

1 The Dilemma of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

2 In mid-May of 2006, Professor Lennard J. Davis of the University of Illinois at Chicago
3 published an essay discussing his experiences of teaching Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.
4 Within that essay were various testimonies from his students detailing why they believed the novel
5 was racist; this is followed up by Davis's own opinions which essentially are a re-statement of his
6 students'. After teaching *Heart of Darkness* for thirty years and defending Conrad's use of racist
7 terms and adoption of a racist and Eurocentric attitude, Davis contemplated removing the novella
8 from his curriculum due to the overwhelming volume of complaints and offense taken by the
9 students. This is mirrored in Chinua Achebe's criticism in his essay entitled "An Image of Africa:
10 Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'" in which he heavily accuses Conrad of being a racist since
11 he dehumanizes the African people as a whole throughout the text. This trend of abandoning certain
12 classical novels due to criticism seems to be a pressing issue in many schools across the country
13 since they have been in the spotlight for such a lengthy time that readers continue to find new aspects
14 to criticize; such is the case of *Heart of Darkness*. However, if the reader is able to decipher Conrad's
15 excessively difficult style of writing, diction, and syntax then he should also be able to remove
16 himself from the text rather than personally taking offense to what is happening in the story because
17 that is truly the point of reading complicated works in school: it exposes the student to a complex
18 novel to build on critical reading skills that are important for higher levels of education, namely
19 college, but also life as well.

20 By definition, imperialism is the policy that allows a country to extend its power to various
21 countries, cultures, and societies in order to influence and alter it. In the context of *Heart of*
22 *Darkness*, this seems accurate since the novella is centered around an unnamed, assumingly white
23 and European, narrator listening to Marlow who is also white and European tell his story about
24 traveling into "a prehistoric earth" (Conrad 42) to find Kurtz. Given the historical context of the

1 novel, it seems impractical to accuse the author of possessing the same opinions as the narrators of
2 the novella because *Heart of Darkness* was written and published in 1899, not long after the surge of
3 imperialism began in the early eighteenth century. During this time, it was socially acceptable to
4 openly believe that Europeans were superior to other cultures and societies as well as openly
5 denounce them. Thus Achebe's claim that "Western psychoanalysts must regard the kind of racism
6 displayed in Conrad absolutely normal" (Achebe 5) becomes completely irrelevant since he
7 essentially damages his own argument; the racism Conrad writes in his narrators *was* normal at the
8 time. To be completely realistic, if this harsh characterization of Africans is such a critical issue and
9 should not be taught in schools, what is stopping anyone from making the argument that the history
10 of slavery should be removed from schools' curriculums for similar reasons as well? Requiring this
11 book to be read in schools is not forcing the students to believe what is being said in the novella, it is
12 simply exposing them to a difficult piece of literature that requires a higher level of analytical
13 thinking and promotes reading skills that are critically important for reading and dissecting other
14 novels. Ideally, an AP-level student should be capable of being open-minded and analytical enough
15 to grasp the concept that Joseph Conrad wrote this novel in a time when societal and cultural
16 standards were completely different than they are today.

17 The upbringing of Joseph Conrad is one aspect that highly fueled Achebe's claims that
18 Conrad wrote his narrators with his own opinions. Born to Polish parents in the Ukraine, he spent
19 most of his life in Poland and the Russian province of Vologda but eventually traveled to Marseilles
20 at the age of sixteen. It was at this time that Conrad began his seafaring career that allowed him to
21 travel to places such as the West Indies, South America, India, Australia, and Africa. In his criticism,
22 Achebe claims that Marlow and Conrad share similar careers which is absolutely true because they
23 are both mariners; yet, Achebe takes it a step further and extends those similarities to their beliefs as
24 well which is completely illegitimate with his given evidence. He establishes his point by first stating

1 that “Marlow seems to me to enjoy Conrad’s complete confidence – a feeling reinforced by the close
2 similarities between their two careers” (Achebe 4) which is a valid point. As he continues, though, he
3 implies that Conrad and Marlow are analogous and interchangeable when discussing the opinions
4 expressed in *Heart of Darkness*; he writes, “the kind of liberalism espoused here by Marlow/Conrad
5 touched all the best minds of the age in England” (Achebe 4) which suggests that both Conrad the
6 individual and Marlow the fictitious character are on the same level of literary influence because they
7 are essentially the same person with the same beliefs. Achebe has no support for this claim which
8 makes it disputable at best; in the context of the essay, it severely damages the validity of his overall
9 argument. It is justified to assume that if students in high school and college can pick up on the
10 necessity to separate themselves from the novel then an individual of high literary merit such as
11 Achebe should notice this since Conrad is quite obviously not narrating the novella himself despite
12 his claims, which makes his argument weaker overall.

13 One of the most steadfast arguments behind maintaining this novella in school curriculums is
14 that it is raw history and literature combined: it offers students the opportunity to not only learn about
15 the attitude towards other cultures in the nineteenth century but also to develop skills that aid in
16 college and life. *Heart of Darkness* is not a novella detailing why the African race alone is inferior to
17 the Europeans. It is a text that criticizes the concept of imperialism and characterizes the Eurocentric
18 attitude that most individuals embodied in the eighteenth century, vividly emphasized when Conrad
19 writes that “no, they were not inhuman. Well, you know that was the worst of it – this suspicion of
20 their not being human ... but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity – like yours –
21 the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar” (Conrad 43). However, he
22 backtracks a bit after he acknowledges the fact that they are indeed human and begins to question
23 why others cannot comprehend that as well. He goes as far to say that “the mind of man is capable of
24 anything ... the man knows, and can look on without a wink. But he must at least be as much of a

1 man as these on the shore” (Conrad 43), suggesting that both Africans and Europeans are equal at the
2 most basic level which, at that time, was somewhat progressive thinking. Rather than writing his own
3 opinions, Conrad intentionally removes himself twice from the story and creates two narrators that
4 act as filters for the story that is being told on the Thames. Also, since it accurately depicts this
5 attitude that Africans witnessed, it becomes a holistically realistic novella that highlights the
6 tendency for people to be condescending of other various peoples. It does not gloss over the more
7 horrendous and terrible things because that is not realistic; one cannot just skip the horrible things
8 that happen in life and neither does *Heart of Darkness*.

9 At a glance, Conrad’s incredibly well-known novella *Heart of Darkness* may come off as
10 condescending and racist from the viewpoint of Marlow and the unnamed narrator and justifiably so.
11 The novella is absolutely racist. However, the standards of this time period are the sole reason
12 readers think this in today’s society. During the height of imperialism around the middle of the
13 eighteenth century, it was generally accepted to believe that Africans were inferior to Europeans
14 because the overall attitude was greatly Eurocentric. Achebe, though, seems to miss this concept
15 completely and personally takes offense to the terms and overall attitude expressed in the novella
16 which is most likely one of the biggest reasons why the volume of students who disapprove of this
17 piece of literature is so high. Misinterpretation can ruin a classic book which is what has apparently
18 taken place during Achebe’s reading; in an ideal situation, a student reading the work would be
19 capable of stepping outside of his comfort zone to acknowledge and learn about topics that most
20 people are not familiar with anymore in order to broaden his educational opportunities.

21 Works Consulted

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