Excerpts from the Achebe Article

As everybody knows, Conrad is a romantic on the side. He might not exactly admire savages clapping their hands and stamping their feet but they at least have the merit of being in their place, unlike this dog in a parody of breeches. For Conrad things being in their place is of the utmost importance.

Towards the end of the story Conrad lavishes a whole page quite unexpectedly on an African woman who has obviously been some kind of mistress to Mr. Kurtz and now presides (if I may be permitted a little liberty) like a formidable mystery over the inexorable imminence of his departure:

She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent....She stood looking at us without a stir and like the wilderness itself, with an air of brooding over and inscrutable purpose.

This Amazon is drawn in considerable detail, albeit of a predictable nature, for two reasons. First, she is in her place and so can win Conrad's special-brand of approval and second, she fulfills a structural requirement of the story: a savage counterpart to the refined. European woman who will step forth to end the story:

She came forward all in black with a pale head, floating toward me in the dusk. She was in mourning...She took both my hands in hers and murmured, "I had heard you were coming"...She had a mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering.

Marlow comes through to us not only as a witness of truth, but one holding those advanced and
humane views appropriate to the English liberal tradition which required all Englishmen of decency to be deeply shocked by atrocities in Bulgaria or the Congo of King Leopold of the Belgians or wherever. The kind of liberalism espoused by Marlow/Conrad touched all the best minds of the age in England, Europe, and America.

Conrad's liberalism would not take him quite as far as Schweitzer's though. He would not use the word *brother* however qualified; the farthest he would go was *kinship*. When Marlow's African helmsman falls down with a spear in his heart he gives white master one final disquieting look.

And the intimate profundity of that look he gave me when he received his hurt remains to this day in my memory—a claim of distant kinship affirmed in a supreme moment.

Certainly Conrad had a problem with niggers. His inordinate love of that word itself should be of interest to psychoanalysts. Sometimes his fixation on *blackness* is equally interesting as when he gives us this brief description:

A black figure stood up, strode on long black legs, waving long black arms.... as though we might expect a black figure striding along on black legs to wave white arms! But so unrelenting is Conrad's obsession.

But more important by far is the abundant testimony about Conrad's savages which we could gather if we were so inclined from other sources and which might lead us to think that these people must have had other *occupations* besides merging into the evil forest or materializing out of it simply to plague Marlow and his dispirited band.

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Achebe: Racism in Heart of Darkness
Rachel Teisch '94, English 32, 1990

The literal heart of darkness in Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* does not merely incorporate the Belgian Congo, the African savages, the journey to the innermost soul, and England as the corruptor in its attempted colonization of the African people for selfish and commercial purposes. In "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," Achebe accuses Conrad of racism as the essential "heart of darkness."

*Heart of Darkness* 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...it is not the differentness that worries Conrad but the lurking hint of kinship, of common ancestry. For the Thames too 'has been one of the dark places of the earth.' It conquered its darkness, of course, and is now in daylight and at peace. But if it were to visit its primordial relative, the Congo, it would run the terrible risk of hearing grotesque echoes of its own forgotten darkness, and falling victim to an avenging recrudescence of the mindless frenzy of the first beginnings. (4)

One might contend that this attitude toward the African in *Heart of Darkness* does not belong to Conrad, but rather to Marlow, and that far from endorsing it "Conrad might indeed be holding it up to irony and criticism." (9) According to Achebe "Conrad appears to go to considerable pains to set up layers of insulation between himself and the moral universe of his story." (9) For example, Conrad has a narrator behind a narrator -- he gives us Marlow's account through the filter of a second person. Achebe thus elucidates how "Conrad seems...to approve of Marlow, with only minor reservations -- a fact reinforced by the similarities between their two careers." (10)

Furthermore, Achebe views Conrad as espousing a kind of liberalism that "touched all the best minds of the age in England, Europe and America. It took different forms in the minds of different people but almost always managed to sidestep the ultimate question of equality between white people and black people...[Conrad] would not use the word 'brother' however qualified; the farthest he would go was 'kinship.'" (11) in *Heart of Darkness*. Recognizing this fundamental flaw in Conrad, Achebe thus labels the white European author a "thoroughgoing racist" (11).

Although many students "will point out to you that Conrad is, if anything, less charitable to the Europeans in the story than he is to the natives, that the point of the story is to ridicule Europe's civilizing mission in Africa" (12), and despite the fact that Achebe recognizes to a certain extent that Africa serves as a setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as a human factor, he challenges readers of *Heart of Darkness* to "see the preposterous and perverse arrogance in this reducing Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind." (12) But Achebe does not see this as the real point. Instead, "the real question is the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world." (12) Questioning whether a novel which "celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art" (12), Achebe responds by doubting Conrad's talents as a writer.

Achebe accounts for Conrad's racism against black Africans because of his personal history-- "there remains in Conrad's attitude a residue of antipathy to black people which his peculiar psychology alone can explain. His own account of his first encounter with a black man is very revealing:

A certain enormous buck nigger encountered in Haiti fixed my [Conrad's] conception of blind, furious, unreasoning rage, as manifested in the human animal to the end of my days. Of the
nigger I used to dream for years afterwards. Certainly Conrad had a problem with niggers." (13)
Thus, Achebe clearly sees *Heart of Darkness* as a racist text, one "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. [He is] talking about a story in which the very humanity of black people is called into question" (15) However, Achebe partly does save the reputation of Conrad when he concedes that "Conrad did not originate the image of Africa which we find in his book. It was and is the dominant image of Africa in the Western imagination...Conrad saw and condemned the evil of imperial exploitation but was strangely unaware of the racism on which it sharpened its iron tooth." (19)

1. Does Conrad really "otherize," or impose racist ideology upon, the Africans in *Heart of Darkness*, or does Achebe merely see Conrad from the point of view of an African? Is it merely a matter of view point, or does there exist greater underlying meaning in the definition of racism?
2. How does Achebe's personal history and the context in which he wrote "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" reflect the manner in which he views Conrad's idea of racism in the novel?
3. Taking into account Achebe's assumptions and analysis of racism in *Heart of Darkness*, how does this change Conrad's novel as a literary work, if it does at all?

Heart of Darkness


Some qualified readers believe "Heart of Darkness" to be the greatest story written in English. Even allowing for some exaggeration, the opinion is a tremendous tribute to a Pole (Joseph Theodor Konrad Nalecz Korzeniowski) who entered the marine service at seventeen years, began to learn English at twenty-one, and finished his first novel, Aymayer's Poly, at thirty-seven. "Heart of Darkness" was written at the height of his literary power (1898): what is the nature of this achievement?

Whose story is it? Some readers give the story to Marlow, others to Kurtz. It has been argued that unless we understand the psychological transformation which takes place within Marlow, the meaning of the story is lost. On the other hand, unless we understand the cause of Marlow's transformation there is no story at all — and the cause is the story of Kurtz. The symbolic action of the story can be found by answering at least four questions: What kind of man was Kurtz before he left for Africa? Why did he go? What happened to him at the Inner Station? And, most important of all, why does Marlow call Kurtz's final "judgment," or "affirmation," ("The horror! The Horror!") a "moral victory"?

Before we probe these questions, let us note that the story's basic integrating symbol — the symbol which fuses and makes meaningful all the facts — is the ivory. The ivory operates here as a beckoning crown operates in Macbeth. How else explain the ironic aside of Marlow (for example, "the jolly pioneers of progress") and the Faust theme? What is the slow process by which Kurtz gives his soul to evil (the Devil)?

Before Kurtz left for Africa, he had been a talented man, "a universal genius" whose "impatience of comparative poverty...drove him" to Africa to make his fortune to overcome the objections of his intended's family to their marriage. The ivory and also his talents, recognized by the Company, were to bring him happiness. Kurtz left as "an emissary of pity, and science, and progress...equipped with moral ideas of some sort," and yet when Marlow found him at the Inner Station, Kurtz had been accepted as a deity who "presided at certain midnight dances ending with unspeakable rites, which...were offered up to him...." What had happened to Kurtz?

Kurtz had been confronted with two basic temptations: his desire to make a fortune through ivory, and his discovery of his latent kinship with the savages, as Marlow discovered in himself. Marlow tells us: The savages "howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity — like yours — the...remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar." Within Kurtz these two temptations coalesced, and he yielded to their combined power by using his authority as deity to help him steal "more ivory than all the other agents together." "The wilderness," Marlow tells us, "had
patted him on the head, and, behold, it was like a ball — an ivory ball [the integrating symbol].... it had taken him, loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation.... [The] wilderness...seemed to draw him to its pitiless breast by the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts, by the memory of gratified and monstrous passions." (Italics added.) "If," Marlow says, "anybody had ever struggled with a soul, I am the man."

These quoted passages, interpreted within the context of the entire story, will help us to answer our final question, why does Marlow call Kurtz's final judgment a "moral victory"? When Marlow found Kurtz crawling through the grass back to the village, Marlow told him, "You will be lost — utterly lost," and Kurtz permitted himself (he could have roused the warriors against Marlow) to be carried back to the riverboat. This was the first basic decision by Kurtz, an affirmation that he had bargained with evil and had lost. When therefore, just before he died, he cried, "The horror! The horror!" he had, as Marlow tells us, "pronounced a judgment upon the adventures of his soul on this earth." The judgment was a moral victory because Kurtz had not only acknowledged the evil in himself, but his final vision "was wide enough to penetrate all the hearts that beat in the darkness." (Italics added.) The judgment is a bitter warning to all men against the ever-latent evil in their hearts. Kurtz's discovery came too late; the implication for us is obvious.

The story, then, has at least three levels of meaning, all related to the title. Literally, the heart of darkness means, of course, the heart of Africa — the savage darkness outside civilization. Symbolically, it means the heart of Kurtz; but deepest of all it means the heart of mankind which was — shall we say? — at its birth given to evil, a condition man has fought against for centuries. Kurtz's judgment, "The horror!" seems to come as a result of this insight into the hearts of all men, and this revelation to Marlow appears to be the cause of Marlow's psychological transformation.

The theme of universal guilt, prominent in the history of letters, is presented, for example, rather conventionally in Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," but in "The Hollow Men," Eliot, unlike Conrad, does not merely warn us of the consequences; he tells us we are no longer even sensitive to its presence. Eliot's epigraph, "Mistah Kurtz — he dead," implies in the context of the poem that we, unlike Kurtz, will not cross "With direct eyes, to death's other Kingdom." Kurtz saw the horror of evil, affirmed the evil, and gained a moral victory, while "We grope together/And avoid speech," neither living nor dying heroically.

Although Conrad's celebrated Preface does not refer explicitly to "Heart of Darkness," their dates of composition are close together, and the Preface is suggestive of Conrad's artistic purposes in his story. To read them as companion pieces is an enlightening literary experience.