A CRITIC AT LARGE

JUNGLE FEVER

Why is Joseph Conrad under suspicion? The author reports on
an impassioned debate surrounding "Heart of Darkness."

BY DAVID DENBY

"Who here comes from a savage race?" Professor James Shapiro shouted at his students.

"We all come from Africa," said the one African-American in the class, whom I'll call Henry, calmly referring to the supposition among most anthropologists that human life originated in sub-Saharan Africa. What Henry was saying was that there are no racial hierarchies among peoples—that we're all "savages."

Shapiro smiled. It was not, I thought, exactly the answer he had been looking for, but it was a good answer. Then he was off again. "Are you natural?" he roared at a girl sitting near his end of the seminar table. "What are the constraints for you? What are the rivets? Why are you here getting civilized, reading Lit Hum?"

It was the end of the academic year, and the mood had grown agitated, burdened, portentous. In short, we were reading Joseph Conrad, the final author in Columbia's Literature Humanities (or Lit Hum) course, one of the two famous "great books" courses that have long been required of all Columbia College undergraduates. Both Lit Hum and the other course, Contemporary Civilization, are devoted to the much ridiculed "narrative" of Western culture, the list of classics, which, in the case of Lit Hum, begins with Homer and ends, chronologically speaking, with Virginia Woolf. I was spending the year reading the same books and sitting in on the Lit Hum classes, which were taught entirely in sections; there were no lectures. At the end of the year, the individual instructors were allotted a week for a free choice. Some teachers chose works by Dostoevski or Mann or Gide or Borges. Shapiro, a Shakespeare scholar from the Department of English and Comparative Literature (his book "Shakespeare and the Jews" will be published by Columbia University Press in January), chose Conrad.

The terms of Shapiro's rhetorical questions—savagery, civilization, constraints, rivets—were drawn from Conrad's great novella of colonial deprecation, "Heart of Darkness," and the students, almost all of them freshmen, were electrified. Almost a hundred years old, and familiar to generations of readers, Conrad's little book has lost none of its power to amaze and appall: it remains, in many places, an essential starting point for discussions of modernism, imperialism, the hypocrisies and glories of the West, and the ambiguities of "civilization." Critics by the dozen have subjected it to symbolic, mythological, and psychoanalytic interpretation; T. S. Eliot used a line from it as an epigraph for "The Hollow Men," and Hemingway and Faulkner were much impressed by it, as were Orson Welles and Francis Ford Coppola, who employed it as the ground plan for his despairing epic of Americans in Vietnam, "Apocalypse Now."

In recent years, however, Conrad—and particularly "Heart of Darkness"—has fallen under a cloud of suspicion in the academy. In the curious language of the tribe, the book has become "a site of contestation." After all, Conrad offered a nineteenth-century European's view of Africans as primitive. He attacked Belgian imperialism and in the same breath seemed to praise the British variety. In 1975, the distinguished Nigerian novelist and essayist Chinua Achebe assailed "Heart of Darkness" as racist and called for its elimination from the

A woodcut from a 1942 American edition of Conrad's "Heart of Darkness," a book that has now become "a site of contestation."
canon of Western classics. And recently Edward W. Said, one of the most famous critics and scholars at Columbia today, has been raising hostile and undermining questions about it. Certainly Said is no breaker of canons. But if Conrad were somehow discredited, one could hardly imagine a more successful challenge to what the academic left has repeatedly deplored as the "hegemonic discourse" of the classic Western

him, and, with rare exception, loathes him. The flower of European civilization ("all Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz"), exemplar of light and compassion, journalist, artist, humanist, Kurtz has gone way upriver and at times well into the jungle, abandoning himself to certain . . . practices. Rifle in hand, he has set himself up as god or devil in ascendency over the Africans. Conrad is notoriously vague about what Kurtz actually does, but if you said "kills has been revised, and I found that I was initially discomforted, as I had not been in the past, by the famous manner—the magnificent, alarmed, and (there is no other word) throbbing excitement of Conrad's laboriously mastered English. Conrad was born in czarist-occupied Poland; though he heard English spoken as a boy (and his father translated Shakespeare), it was his third language, and his prose, now and then, betrays the propensity for high intellectual melodrama.

Conrad in 1904 and an entry from his Congo diary. Can a writer be condemned for writing within the confines of his own time?

texts. There is also the inescapable question of justice to Conrad himself.

W R I T T E N in a little more than two months, the last of 1898 and the first of 1899, "Heart of Darkness" is both the story of a journey and a kind of morbid fairy tale. Marlow, Conrad's narrator and familiar alter ego, a British merchant seaman of the eighteen-nineties, travels up the Congo in the service of a rapacious Belgian trading company, hoping to retrieve the company's brilliant representative and ivory trader, Mr. Kurtz, who has mysteriously grown silent. The great Mr. Kurtz! In Africa, everyone gossip about him, envies some people, has sex with others, steals all the ivory, you would not, I believe, be far wrong. In Kurtz, the alleged benevolence of colonialism has flowered into criminality. Marlow's voyage from Europe to Africa and then upriver to Kurtz's Inner Station is a revelation of the squands and disasters of the colonial "mission"; it is also, in Marlow's mind, a journey back to the beginning of creation, when nature reigned exuberant and unrestrained, and a trip figuratively down as well, through the levels of the self to repressed and unlawful desires. At death's door, Marlow and Kurtz find each other.

Rereading a work of literature is often a shock, an encounter with an earlier self that and rhymed abstraction ("the fascination of the abomination") characteristic of his second language, French. Oh, inexcusable, unutterable, unspeakable! The great British critic F. R. Leavis, who loved Conrad, ridiculed such sentences as "It was the stillness of an inaplicable force brooding over an incrustable intention." The sound, Leavis thought, was an overwrought, thrilled embrace of strangeness. (In Max Beerbohm's parody: "Silence, the silence murmurous and unquiet of a tropical night, brooded over the hut that, baked through by the sun, sweated a vapour beneath the cynical light of the stars. . . . Within the hut the form of the white man, corpulent and pale, was covered
with a mosquito-net that was itself illusory like everything else, only more so.)

Read in isolation, some of Conrad’s sentences are certainly a howl, but one reads them in isolation only in criticism like Leavis’s or Achebe’s. Reading the tale straight through, I lost my discomfort after twenty pages or so and felt hopefully under Conrad’s spell; thereafter, even his most heavily freighted constructions dropped into place, summing up the many specific matters that had come before. Marlow speaks:

“Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. The air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish. There was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine. The stations were like the gateways on deserted, the gloom of overshadowed distances. On silvery sandbanks hippos and alligators sunned themselves side by side. The broadening waters flowed through a mob of wooded islands. You lost your way on the steamer as if you would in a desert and butted all day long against shoals trying to find the channel till you thought yourself bewitched and cut off for ever from everything you had known once—somewhere—far away—in another existence perhaps. There were moments when one’s past came back to one, as it will sometimes when you have not a moment to spare to yourself, but it came in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream remembered with wonder amongst the overwhelming realities of this strange world of plants and water and silence. And this stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace. It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention.”

In one sense, the writing now seemed close to the movies: it revelled in sensation and atmosphere, in extreme acts and grotesque violence (however indirectly presented), in shivering enigmas and richly phrased premonitions and frights. In other ways, though, “Heart of Darkness” was modernism at its most intellectually bracing, with tonalities, entirely contemporary and distantized, that I had failed to notice when I was younger—immense pride and immense contempt: a mood of barely contained revulsion; and sardonic humor that verged on malevolence:

“I don’t pretend to say that steamboat floated all the time. More than once she had to wade for a bit, with twenty cannibals splashing around and pushing. We had enlisted some of these chaps on the way for a crew. Fine fellows—cannibals—in their place. They were men one could work with, and I am grateful to them. And, after all, they did not eat each other before my face; they had brought along a provision of hippo-meat which went rotten and made the mystery of the wilderness sinks in my nostrils. Phoo! I can sniff it now. I had the Manager on board and three or four pilgrims (white traders) with their slaves—all complete. Sometimes we came upon a station close by the bank clinging to the skirts of the unknown, and the white men rushing out of a tumble-down hovel with great gestures of joy and surprise and welcome seemed very strange, had the appearance of being held there captive by spell. The word ‘ivory’ would ring in the air for a while—and on we went again into the silence, along empty reaches, round the still bends, between the high walls of our winding way, reverberating in hollow claps the ponderous best of the stern-wheel.”

Out of sight of their countrymen back home, who continue to cloak the colonial mission in the language of Christian charity and improvement, the “pilgrims” have become rapacious and cruel. The cannibals eating hippo meat practice restraint; the Europeans do not. That was the point of Shapiro’s taunting initial sally: “savagery” is inherent in all of us, including the most “civilized,” for we live, according to Conrad, in a brief interlude between innumerable centuries of darkness and the darkness yet to come. Only the rivers, desperately needed to repair Marlow’s pathetically steamboat, offer stability—the rivers and the ship itself and the codes of seamanship and duty are all that hold life together in a time of moral anarchy. Marlow, meeting Kurtz at last, despises him for letting go—and at the same time, with breathtaking ambivalence, admires him for going all the way to the bottom of his soul and discovering there, at the point of death, a judgment of his own life. It is perhaps the most famous death scene written since Shakespeare:

“Anything approaching the change that came over his figure I have never seen before and hope never to see again. Oh, I wasn’t touched. I was fascinated. It was as though a veil had been rent. I saw on that ivory face the expression of sombre pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror—of an intense and hopeless despair. Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision—he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath:

“‘The horror! The horror!’”

Much dispute and occasional merchandise have long attended the question of what, exactly, Kurtz means by the melodic exclamation “The horror!” But surely one of the things he means is his long revelling in “abominations”—his own internal collapse. Shapiro’s opening questions set up a reading of the novella that interrogated the Western civilization of which Kurtz is the supreme representative and of which the students, in their youthful way, were representatives as well.

When Shapiro asked the class why they thought he had chosen “Heart of Darkness,” hands were going up but before he had finished his question.

“You chose it because the whole core curriculum is embodied in Kurtz,” said Henry, who had answered Shapiro’s earlier question. “We embody this knowledge, and the book asks, Do we fall into the void—do we drown or come out with a stronger sense of self?”

Henry had turned the book into a test of the course and of himself. Conrad had great personal significance for him, which didn’t surprise me. An African-American from Baltimore, Henry, in his sophomore year at Columbia, had evolved into a fervent Nietzschean, and, though Conrad claimed to dislike Nietzsche, this was a Nietzschean text. The meaning of Henry’s life—his personal mythology—required (he had said it in class many times) challenge, struggle, and self-transcendence. He was tall and strong, with a flattop “wedge” haircut and a loud, excited voice. Some months after this class, he got himself not tattooed but branded with the insignia of his black Columbia fraternity—an act of excruciating irony unavailable to members of the master race. Kurtz, however horrifying, was an exemplar for him as for Conrad’s hero, Marlow.

A freshman of Chinese descent from Singapore, who was largely reared on British and Continental literature, also saw the book as a test for Western civilization. But, unlike Henry, she hated the abyss. Kurtz was a seduced man, a portent of disintegration. “Can we deal with the knowledge we are seeking?” she asked. “Or will we say, with Kurtz, ‘The horror?’” For her, Kurtz’s outburst was an admission of the failure of knowledge.

And many others made similar remarks. All of a sudden, at the end of the course, the students were quite willing to see their year of education in Western classics as problematic. Their reading of “the great books” could be affirmed only
to me I had stepped into the gloomy circle of some Inferno," he says.

"They were dying slowly—it was very clear. They were not criminals, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now, nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. Brought from all the recesses of coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest. These moribund shapes were free as air—and nearly as thin. I began to distinguish the gleam of the eyes under the trees. Then glancing down I saw a face near my hand. The black bones reclined at full length with one shoulder against the tree, and slowly the eyelids rose and the sunken eyes looked up at me, enormous and vacant, a kind of blind, white flicker in the depths of the orbs which died out slowly. The man seemed young—almost a boy—but you know with them it's hard to tell. I found nothing else to do but to offer him one of my good Sweden's ship's biscuits I had in my pocket. The fingers closed slowly on it and held—there was no other movement and no other glance. He had tied a bit of white worsted round his neck—Why? Where did he get it. Was it a badge—an ornament—a charm—a propitiatory act? Was there any idea at all connected with it. It looked starting round his black neck this bit of white thread from beyond the seas.

"Near the same tree two more bundles of acute angles sat with their legs drawn up. One, with his chin propped on his knees, stared at nothing in an intolerable and appalling manner. His brother phantom rested its forehead as if overcome with a great weariness; and all about others were scattered in every pose of contorted collapse, as in some picture of a massacre or a pestilence."

Despite the last sentence, which links the grove of death to ancient and medival catastrophes, there is a sense here, as many readers have said, of something unprecedented in horror, something new on earth—what later became known as genocide. It is one of Conrad's bitter ironies that at least some of the Europeans forcing the Congolese into labor are "liberals" devoted to the "suppression of savage customs". What they had perpetrated in the Congo was not, perhaps, planned slaughter, but it was a slaughter nonetheless, and some of the students, pointing to the passage, were abashed. Western man had done this. We had created an Inferno on earth. "Heart of Darkness," written at the end of the nineteenth century, resonates unhappily throughout the twentieth. Marlow's shock, his amazement before the sheer strangeness of the ravaged human forms, anticipates what the Allied liberators of the concentration
camps felt in 1945. The answer to the question "Does the book redeem the West?" was clear enough: No book can provide expiation for any culture. But if some crimes are irredeemable, a frank acknowledgment of the crime might lead to a partial remission of sin. Conrad had written such an acknowledgment.

That was the heart of the liberal reading, and Shapiro's students rose to it willingly, gravely, ardently—and then, all of a sudden, the class fell into an acrimonious dispute. Alex was not happy with the way Shapiro and the other students were talking about Kurtz and the moral self-judgment of the West. He thought it was gibber. He couldn't see the book in apocalyptic terms. Kurtz was a criminal, an isolated figure. He was not representative of the West or of anything else. "Why is this a critique of the West?" he demanded. "No culture celebrates men like Kurtz. No culture condones what he did." There was general protest, even a few laughs. "O.K.," he said, yielding a bit. "It can be read as a critique of the West, but not only of the West."

From my corner of the room, I took a hard look at him. He was as tight as a drum, dry, a little supercilious. Kurtz had nothing to do with him—that was his unmistakable attitude. He denied the connection that the other students acknowledged. He was cut off in some way, withholding himself. Yet I knew this student. I had seen him only in class, but there was something familiar in him that irked me, though exactly what it was I couldn't say. Why was he so dense? The other students were not claiming personal responsibility for imperialism or luxuriating in guilt. They were merely admitting participation in an "advanced" civilization that could lose its moral bearings.

Henry, leaning back in his chair—against the wall, behind Alex, who sat at the table—insisted on an existential reading. "Kurtz is an Everyman figure," he said. "He gets down to the soul, below the layers of parents, religion, society."

Alex hotly disagreed. They were talking past each other, offering different angles of approach, but there was an edge to their voices which suggested an animus that went beyond mere disagreement. There was an awkward pause, and some of the students stirred uneas-
"I need you, Roberta. Deep inside me there's a married man aching to get out."
students’ complacencies with rhetorical questions. But sober analysis wasn’t what he wanted, not of this text, and he soon returned to the complicity of the West, and even the Western universities, in a policy that King Leopold II of the Belgians—the man responsible for some of the worst atrocities of colonial Africa—always referred to as noble and self-sacrificing.

“Now else would you guys be civilized except for the noble cause?” Shapiro said.

“You guys are all products of the noble cause. Columbia’s motto, translated from the Latin, is ‘In Thy light shall we see light.’ That’s the light that is supposed to penetrate the heart of darkness, isn’t it?”

“But enlightenment comes only by way of darkness,” said Henry, still at it, and Alex demurred angrily again—no darkness for him—and for a terrible moment I thought they were actually going to come to blows. The women in the class, who for the most part had been silent during these exchanges, were appalled and afterward muttered angrily.

“Is a boy thing, macho showing off. Who’s the biggest intellectual?” True, but maybe it was also a nice thing. Though Shapiro restored order, something had broken, and the class, which had begun so well, with everyone joining in and exounding, had come unraveled.

Is “Heart of Darkness” a depraved book? The following is one of the passages Chinua Achebe deplores as racist.

“We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet. We could have fancied ourselves the first of men taking possession of an unaccursed inheritance, to be subjugated at the cost of profound anguish and of excessive toil. But suddenly we were wrapped round a bend there would be a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass-roofs, a burst of yell, a whiff of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling under the droop of heavy and motionless limbs. We were stupefied along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy. The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us—who could tell? We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings; we gazed past like phantoms, wandering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse. We could not understand because we were too far and could not remember because we were travelling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign—and no memories.

“The earth seemed uncertain. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there—there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly and the men were... No they were not inhuman. Well, you know that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped and spun and made horrific faces, but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity, like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Yes, it was ugly enough, but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you—you so remote from the night of first ages—could comprehend.”

Achebe believes that “Heart of Darkness” is an example of the Western habit of setting 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.” Conrad, obsessed with the black skin of Africans, had as his real purpose the desire to comfort Europeans in their sense of superiority: “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. Achebe dismisses the groove-of-death passage and others like it as “bleeding-heart sentiments,” mere decoration in a book that “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,” and he adds, “I am talking about a story in which the very humanity of black people is called in question.”

Chinua Achebe has written at least one great novel, “Things Fall Apart” (1958), a book I love and from which I have learned a great deal. Yet this article on Conrad (originally a speech delivered at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, in 1975, and revised for the third Norton edition of the novel in 1987 and reprinted as well in Achebe’s 1988 collection of essays, “Hopes and Impediments”) is an act of rhetorical violence, and I recoiled from it. Achebe regards the book not as an expression of its time or as the elaboration of a fictional situation, in which a white man’s fears of the unknown are accurately represented, but as a general slander against Africans, a simple racial attack. As far as Achebe is concerned, Africans have struggled to free themselves from the prison of colonial discourse, and for him reading Conrad meant reentering the prison: “Heart of Darkness” is a book in which Europeans consistently have the upper hand.

Reading Achebe, I wanted to argue that most of the students in the Lit Hum class—not Europeans but an American elite—had seen “Heart of Darkness” as a representation of the West’s infancy, and hardly as an affirmation of its “spiritual grace.” I wanted to argue as well that everything in “Heart of Darkness”—not just the spectacular frights of the African jungle but everything, including the city of Brussels and Marlow’s perception of every white character—is rendered sardonically and nightmarishly as an experience of estrangement and displacement. Conrad certainly describes the Africans gesticulating on the riverbank as a violently incomprehensible “other.” But consider the fictional situation! Having arrived fresh from Europe, Marlow, surrounded by jungle, commands a small steamer travelling up the big river en route to an unknown destiny—death, perhaps. He is a character in an adventure story, baffled by strangeness. Achebe might well have preferred that Marlow engage the Africans in conversation of, at least, observe them closely and come to the realization that they, too, are a people, that they, too, are souls, have a destiny, spiritual struggles, triumphs and disasters of selfhood. But could African selfhood be described within this brief narrative, with its extraordinary physical and philosophical momentum, and within Conrad’s purpose of exposing the “pitless folly” of the Europeans? Achebe wants another story, another hero, another consciousness. As it happens, Marlow, regarding the African tribesmen as savage and incomprehensible, nevertheless feels a kinship with them. He recognizes no moral difference between himself and them. It is the Europeans who have been demoralized.

But what’s the use? Though Achebe is a novelist, not a scholar, variants of his critique have appeared in many academic settings and in response to many classic works. Such publications as Lingua Franca are often filled with ads from university presses for books about literature and race, literature and gender, literature and empire. Whatever these scholars are doing in the classroom, they are seeking to make their reputations outside the
classroom with politicized views of literature. F. R. Leavis’s criterion of greatness in literature—moral seriousness—has been replaced by the moral aggressiveness of the academic critic in nailing the author to whatever power formation existed around him. “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 eighteenth-nineties consciousness of race and our own. At the same time, parts of the academic left now consider the old way of reading fiction for pleasure, for enchantment—my falling hopelessly under Conrad’s spell—to be naïve, an unconscious submission to political values whose nature is disguised precisely by the pleasures of the narrative. In some quarters, pleasure in reading has itself become a political error, rather like sex in Orwell’s “1984.”

As much as Conrad himself, Edward W. Said is a self-created and ambiguous figure. A Palestinian Christian (from a Protestant family), he was brought up in Jerusalem and Cairo, but has built a formidable career in America, where he has assumed the position of the exiled literary man in extremis—an Arab critic of the West who lives and works in the West, a reader who is at home in Western literature but makes an active case for non-Western literature. Said loathes insularity and parochialism, and has disdained “flat-minded” approaches to reading. Over the years, he has gained many disciples and followers, some of whom he has recently chastised for carrying his moral and political critiques of Western literature to the point of caricature. Said has repeatedly discouraged any attempt to “level” the Western canon.

His most famous work is the remarkable “Orientalism” (1978), a charged analysis of the Western habit of constructing an “exotic” image of the Muslim East as an aid to controlling it. In 1993, Said published “Culture and Imperialism” as a sequel to that book, and part of his intention is to bring to account the great European nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers, examining and judging them as a way of combating the notion—still alive today, Said says—that Europeans and Americans have the right to govern the inhabitants of the Third World.

Most imaginative writers of the nineteenth century, Said maintains, failed to connect their work, their own spiritual practice, to the squalid operations of colonialism. Such writers as Austen, Carlyle, Thackeray, Dickens, Tennyson, and Flaubert were heroes of culture who either harbored racist views of the subject people then dominated by the English and the French or merely acquiesced in the material advantages of empire. They took empire for granted as a space in which their characters might roam and prosper; they collided in evil. Here and there, one could see in their work shameless traces of the subordinated world: a sugar plantation in Antigua whose earnings sustain in English luxury a landed family (the Bertrams) in Austen’s “Mansfield Park”; a central character in Dickens’s “Great Expectations” (the convict Magwitch) who enriches himself in the “white colony” of Australia and whose secret bequest turns Pip, the novel’s young hero, into a “London gentleman.” These novels, Said says, could not be fully understood unless their connections to the colonial assumptions and practices in the culture at large were analyzed. But how important, I wonder, is the source of the money to either of these novels? Austen mentions the Antigua plantation only a few times; exactly where the Bertrams’ money came from clearly did not interest her. And if Magwitch had made his pite not in Australia but in, say, Scotland, by illegally cornering the market in barley or mash, how great a difference would it have made to the structural, thematic, and metaphorical substance of “Great Expectations”? Magwitch would still be a disreputable convict whom Pip would have to reject as a scoundrel or accept as his true spiritual father. Were these novels, as literature, seriously affected by the alleged imperial nexus? Or is Said making lawyerlike points, not out of necessity but merely because they can be made? Indeed, one begins to suspect that a work like “Mansfield Park” is useful to Said precisely because it’s such an outlandish example. For if Jane Austen is heavily involved in the creation of imperialism, then every music-hall show, tea-room menu, and floral arrangement is also involved. The West’s cultural innocence must be brought to the bar of justice.

In the end, isn’t Said’s thesis a vast tautology, an assumption that imperialism did, indeed, receive the support of a structure that produced . . . imperialism? By Said’s measure, few writers would escape censure. Proust? Indifferent to French exploitation of North African native workers. (And where did the cork that lined the walls of his bedroom come from? Morocco? The very armature of Proust’s aesthetic contemplation partakes of imperial domination.) Henry James? Failed to inquire into the

*Nice sonata, but it wouldn’t hurt him to comb his hair and smile now and then.*
late-nineteenth-century industrial capitalism and overseas expansion that made possible the leisure, the civilized discourse, and the spiritual anguish of so many of his characters. James’s celebrated refinement was as much a product and an expression of American imperialism as Theodore Roosevelt’s pugnacious jingoism. And so on.

When Said arrives at “Heart of Darkness” (a book he loves), he asserts that Conrad, as much as Marlow and Kurtz, was enclosed within the mind-set of imperial domination and therefore could not imagine any possibilities outside it; that is, Conrad could imagine Africans only as ruled by Europeans. It’s perfectly true that “Heart of Darkness” contains a few widely spaced and ambiguous remarks that appear to praise the British variety of overseas domination. But how much do such remarks matter against the overwhelming weight of all the rest—the awful sense of desolation produced by the physical chaos, the death and ravaging cruelty everywhere? What readers remember is the squalor of imperialism, and it’s surely misleading for Said to speak of “Heart of Darkness” as a work that was “an organic part of the scramble for Africa,” a work that has functioned ever since to reassure Westerners that they had the right to rule the Third World. If we are to discuss the question of the book’s historical effect, shouldn’t we ask, on the contrary, whether thousands of European and American readers may not have become nauseated by colonialism after reading “Heart of Darkness”? Said is so eager to find the hidden power in “Heart of Darkness” that he underestimates the power of what’s on the surface. Here is his summing up:

Kurtz and Marlow acknowledge the darkness, the former as he is dying, the latter as he reflects retrospectively on the meaning of Kurtz’s final words. They (and of course Conrad) are ahead of their time in understanding that what they call “the darkness” has an autonomy of its own, and can reinvent and reclaim whatever imperialism has taken for its own. But Marlow and Kurtz are also creatures of their time and cannot take the next step, which would be to recognize that what they saw, disapprovingly and disparagingly, as a non-European “darkness” was in fact a non-European world resisting imperialism so as one day to regain sovereignty and independence, and not, as Conrad reductively says, to reestablish the darkness. Conrad’s tragic limitation is that even though he could see clearly that on one level imperialism was essentially pure dominance and land-grabbing, he could not then conclude that imperialism had to end so that “natives” could lead lives free from European domination. As a creature of his time, Conrad could not grant the natives their freedom, despite his severe critique of the imperialism that enslaved them.

I have read this passage over and over, each time with increasing disbelief. It’s not enough that Conrad captured the soul of imperialism, the genocidal elimination of a people forced into labor; no, his “tragic limitation” was his failure to “grant the natives their freedom.” Perhaps Said means something fragmentary—a tiny gesture, an implication, a few words that would suggest the liberated future. But I still find the idea bizarre as a suggested improvement of “Heart of Darkness,” and my mind is flooded with visions from terrible Hollywood movies. Mist slowly lifts from thick, dark jungle, revealing a rainbow in the distance; Kurtz, sweating an ivory necklace, gestures to the jungle as he speaks to a magnificent-looking African chief. “Someday your people will throw off the colonial oppressor. Someday your people will be free.”

Dear God, a vision of freedom? After the grove of death? Wouldn’t such a vision amount to the grossest sentimental-
SWIMMING IN THE FLOOD

Later he must have watched
the newsreel,
his village erased by water: farmsteads and churches
breaking and floating away
as if by design;
bloated cattle, lumber, bales of straw
turning in local whirlpools; the camera
panning across the surface, finding the odd
rooftop or skeletal tree,
or homing in to focus on a child’s
shock-headed doll.
Under it all, his house would be standing intact,
the roses and lime trees, the windows,
the baby grand.

He saw it through the water when he dreamed,
and, waking at night, he remembered the rescue boat,
the chickens at the prow, his neighbor’s pig,
the woman beside him clutching a silver frame,
her face dislodged, reduced to a puzzle of bone
and atmosphere, the tremors on her skin
wayward and dark, like shadows crossing a field
of clouded grain.

Later, he would see her on the screen,
trying to smile, as they lifted her onto the dock,
and he’d notice the frame again, baroque and absurd,
and empty, like the faces of the drowned.

—JOHN BURNSIDE

required—to listen to points of view that
are contrary to their own. But what
Achebe and Said (and a fair number of
other politicized critics) are offering is not
simply a different interpretation of this or
that work but something close to an at-
tack on the moral legitimacy of literature.

THERE is no way for me to under-
stand your pain,” Henry said the
next time the class met, speaking to ev-
everyone in general but perhaps to Alex in
particular. “Nor is there any way for you
to understand mine. The only common
ground we have is that we can glimpse
the horror.”

It was a portentous remark for so
young a man, but he backed it up. Launching into a formal presentation of
his ideas about “Heart of Darkness,” he
rose from his seat behind Alex to speak.
At one point, shouting with excitement,
he brushed past him—“Watch out, Alex!”
he warned—and threw some coins into
the air, first catching them and then let-
ting them drop to the table, where they
landed with a clatter and rolled this way
and that. Everyone jumped. “That’s what
the wilderness does," he said. "It disperses what we try to hold under control. Kurtz went in and saw that chaos."

Henry had a talent for melodrama. "Chaos" was another Conradian notion, and I shuddered; our first class on Conrad had come close to breaking apart. Today, however, Shapiro had restored civility, beginning the class with a somber speech. Hourning over the long table, his voice low, he said, "I had to feel a little despair the other day." He warned the students against shouting past one another. He spoke very slowly of his own ambivalence in teaching a book that challenges the very nature of Western society. It's very hard when you teach a course like Lit Hum, which the outside world represents as the normative, or even conservative, view of social values—it's very hard to find yourself. As you read Conrad, do you say, 'Am I going to step away from this culture?' Or do you say, 'I'm going to interact with it in some way that recognizes the contradictions and lies that culture tells itself?'

And Shapiro went on, slowly reestablishing the frame of his class, situating the book in the year's work and in the work of the elite university that sits on a hill above Harlem.

Looking back on our little Kulturkampf, I realize now that however much I disliked Achebe's and Said's approach, they helped me to understand what happened in the classroom. Just as Alex fought so angrily to keep Western civilization untouched by the stain of Kurtz's crimes, I initially wanted "Heart of Darkness" to remain impervious to political criticism. In truth, I don't think any political attack can seriously hurt Conrad's novella. But to maintain that this book is not embedded in the world—to treat it innocently, as earlier critics did, as a garden of symbols, or as a quest for the Grail or the Father, or whatnot—is itself to diminish Conrad's achievement. And to pretend that literature has no political component whatsoever is an equal folly.

However wrong or extreme in individual cases, the academic left has alerted readers to the possible hidden assumptions in language and point of view. Achebe and Said jarred me into seeing, for instance, that Shapiro's way with "Heart of Darkness" was also highly political. I will quickly add that the great value of Shapiro's "liberal" reading is that it did not depend on reductive control of the book's meanings; when the class, provoked by Shapiro's questions, broke down, it did not do so along the cliché lines of whether Conrad was a racist or an imperialist. On the contrary, an African-American student had read the book seeking not victimization through literature but self-realization through literature, and white and Asian students, with one exception, had tried in their different ways not to accuse the text but to interrogate themselves. Their responses participated in the liberal consensus of a great university, in which the act of self-criticism is one of the highest goals and a fulfillment of Western education itself. A benevolent politics, but politics nonetheless.

Reading Conrad again, one is struck by his extraordinary unease—and by what he made of it. In the end, his precarious situation both inside and outside imperialism should be seen not as a weakness but as a strength. Yes, Conrad the master seaman had done his time as a colonial employee, working for a Belgian company in 1890, making his own trip up the Congo. He had lived within the consciousness of colonial expansion. But if he had not, could he have written a book like "Heart of Darkness"? Could he have captured with such devastating force the peculiar, hollow triviality of the colonists' ambitions, the self-seeking, the greed, the pettiness, the lies and evasions? Here was the last great Victorian, insisting on responsibility and order, and fighting, at the same time, an exhausting and often crucifying struggle against uncertainty and doubt of every kind, such that he cast every truth in his fictions as a mocking illusion and turned his morally didactic tale into an endlessly provocative and dismaying battle between stoical assumption of duty and perverse complicity in evil. Conrad's sea-captain hero Marlow loathes the monstrous Kurtz, yet feels, after Kurtz's death, an overpowering loyalty to the integrity of which Kurtz discovered in his furious descent into crime. "The horror" was Conrad's burden as man and artist—the violent contradictions that possessed him. But what a yield in art! Certainly T. S. Eliot and others understood "Heart of Darkness" to be one of the essential works of modernism, a new kind of art in which the radically disjunctive experiences of the age would find expression in ever more complex aesthetic forms. Seen in that light, the spectacular intricacy of Conrad's work is unimaginable without his participation in the destructive energies of imperialism. It's possible that Achebe and Said understand this better than any Western reader ever could. But great work galls us, drives us into folly; the fervor of our response to it is a form of tribute. Despite his "errors," Conrad will never be dropped from the reading lists. Achebe's and Said's anguish only confirms his centrality to the modern age.

At the end of the second class, Henry spoke at length of Kurtz's progression toward death and Marlow's "privilege of watching this self encounter itself," and Alex was silent, perhaps humbled. My antagonism toward him eased. I had not much liked myself as a young man, I remembered. Alex had resisted the class consensus, which took some courage, or stubbornness, and if he thought he was absorbed of "darkness" he had plenty of time to discover otherwise. In Shapiro's class, liberal humanism had resisted and survived, though the experience had left us all a little shaken. It was hard these days, as Shapiro noted, to find yourself.

"I don't want to say that this is a work that teaches desperation, or that evil is something we can't deal with," Shapiro said. "In some ways, the world we live in is not as dark as Conrad's; in some ways, it is darker. This is not a one-way slide to the apocalypse that we are witnessing. We ourselves have the ability now to recognize, and even to fix and change our society, just as literature reflects, embodies, and serves as an agent of change."

The students were relieved. They wanted reconciliation and peace. And one of them, it seems, had, like Marlow, discovered what he was looking for. He had "found" himself. "We scream at the wilderness, and the wilderness screams back," Henry said, concluding his presentation with a flourish. "There's a tension, and at that point of tension we resolve our nature."
Notes on Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Sharer*

1. Conrad was “one of the greatest novelists and stylists” and a major influence on Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Woolf, and Joyce.

2. Conrad looks at the failure of idealism (or misguided idealism) in modern society and searches for ethical conduct in the face of materialism and Naturalism.

3. *The Secret Sharer* is a narrative in the first person with a straight-line plot except for one flashback.

4. The story has two levels of meaning: (1) the literal one: an adventure to help Leggatt escape, and (2) the “internal” one: a descent in the subconscious.

5. The story exploits the ancient myth or archetypal experience of the “night journey,” the journey within oneself: “There can be no improvement without self-analysis.”

   A. The cause of the journey is a psychological need to know, to face the truth, to test oneself, to gain insight.

   B. The journey is a solitary one: the person faces the truth alone.

   C. The journey may be portrayed as a descent into the earth (epics), an illuminating dream that reveals the inner self, or an actual voyage (ocean, sea, wilderness, river, tunnel, etc.)

   D. The atmosphere of the journey is “unreal” even dream-like: shadows, fleeting images, gloom, uneasiness, mystery, dim spectral figures, fantastic events, etc. In this atmosphere, however, come the truth.

   E. The effect of the voyage is a profound psychological and spiritual change: new insights, new priorities, new values, new goals, etc.

6. The Captain starts with three problems: unfamiliar with the ship, uncertain about respect from the crew, and a stranger to himself.

7. The Captain’s position is a solitary one: “…I was left alone with my ship…far from all human eyes….”

8. Leggatt emerges out of the deep, out of the unconscious, primitive life of man.

9. The Captain of the *Sephora* seeks to imprison Leggatt in the name of civilization.

10. Our young Captain faces a dilemma: to give into the demands of society or to follow personal imperatives, psychological realities, “natural” truth.

11. The Captain’s solution involves complexities to discuss..

12. Symbols of note: shadows, fog, darkness, light, sleeping suit, hat, rope ladder, cigar pagoda, headless corpse, silvery and fishlike body, fences