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Racist or Anti-Imperialist: Examining Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad is a novella about a voyage up the Congo River into the heart of the Congo, which is told by one of the story's narrators, Marlow. Conrad's novella has become one of the most critically acclaimed novels in history. In recent years, the novella has been revived by a flurry of debates in the literary community. The novel, usually in the position of receiving praise, has been faulted for being racist. Noted author, Chinua Achebe, has cited the novel for being "bloody racist" and that Conrad's depiction of the Congolese purveys negative stereotypes (Achebe 9). This claim incited an uproar amongst critics, many of whom have come to Conrad's defense. Critics have stated that Conrad's portrayal of Africans is one of the ways he criticizes the depravity of imperialism. While some critics point out that, by criticizing imperialism, Conrad's novel is anti-imperialist not racist, others claim that the novel is too ambiguous for it to be concretely one or the other. Though critics have cited reasons, such as those previously mentioned, as to why Conrad's novel isn't racist, Conrad's portrayal of Africans and Africa purveys racist stereotypes which inherently makes the novel racist. In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad repeatedly presents Africans in a negative light, which would only affirm/spread the views of Africans being inferior savages.

Throughout the novella, Conrad consistently portrays Africans as savages, so much so that they almost seem inhuman. There are numerous ways that Conrad purveys this negative image of Africans (and Africa) being inferior inhuman beings. One way Conrad does this is by depicting Africa itself as being an evil seductress. Africa is a place that turns good wholesome

men into a dark version of themselves. Characters like Fresleven and Kurtz show how Africa appears to change good men into wicked men. Fresleven was described as being a good and gentle man, but he dies in a way that a man of his nature shouldn't have. Kurtz is also talked about highly by the Russian and his family members, but yet he has descended into the savagery surrounding him. Achebe writes Conrad "projects the image of Africa as '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" (Achebe 3). By grasping the most ghastly aspects of Africa, and pushing this image of Africans on the audience, the novel could only give readers an image of Africa that they could interpret as savage. Conrad darkens the African race on a level beyond their skin. Going with Achebe's theory, Conrad stains the image of the African race by painting pictures of a cannibalistic, diseased people who cut off body parts of other natives. By associating African's with continuous images of depravity, blood, death, and disease, the dark image of Africans becomes the first thing people think of when they think of the Congolese.

Aside from Conrad painting the entire continent of Africa as savage, he continuously depicts the Congolese as being subhuman. Throughout the novel, Conrad gives the reader two immensely different images of the Congolese and Europeans. The language he uses to write about European characters and African characters is immensely different. On Kurtz's mistress, Conrad writes "And from right to left along the lighted shore moved a wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman" (60). Conrad doesn't call the mistress just a woman, but an "apparition of a woman." This suggests that the woman is not real. She is an elusive figment of the imagination. This makes it appear as if the woman is not human, but what could she be if she's not human? Well, Conrad goes on to say that "She walked with measured steps, draped in striped

and fringed cloths, treading the earth proudly with a slight jingle and flash of barbarous ornaments...She must have had the value of several elephants tusks upon her. She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress” (60). There are a few things happening here. First, the way Conrad describes the way she walks is how one would describe the approach of an animal. She doesn't walk like a normal human. She saunters like a lioness or a cheetah would, with “measured steps” as they approach their prey. Again, Conrad depicts the image of the savage African, but here they are not only savage they are animals. The other thing is that Conrad makes the mistress seem like less of a person by making her appear insignificant. He does this by lacing her with “several elephant tusks” of ornaments. Due to ivory being so important throughout the novel, it appears as if without these ornaments the mistress would be immaterial. The ivory laced upon her body seems to be the only thing giving her any worth. There is such an importance placed on ivory that it appears that the African woman is irrelevant compared to it and irrelevant without it.

While the African woman is spoken of as a creature, the intended is described as the perfect European woman. Conrad writes “this fair hair, this pale visage, this pure brow, seemed surrounded by an ashy halo from which the dark eyes looked out at me. Their glance was guileless, profound, confident, and trustful. She carried her sorrowful head as though she were proud of that sorrow...” (74). The language changes immensely between the description of the mistress and the intended. Achebe states that “The difference in the attitude of the novelist to these two women is conveyed in too many direct and subtle ways to need elaboration. But perhaps the most significant difference is the one implied in the author's bestowal of human expression to the one and the withholding of it from the other” (6). The mistress is described as this wild, animal like creature, while the intended is actually assigned human emotions and

characteristics. The intended is an actual person who can be pitied for the grief she feels. The mistress can't even be allowed to mourn for Kurtz. She is an inscrutable, fascinating creature, which is how one might describe an animal that is "wild-eyed and magnificent." The mistress is not even human enough to have emotions that are to be pitied like the intended. He paints the white woman as being an actual human being that another human being can connect to and pity, but the African woman is something that's fascinating just like any other animal would be. The way Conrad changes the language he uses when describing the woman shows how the novel is racist.

Critics, in defense against the claims of Conrad's novel being racist, have stated that the novel is not racist but anti-imperialist. They assert that, throughout the novel, Conrad is trying to point out the faults of imperialism, and he criticizes the hypocrisy of the practice. Yes, Conrad does point out the faults of imperialism throughout the novel, but it is not imperialism as a whole that Conrad condemns. Throughout the novel, it can only be concretely said that Conrad finds fault in the Belgian version of imperialism. The problem with Belgian imperialism is shown to be that it perverts the idea of what imperialism is really supposed to be. Imperialism is supposed to be a mission to civilize the savages, but the Belgians have used the guise of the civilizing mission and perverted it for greed and capital gain. It is the hypocrisy of Belgian imperialism the novel seems to find fault with not the decimation and cruel punishment of the natives. The natives are only used as a tool for which Conrad can point out how Belgian imperialism has twisted the good idea of imperialism. The Congolese show what King Leopold has done to what should have been the civilizing mission. Conrad uses the Congolese as a backdrop in his novella to get his point across. This shows the Congolese not to be people, but inanimate objects used as a ploy.

While some critics use the novel's anti-imperialist tendencies to defend Conrad, other critics claim that the way Conrad wrote the novella makes it too ambiguous for the novel to be concretely called racist or anti-imperialist. In his text *Rules of Darkness*, Brantlinger states that "Conrad's impressionism is for some critics his most praiseworthy quality; to others it appears instead a means of obfuscation, allowing him to mask his nihilism or to maintain contradictory values, or both" (256). Critics have claimed that Conrad's ambiguity enables his novella's true intentions to never be unveiled. He writes in such a way that forces the reader to interpret the meaning and intention of the novella, and decide for themselves what it signifies. In the text, *Heart of Darkness: Search for the Unconscious*, the author quotes E. M. Forster as saying that Conrad is "misty in the middle as well as at the edges, that the secret casket of his genius contains a vapour rather than a jewel; and that we need not try to write him down philosophically, because there is, in this particular direction, nothing to write" (Adelman 17). Part of his ambiguous writing lies in the "misty" imagery he evokes throughout the book. The title *Heart of Darkness*, though it may seem at first to be concrete, is ambiguous as well. There are many connotations associated with darkness, and one of them is that of mystery. Though critics claim that this ambiguity makes Conrad's intentions unclear, Conrad's intentional ambiguity speaks to something else entirely.

By shrouding everything in the novel so that nothing seems clear, Conrad makes it perfectly clear that he is hiding something. There is no reason for an entire book to be inscrutable and for a writer to hide behind two narrators unless the writer is trying to shield something from the readers. In Conrad's case, his ambiguity suggests that if his readers knew his true feelings they may find fault with him/the novella. The prominent thing in the novel that would provoke negative feelings from the audience is the issue of the Congolese. While critics may say that the

novel is too inscrutable to draw conclusions about Conrad's feelings, the reality appears to be that Conrad intentionally didn't want readers to know his opinions. As it appears in the novel, Conrad doesn't directly state that what has happened to the Congolese is the most atrocious thing imaginable. He pities the poor Africans which can be seen when he stumbles upon the grove of death, but then he is almost emotionless in his observation of the Africans who lie at his feet. However, when he describes the death of Kurtz it is like Marlow has lost a dear relative. He can't even bear to stick around and watch him breathe his last breath. The fact that "Every year from 1890 to 1900, an estimated five hundred thousand of these nameless victims, nowhere mentioned in the annual reports, lost their lives," one would expect that the cruel deaths and decimation of the African people would be at the forefront of the novel (Sebald 119). However, that is not the case. The reader is made to pity the death of Kurtz more than the countless Africans that has died at the hands of imperialism. Conrad does portray the death of the Africans, but it is mainly used as a ploy to make his point about the hypocrisy of Belgian imperialism. His lack of portraying the atrocity the Congolese were experiencing can also be seen in Marlow's reaction to seeing the decapitated heads of "rebels" sitting upon a fence. When Marlow sees these heads he is not shocked or sickened to see them, which suggests that this kind of thing is common practice in Africa. It is something to be expected of a savage people.

In the text *Envisioning Africa: Racism and Imperialism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness*, the author, Peter Firchow, writes, "Such views, as horrible as we find them today, would not have surprised or outraged most of Conrad's first readers, for in terms of late-nineteenth-century thinking about the future of 'inferior' races..." (152). By taking away from the appalling nature of the deaths and treatments of Africans, Conrad allows for the kind of belief and thinking Firchow mentions to persist. So, Achebe is right to say that Conrad is a "purveyor of comforting

myths” (Achebe 4). Conrad doesn’t allow for the reader to grasp the fact that what is happening is wrong (which thereby makes imperialism wrong), but he clouds the entire novel, making the reader unable to deduce this notion. Due to this clouding, it would appear as if Conrad believed in Firchow’s notions as well. Conrad may not have supported the violence and cruelty of the Congolese deaths, but it is not made apparent whether he did or didn’t believe in the “future of inferior races.” With that in mind, it is clear why Conrad would want to confuse his readers so they couldn’t tell what his feelings were about this issue.

As pointed out, there have been different ways in which critics have tried to come to the defense of Conrad, but the fervency with which critics came to his defense is a signal to raise suspicion. Many novels in the past have been debated for any number of reasons, but this novella inspired a vigorous debate. American journalist and film critic, David Denby, writes “*Heart of Darkness* could indeed be read as racist by anyone sufficiently angry to ignore its fictional strategies, its palpable anguish, and the many differences between Conrad's 1890s consciousness of race and our own. It could be read as racist by anyone ruthless enough to detach its representation of life from meaning” (420). This strong defense of Conrad is one of many that have arisen in the debate sparked by Achebe. In Denby’s argument, there seems to be an emotional charge behind his words. The question that must be asked is why? In the article “The horror! The horror!” author Jennifer Lipka may have an answer;

Not surprisingly, many critics and interpreters of Conrad are male, white, Western, and European, and the still existent frantic and heated attempts to rescue or damn *Heart of Darkness* have filled more pages than the novel itself. The reaction to Achebe is almost a story unto itself, a study in the guilt of the white man, the questioning and evaluating of the values of Western culture, and the birth and popularity of colonial studies and the

desire to hear from non-Europeans regarding how the brute force and greed of the Western world have forever altered their cultures. (Lipka 27)

This quote implies that most critics, mainly “male, white, Western, and European” (which is important to note), up until Achebe, overlooked or didn’t recognize the racist tones of the novella. In his piece “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*,” Achebe writes, “That this simple truth is glossed over in criticisms of his work is due to the fact that white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely unremarked” (9). From what Lipka and Achebe point out, this fervent defense of Conrad stems from the critics needing to defend themselves. This novel is something that critics believed in, so, by calling the novel racist means that the people who were mesmerized by the novel in some way believe in what Conrad portrays about the Congolese.

In conclusion, though critics have gone to lengths to show why Conrad’s book isn’t racist, it cannot be denied that the novel presents images of Africans and Africa that can only be interpreted as savage, depraved, and inhuman. Conrad may criticize some aspects of imperialism, but he doesn’t criticize imperialism as a whole. He uses Africans as a tool to make his point about the hypocrisy of imperialism. Africans are just objects in Conrad’s novella. Even when Conrad attempts profuse ambiguity to make it inscrutable whether the novel is wholly anti-imperialist or racist, it only points to the fact that Conrad is trying to hide his true feelings. The ambiguity seen throughout the novel works as a way to remove Conrad and his intentions from the novel, which point to the fact that Conrad doesn’t want the reader to know his true feelings about the fate of the Congolese. With everything Conrad presents, the only image the reader can construct of Africa is a dark one, and by letting this be the only image the reader has of Africa, Conrad purveys racial stereotypes as Achebe pointed out.

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