* and the *actions* of the "civilized."

Achebe also noted that Kurtz's African mistress is the "savage counterpart to the refined, European woman" (*I.o.A.*, p. 35). But the European woman is pale and rather anemic whilst the former, to use Conrad's words, is gorgeous, proud, superb, magnificent, tragic, fierce, and filled with sorrow (See *H.o.D.*, pp. 135-36). She is an impressive figure and, importantly, her human feelings are not denied. The contrast, however, is not simply between these two, but between Kurtz's African mistress on the one hand, and Marlow's aunt and Kurtz's "Intended" on the other. The aunt glibly believes that he who goes to the Congo is "a lower sort of apostle": "She talked about 'weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways'" (*H.o.D.*, p. 59). The hairdresser's dummy, we recall, was first taken to be "a sort of vision" (*H.o.D.*, p. 67). The same ignorance and the same illusions are found at the end, in Kurtz's Intended. After all, he was also one of those apostles. The darkness which is often mentioned, refers not only to the darkness within man, to the mysterious and the unpredictable, but also to ignorance and illusions: it is significant that as Marlow talks with Kurtz's Intended, the "darkness deepened" (*H.o.D.*, p. 158). The African woman faces the truth and endures the pain of her dereliction, whilst the illusions of the two European women are also the fond illusions of European society.

This is not to claim that Conrad was free of all prejudice, nor to deny that he has wholly resisted the temptation to use physical appearance and setting as indicators of nonphysical qualities.<sup>7</sup> Conrad reflects to some degree the attitudes of his age, and his description of the fireman as a dog in a parody of breeches, is cruel. On the one hand, in terms of technological progress, the gap between London and the Congo was immense; on the other, though it is extreme to say that Conrad called into question the very humanity of the African, one's perspective and evaluation of this work need alteration.

In a conversation with me,<sup>8</sup> Ngugi Wa Thiong'o accepted some of Achebe's criticisms but felt he had overlooked the positive aspect, namely, Conrad's attack on colonialism. The skulls stuck on poles outside Kurtz's house, Wa Thiong'o said, was the most powerful indictment of colonialism. No African writer, he continued, had created so ironic, apt, and powerful an image: ironic when one considers that Kurtz and many others like him had come to "civilize" the non-European world; apt when one recalls what they really did. But Wa Thiong'o also observed that though Conrad (having experienced the evils of Czarist imperialism) castigates Belgian atrocities, he is much milder in his criticisms of British imperialism. This ambivalence, concluded Professor Wa Thiong'o, compromised Conrad's otherwise admirable stand. Leonard Kibera

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<sup>6</sup>Compare Mark Twain, *More Tramps Abroad*, London, 1897, pp. 137-38 "There are many humorous things in the world; among them, the white man's notion that he is less savage than the other savages."

<sup>7</sup>Compare Shiva Naipaul, "Zambia's Compromise with the West," *Spectator*, 11 June 1977, p. 11: "Now and then, in a clearing in the bush, there is the fleeting apparition of a village of mud huts. Women, squatting in the shade, look up expressionlessly from their labours; squads of naked children, shouting, arms flailing, come rushing over the beaten brown earth to wave. . . . The wilderness closes in again. . . . Nothing indicates that you have made any progress."

<sup>8</sup>University of Nairobi, 19 July 1977.

(Kenyan novelist, short story writer, critic, and teacher) wrote informally to me as follows: "I study *Heart of Darkness* as an examination of the West itself and not as a comment on Africa. Many Africans do get turned off Conrad because they feel he used the third world so totally as a background against which he examined Western values and conduct that the people in Africa and Asia are no more than caricatures. I do not object to this and appreciate the fact that in Conrad there is not that Joyce Cary, Graham Greene pretension of understanding the third world."<sup>9</sup> Nadine Gordimer writing on another famous European in Africa states that Livingstone, reassessed, emerges as a fallible human being.<sup>10</sup> Conrad too was not entirely immune to the infection of the beliefs and attitudes of his age, but he was ahead of most in trying to break free.

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<sup>9</sup>Letter dated 7 April 1977.

<sup>10</sup>*Contrast*, 30, 8, No. 2 (April 1973), 82.