

Postcolonial Criticism of *Heart of Darkness*: A Casebook

'I knew it--I was sure!' ...She knew. She was sure. I heard her weeping; she had hidden her face in her hands. It seemed to me that the house would collapse before I could escape, that the heavens would fall upon my head. But nothing happened. The heavens do not fall for such a trifle. Would they have fallen, I wonder, if I had rendered Kurtz that justice which was his due? Hadn't he said he wanted only justice? But I couldn't. I could not tell her. It would have been too dark--too dark altogether.... (Conrad 77)

Heart of Darkness concludes with a lie. In the final scene, Marlow relates how he could not bring himself to tell the truth about Kurtz to his "Intended" back home in London: that he had thoroughly forsaken her for "a wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman" who was both "savage" and "superb" (60). Having made the visit in response to "an impulse of unconscious loyalty" that he himself did not fully comprehend (72), Marlow nevertheless realized that the corruption that wholly consumed Kurtz during his time in Africa could not be adequately explained to someone who had never been there and seen it for herself. Thus, the reader understands that Marlow's lie parallels the underlying implication of his entire tale, which forms the context of Joseph Conrad's celebrated novel: that *the noble cause of empire-building is itself a lie*, a front for unchecked greed, cruelty, and exploitation on a massive scale. Indeed, those who have experienced it up close, like Conrad and Marlow, recognize in the broad sense of the word, a dangerous and abiding "darkness" at the core of the enterprise that is nothing less than, as Kurtz described it, a "horror." All through the novel, as Marlow recounts his journey along the Congo River to and from Kurtz's isolated Inner Station, the reader sees what Marlow sees,

and is exposed to the often stark contrast between the imperial ideal and the tragic reality of English operations in Africa at the end of the nineteenth century. There is, most assuredly, a darkness here--an otherworldly theater of suffering, madness, and death--that must be overcome. And yet, important questions remain. Where, exactly, does this darkness originate, according to Conrad? Does it grow in the heart of the conquering white man, or does it lurk in the primeval jungles of the Dark Continent? Does the invasion of Western civilization represent the cause, or the cure? More specifically, is *Heart of Darkness* a brilliant literary achievement that exposes the evil motives behind imperialism, or a deplorable expression of racism that should be expelled from the canon for its depiction of black people and African culture as inherently inferior? Postcolonial critics from various racial backgrounds have debated the issue for more than three decades now, examining the text as a point of reference for general discussion about the effects of colonization upon the consciousness of the colonized. What follows is a brief overview of six representative essays that apply postcolonial theory to *Heart of Darkness* in an effort to explore the larger question of the role of literature in matters of race.

Conrad's novel enjoyed three-quarters of a century of praise until Chinua Achebe raised the question of the author's racism in his provocative essay, "An Image of Africa," in 1977. Originally presented as an address at the University of Massachusetts, the celebrated Nigerian writer and professor claimed that "*Heart of Darkness* projects the image of Africa as 'the other world,' the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where a man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by bestiality" (338). The idea of "the Other," popularized by Edward Said (Bressler 240), is prominent in postcolonial theory; the opposite forces of colonizer and colonized suggest a binary in which the invader is privileged and therefore superior to the subaltern society it seeks to dominate. As expressed in literature, the

relative worth of one society is made more readily apparent by showing its contrast with the other. In this sense Achebe finds in *Heart of Darkness* "the desire--one might indeed say the need--in Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil in Europe, a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar in comparison with which Europe's own state of grace will be manifest" (337). This might seem unavoidable in a novel that depicts the British presence in Africa in 1899, when Conrad penned his story. While Achebe acknowledges this, he objects to such a work being canonized as "permanent literature" (337) for the simple reason that it "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" (346). This is, of course, a valid point, and the question becomes one of weighing the literary merit of the novel against the culture-bound prejudices it undeniably contains. But Achebe goes further, exploiting the idea of "negation" to suggest that Conrad denied even humanity to his black characters to the point that he can declare, "Conrad was a bloody racist" (343) and "Certainly, Conrad had a problem with niggers" (345). He sees in the language, plot, and structure of *Heart of Darkness* a nefarious design that Conrad skillfully creates in order to portray Africa as a vortex of corrupting evil "into which the wandering European enters at his peril" (344), as in the case of Kurtz. Thus, Conrad's "darkness" is the specter of man's primitive past, marked by such things as barbarism (even cannibalism), rudimentary living just above the level of the animal, and ritual superstition; it still resides in Africa and nests in the heart of every black man, threatening to undermine the foundations of white culture (represented by the British Empire) that nobly seeks to subdue it.

For all its venom, "An Image of Africa" is important for raising key questions about the lenses through which we interpret literature, and for its emphasis on the perspective of the Other,

a central theme not only of postcolonial critics, but of feminist, gender, and race theorists who would follow Achebe. His bold accusations (which he would later soften in a revised version of his essay) shifted the focus of criticism about *Heart of Darkness*, and published responses to his claims are legion. Of these, Cedric Watts's, "'A Bloody Racist': About Achebe's View of Conrad," published in 1983, stands as a prominent example and is often quoted in subsequent articles of similar opinion. Watts, a white, Cambridge educated professor at the University of Sussex since 1965, makes the convincing argument, largely ignored by Achebe, that Conrad's "organizational principle" deliberately subverts the myths and assumptions of his time concerning imperialism (198), namely, that it improved other cultures and reflected a missionary compassion that was both benevolent and benign in its intention and effects. Watts sees Marlow's depiction of *whites* as predominantly negative, finds *similarities* rather than differences between Kurtz's black and white women, and assigns to Marlow the cynical view that imperialism is a purely capitalist endeavor. While Marlow's disgust for the British obsession with African ivory is implied rather than overtly stated (for after all, Marlow is himself a part of the program), Watts uses careful literary analysis to assert that, in Marlow's eyes, London fares no better than Africa, and his narrative "obliges the reader to ask whether civilization is a valuable, fragile improvement of savagery, or a hypocritical elaboration of it" (200). Clearly, Watts places Conrad in the latter category. It soon becomes evident that Watts is challenging not only Achebe's argument but his method, and it is at this point that postcolonial critics of all stripes must take notice. Watts decries the "increasingly fashionable" tendency "for critics to reduce complex works to binary oppositions" (203) and then startlingly turns the tables on Achebe:

Achebe makes it clear that he could praise *Heart of Darkness* only if he felt that its values tallied with his own, which include hostility to imperialism. An obvious paradox arises. A critic who in his travels through the world of letters seeks to commend those areas which he can annex as supports for his own values is practising *ideological imperialism*: his readings may constitute a support-system for himself as *critical emperor*. (207, emphasis added)

After Watts, postcolonial critics are careful to avoid Achebe's narrow lens in using *Heart of Darkness* as a proof-text to advance social agendas, and they are more concerned with the literary aspects of established canonical works from previous generations when positing theories. A case in point is Homi Bhabha's "Signs Taken for Wonders," an important contribution to postcolonial studies that gives considerable attention to *Heart of Darkness* without demonizing Conrad. Following Watts by just two years, Bhabha's essay moves beyond the "third possibility...of cultural equivalence between the two regions" (Watts 200) in setting forth his concept of hybridity, the "split-consciousness in which the individual identifies simultaneously with his or her own people and with the colonial power" (Richter 1763). For Bhabha, an Indian by birth whose resume lists positions at prestigious English and American universities, hybridity incorporates the ideas of Foucault in recognizing the shifting forces or discourses that are inevitable when one culture imposes its values upon another, and also appropriates Derrida's ideas to his proposition that "what is disavowed [in the colonized culture] is not repressed but repeated as something *different*--a mutation, a hybrid" (Bhabha 153). Thus, the opposing cultures impact each other for better and worse; perhaps this explains why Conrad's "darkness" is as easily seen in the English lust for wealth and power as it is in the barbarism of the African tribes.

By taking this approach, Bhabha avoids the trap of bitter personal attacks against governments, races, or their heirs, in the guise of scholarship; he prefers the role of theoretical observer, carefully explaining the dynamics of the Postmodern world in which discourses act upon society to produce something new that owes its existence to multiple traditions. His prose is filled with technical jargon and his meaning is often obscure, but Bhabha's academic prose style diffuses the emotion that often marks debates that rage about the edge of racial issues. Ultimately unconcerned with the political motivations for conquest or the attitudes that take shape between different races as a result, Bhabha maintains that the colonized become like their colonizers while still retaining aspects of their original identity and customs, which is, ironically, a form of resistance.

Central to the process of hybridization is "the emblem of the "English book...an insignia of colonial authority and a signifier of colonial desire and discipline" (144). The Bible, for instance, is a tool used by British imperialists both to justify their activities in foreign lands and to shape a new society there based on their own. The appearance of the English book relieves the uncertainty felt by both cultures; in *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad has Marlow come upon a copy of Towson's *Inquiry into Some Points of Seamanship* at a moment when he is "cut off from the comprehension of his surroundings, desperately in need of a deliberate belief" (Bhabha 146). The effect on Marlow is dramatic:

Caught as he is--between the madness of "prehistoric" Africa and the unconscious desire to repeat the traumatic intervention of modern colonialism within the compass of a seaman's yarn--Towson's manual provides Marlow with a singleness of intention. It is the book of work that turns delirium into the discourse of civil address. (Bhabha 148).

In identifying this relatively minor episode as a literary device that is crucial to the novel's relevance, Bhabha transforms Conrad from a racist polemicist (Achebe) or a social apologist (Watts) into a gifted writer possessed of keen insight to the workings of history; in the process, *Heart of Darkness* is similarly rescued from the crossfire of political debate and made into a valuable document for studying the mechanics of cultural change brought about by colonization.

Perhaps the most notable of the postcolonial theorists is Edward Said, whose writings strongly influenced Bhabha and others. In his foundational work, *Orientalism* (1978), Said emphasizes that knowledge of other cultures is limited by the perspective of one's own ideology; consequently, negative stereotypes were created to justify European expansion into the East during the nineteenth century. In subsequent works, he develops the concept of the colonized as "Other" who were seen as inferior and therefore deserved to be ruled. Thus, broad characterizations of colonized peoples are always suspect because they do not reflect the authentic "narrative" in its rich variety that can only be heard in the voices of the colonized themselves (Bressler 240). In 1993, Said joined the conversation on the significance of Conrad's novel with his essay, "Two Visions in *Heart of Darkness*." Following Bhabha, Said views the novel as one of a "set of rich cultural documents in which the interaction between Europe or America on the one hand and the imperialized world on the other is animated, informed, made explicit as an experience for both sides of the encounter" (423).

Said notes that Conrad, being himself a Polish expatriate, remains in some sense an outsider to the imperialist program; he is therefore not "in perfect synchrony" with the "machine," though he knows how it functions. "Never the wholly incorporated and fully acculturated Englishman," Said observes, "Conrad therefore preserved an ironic distance in each of his own works." This seems to exonerate the novelist from Achebe's harshest criticisms, but

Said readily admits that this same distance that allows Marlow to question the assumptions of imperialism (as Conrad might), while willfully participating in it, makes it possible to "derive two possible arguments, two visions, in the post-colonial world." In other words, we can regard *Heart of Darkness* as a universal manifesto for imperialism, *or* as the report of a localized, subjective experience with an uncertain outcome. Said leans toward the latter of these two possibilities (Said 425-6).

At the very end of the novel, Marlow understands that civilization, or perhaps the vast structure of the empire itself, is unstable--a false and fragile front that masks but does not really bring light to the world: "The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky--seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness" (Conrad 77). The darkness that bathes Africa in violence, that corrupts the mind of Kurtz, is potentially everywhere. Imperialism does not extinguish it so much as it summons it forth. And here, floating on the Thames in anticipation of another journey, Marlow knows it. Said points out that "Conrad's genius allowed him to realize that the ever-present darkness could be colonized or illuminated...but that it also had to be acknowledged as independent;" both Kurtz and Marlow perceive that at any time "what they call 'the darkness' has an autonomy of its own, and can reinvade and reclaim what imperialism had taken for *its* own." But Said insists that they *cannot* perceive that the non-European "darkness" was simply a *resistance* with a view to "one day regain sovereignty and independence, and not...to reestablish the darkness" (428). Their full appreciation of non-European culture is limited by the values of Western society and the ideology of their own moment in history.

At the end of his essay, the Palestinian-born Said acknowledges that "Many of the most interesting post-colonial writers bear their past within them--as scars of humiliating wounds, as instigation for different practices, as potentially revised visions of the past tending toward a new future, as urgently reinterpretable and redeployable experiences, in which the formerly silent native speaks and acts on territory taken back from the empire" (429). Said lists Achebe as one of these writers, and rightly so, given that his *Things Fall Apart* is one of the best known works such as those Said so succinctly describes. Coming from a leading postcolonial theorist like Said, one may suspect that this tribute might serve as the definitive word on the prickly Nigerian's interpretation of *Heart of Darkness*. Not so. In fact, the strands of Achebe's argument continue to see life in recent scholarship in both postcolonial and ethnic studies, fueled in part by the ongoing racial tension in contemporary society. As Richter explains, "in both areas of study parallel questions have emerged" to the degree that "it may be hard to distinguish postcolonial writing from that of minority groups" around the globe (1753).

An excellent study of the rationale behind the negative African response to Conrad's novel (by Achebe and others) is Rino Zhuwarara's, "*Heart of Darkness* Revisited," appearing just on the heels of Said's, "Two Visions." Zhuwarara recognizes "the inherently skeptical and ruthlessly questioning stance assumed by Marlow" (224) and credits Conrad with being an insightful critic of the evils of imperialism in innumerable ways throughout the essay. His primary objection, however, is that the novel is "too dependent on stereotypes of the time" which are "part of a long-standing tradition which has been harmful to blacks for centuries" (221). Of particular interest is his reference to the nineteenth century idea of the Chain of Being that ranked every part of the created order; for Zhuwarara, *Heart of Darkness*, with its depiction of "blacks as primitive primates" only reinforces this ignorant perception which lingers even today

(231). This argument is prominent in the works of contemporary ethnic theorists, notably Henry Louis Gates, Jr., who claims that the Chain of Being ranked blacks as "first cousin to the ape" and called it "Europe's fundamental figure of domination" (1900). Zhuwarara concludes: "Conrad allowed the prejudiced and popular imagination of his time to run away with his story of the Congo and in the process he prevented a whole continent from occupying its rightful place in the human family" (239). This judgment became part of a growing sentiment at the end of the twentieth century that questioned whether *Heart of Darkness*, despite its acknowledged literary merit, should be read at all. Some forty years past "An Image of Africa," respected Australian scholar Inga Clendinnen returns to the text with a view towards reconciling the clash of opinions in her well-written article, "Preempting Postcolonial Critique: Europeans in the *Heart of Darkness*."

Clendinnen argues, answering Achebe with textual evidence, that the novel fails to show the accomplished history of African culture because Conrad's Africa "escapes time" (4). For some reason, Europeans who are so naturally skilled in suppressing peoples all over the world cannot quite tame this place, to their own unending frustration to which Marlow is a chagrined witness. There is something, Clendinnen argues, in the spirit of the people that refuses to succumb, though they might, on occasion, adopt the trappings of European life, to Marlow's disgust. Clendinnen believes that, while Conrad "reiterated some cultural notions, he also had some deeply uncomfortable things to say about what happens to people, whatever their nationality, who invade and exploit another people for their own ends" (6). In other words, Conrad's primary focus is on the moral disintegration of the colonizer, expressed so overtly in Kurtz but also in Marlow, who represents the "process of a consciousness struggling to order perceptions into a coherent explanation of what is before it" (11). Making her point with

numerous examples from the narrative, she suggests that this should be the reader's focus as well. In fact, to Clendinnen, "the Europeans we encounter are ludicrous self-deceivers, dangerous to others, dangerous to themselves, reeling about in a hallucinatory world" (6), while the "Africans cannot be changed" by the attempts to colonize them; "They can only be corrupted, or destroyed" (4). In this way Conrad "preempts" the work of later postcolonial critics, demonstrating through literary art what theorists of subsequent generations would observe and elucidate concerning the legacy of imperialism. Joseph Conrad: the first postcolonial critic!

Clendinnen supports the continued study of *Heart of Darkness* for its central message that "to exert power over others, especially alien others, brings disaster to all," showing how Conrad relates the "injuries of empire" again and again (17). But can this ever satisfy today's black readers, who must overcome so much in the text that offends them? Does the continued reading of *Heart of Darkness* keep negative stereotypes alive? Postcolonial theory, with its emphasis on the political, social, and psychological effects on the colonized, cautions us, through the work of Said and his contemporaries, that the only way to fully appreciate the consciousness inherent in colonized cultures is to hear their own voices. Zhuwarara, additionally, states that works such as *Heart of Darkness* "can help to start a debate about the fate of the oppressed, but ultimately, they cannot be a substitute for the voices of the oppressed themselves" (241). As the six critics cited in this casebook reveal in their different ethnic backgrounds and conflicting opinions over four decades, no single perspective about any work can any longer be sufficient. This may be the enduring value of postcolonial criticism itself, to encourage understanding through the promotion of literature reflecting the experience of all peoples.

Heart of Darkness was written in under the cloud of creeping doubt called Modernism; by virtue of its great literary power it has survived an entire century, and now must contend with

the realities of a Postmodern world, with the words of Derrida, Lacan, and Foucault forever casting doubt on its interpretation. Fresher, long-silenced voices have a right to be heard. As the feminist and race theorist Barbara Christian complains, "the terms 'minority' and 'discourse' are located firmly in a Western dualistic or 'binary' frame which sees the rest of the world as minor," but "many of us have never conceived of ourselves only as somebody's *other*" (1860). It is a sentiment that Marlow--sitting in his boat on the stagnant Thames, exhausted from his tale and preparing to sail forward into parts unknown--would certainly understand.

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