

A Heart of Hypocrisy

1
2 Achebe is a reactionary. From *Things Fall Apart*, to his criticism of Joseph Conrad's
3 *Heart of Darkness*, a novella that is an allegory against the imperialism, racism, and colonialism
4 that plagued the world during the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, a
5 novella that tries to show the hypocrisy of the European countries; Achebe is reacting negatively
6 to this novella that proves that European white guilt, the white man's burden, are lies because
7 Achebe does not want to see the evidence but wants to react with emotion. It is true Europeans
8 never went to Africa to make the African continent like Europe; they never went to truly
9 colonize for the benefit of the African people, nor did they go to truly spread their religion. The
10 people of Europe, according to Conrad, went to Africa for greed, for ivory, for personal
11 advancement while drowning the African people both physically and mentally for is that not
12 what the Manager had come to do? Had he, or Kurtz, or any other man or pilgrim, had they not
13 come to the Congo for money, for power? Europeans came to enact their will on the African
14 continent. They swallowed the culture and superstitions of the African people and suffocated that
15 culture with their own or in the case of Kurtz saw that these things could be advantageous; For
16 Europeans cry African culture is inferior while European culture is superior. Let those African
17 savages die in the fusillade of smoke and bullets; Let them die from the starvation, disease, and
18 strain of work; let them perish at the feet of the Europeans—those who maintain a higher level of
19 culture than the savages of Africa. That is thought of Europeans during Conrad's time; he is
20 portraying what he saw in Africa. These things he shows in *Heart of Darkness*, those terrible
21 things, are not his own feelings but the feelings of his countrymen at the time *Heart of Darkness*
22 was written. *Heart of Darkness* is not a novella meant for those who cannot handle the truth of
23 the nineteenth century; it is not meant for an immature audience who cannot handle the racist

1 remarks or the disregard of human life. This novella is meant for those who can see past the
2 grime to what Conrad truly meant in his work: that racism, imperialism, colonialism are all
3 things that should not be taking place for those actions show no regard for the lives of other
4 humans as all they do is exploit a superstitious culture, but a culture none the less.

5 This is what Achebe is appalled by: the utter disregard for African life, for human life;
6 the fact that in *Heart of Darkness* Conrad portrays characters with little to no moral substance.
7 They are hollow men, they are the men that care only for themselves, men that can feel nothing
8 for other human beings and exploit them as slaves and feed them nothing, paying them in wire;
9 these men are men who complain when those that are on the brink of death moan their last
10 breathe (Eliot 1). Conrad uses those men, not to say that is what Europeans should be doing, not
11 to show how he personally feels about those in the Congo, or in Africa in general, but to show
12 the intentions of other Europeans as they went into the heart of the African continent. Characters
13 like the Main Accountant at the first station are narcissistic as he uses starving slaves as his way
14 to keep up his personal hygiene. A man who can train a person to clean, make, and press linens,
15 and then watch that person slowly die from malnourishment is a man with no moral character; a
16 man such as that is a man who cares only for himself, a man who sees people only as tools, not
17 as human beings (Conrad 18). Likewise, the Manager is man who only wants power. Kurtz is a
18 man who kills with ease to acquire his precious ivory, his precious intended; the heads he
19 impales on sticks and the lives that he takes mean nothing as he thinks Machiavellian; his one
20 end justifies every act, every single mean.

21 Furthermore, others feel as Achebe does, that *Heart of Darkness* is a racist work, one that
22 should be reevaluated as a work taught at the high school level because it is teaching students
23 that being low in moral character is something that is exemplary; that being a racist is something

1 that is appropriate, something that would propel one forward in life perhaps. That is not true.
2 Conrad was a liberal, a man well ahead of his time, one who saw past the black and white and
3 imperialism of his time. *Heart of Darkness* is his political allegory showing what really happens
4 in the Congo during the late nineteenth century; it shows that men such as the Main Accountant
5 and the Manager are those who truly are savages not the cannibals or the natives that Kurtz
6 coaxes into following him. The African people are shown to truly care about the lives of others
7 while the Main Accountant complains when a man is dying outside of his tent; he complains that
8 that man will not stop with his coughing, his loud breathing; he takes no effort to try and help the
9 man that he is killing with the labor he forces upon him; he offers him no quarter or food; he
10 offers him no shade but asks for him not to “loiter in it” (Conrad 18). Achebe indubitably is
11 correct about *Heart of Darkness* as a text that should not be taught in high school; *Heart of*
12 *Darkness* is a novella that should be taught at the college level, not just because of its political
13 allegory, but due to the well above average and complex style of Conrad’s writing that would
14 challenge readers at a college level, but torment those at the high school level; it is a novella that
15 causes one to have to take a step back, look at the bigger picture, and then try and describe that
16 narrative as a whole—something that most high school students may not be able to achieve.
17 Achebe, when he wrote his criticism and his reactionary novel, was not thinking so much on the
18 logical side of things; he was a man, an African man, who had found himself categorized in
19 Conrad’s novel as one without culture, one without sophistication. Conrad did not mean to say
20 that those in the Congo or near it are not sophisticated but to show how the Europeans abused the
21 African people, he had no time to go into the rich culture of the natives for that would not have
22 been Marlow—that would have been Conrad who, in *Heart of Darkness*, is twice removed from
23 the narration of the novella.

1 Yet, Achebe does not see what Conrad was actually trying to do; he just sees that the
2 African people in Conrad's novella are being mistreated and not given the basic human rights of
3 man. He attacks with straw man fallacies: he compliments Conrad only to tear down his own
4 compliment. Achebe states that "Conrad... is undoubtedly one of the great stylists of modern
5 fiction" only to attack his style three paragraphs later assuming the reader all ready forgot
6 Achebe's compliment earlier: "his method amounts to no more than a steady, ponderous, fake-
7 ritualistic repetition of two antithetical sentences, one about silence and another about frenzy."
8 (Achebe 2) Achebe is utilizing a straw man's fallacy. He cares nothing of Conrad's style; his
9 compliment is patronizing Conrad. Achebe sees Conrad's style as a farce; Achebe believes that
10 Conrad is using his style poorly, causing his writing to be a lie; he calls Conrad a romantic-- a
11 man who will exaggerate what he sees. Achebe states: "[Conrad] might not exactly admire
12 savages clapping their hands and stamping their feet but they have... the merit of being in their
13 place... For Conrad things being in their place is of the utmost importance (Achebe 3)." Achebe
14 means that Conrad set his novella to be exactly how it is; that it is not an allegory, that it is
15 merely a racist work of "European fiction (Achebe 1)." Yet, Conrad does not lie; he tells no
16 farce. Conrad is twice removed from the narration of *Heart of Darkness* once by Marlow and yet
17 another time by the narrator himself. It is quite easy for at least one of those men telling the
18 narrative of Kurtz in the Congo to mistake or misinterpret a fact that may or may not have
19 happened. Marlow could have stated that the Africans that accompanied Kurtz were men and
20 women of a great cultural prowess, but the narrator of *Heart of Darkness*, the man telling the
21 story that he had heard only once, had misheard Marlow as if Marlow had stated that the people
22 of the Congo had no culture, no prowess, and that they coward away in fear from the supposed
23 great and mighty European culture projecting the narrators own bias onto Marlow's story. One

1 cannot completely trust the narrator or Marlow which is the intended purpose of this type of
2 narration. Conrad, by using a secondary account of what happened pushes the idea that
3 everything may not be exactly as it appears. The European continent, Conrad seems to plea, must
4 not listen to the propaganda that lingers in the street. Europeans were told to pity, were told that
5 they were superior to the Africans by their scientists, by their government, but Conrad did not
6 see it as this. This is what Achebe seems to ignore. The Congo during this time that Marlow is in
7 it is a time where something can happen that is immediately followed by quiet, by stillness, and
8 vice versa. This Africa is not the Africa Achebe was raised; in fact Achebe was born thirty plus
9 years after the time that this story supposedly takes place. This story takes place before World
10 War One, before Kaiser Wilhelm is deposed and before the African continent is remapped by the
11 Allied Powers. It is true that Conrad goes from frenzy to calm in immediate sentences, but that is
12 something that has no real effect toward the holistic meaning of *Heart of Darkness*. Achebe can
13 criticize Conrad's style all he likes, but he cannot logically ignore the fact that Joseph Conrad did
14 not agree with the attitudes of the time.

15 Although characters in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* are characters who maintain a
16 nineteenth century attitude toward Africa which indeed makes them racist, the novella itself is
17 not a racist work. Conrad wrote *Heart of Darkness* as a political allegory to the people of Europe
18 to hopefully show them how foolish it is to think that their race of people is superior to another.
19 Conrad hoped that his novella would show that the people of Africa are people and not savages,
20 just people looking to survive in the wild and unruly expanse that is Africa. Achebe is a man of
21 great intellect and he should have been able to see this if he were not clouded by emotion.
22 Achebe should not logically deny Conrad's original purpose in writing the novella for he is a
23 man of great intelligence, yet others may simply pass it off as Achebe did by only reacting with

1 emotion, or others may not be able to understand the work due to the complex style and excellent
2 vocabulary of Joseph Conrad. *Heart of Darkness* is a novella that should be looked at
3 intellectually at the college level for if it were to be examined with the smoke of emotion or
4 through the eyes of one without the ability to comprehend the political allegory behind it, it
5 would be interpreted and passed off as one of the most extreme and racist works of the late
6 nineteenth century even though that title is not befitting of this novella. *Heart of Darkness* is not
7 that; it is not a racist work. Conrad's purpose was not racist and if one was to intellectually
8 examine the novella that would be apparent and that is why it is a work that is deemed only
9 appropriate for a college course.

10

1
2
3
4
5
6

Works Cited

Achebe, Chinua. "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'" Rev. of *Heart of Darkness*. *Massachusetts Review* 1961: 251-61. Print.

Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. London: Orion, ,1996. Print.

Eliot, Thomas S. "The Hollow Men by T S Eliot." - *Famous Poems, Famous Poets*. All Poetry, n.d. Web. 21 Oct. 2014.