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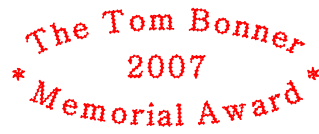
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Unfair Accusations of Racism Regarding Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness

The capacity for a cosmopolitan civilization lies in our aptitude for the impartial acceptance of the single individual. The ascension of the human brain, to our present level of higher complexities, brought with it this gift. Sadly enough, this ascension also brought with it hate—the scourge of humanity. Hate is a powerful emotion that can have many meanings and even more unfortunate consequences; however, it cannot exist without leading to distinct and unnatural separation. Throughout time, the separation of men has been the plague of history. The unfair labeling of inferiority, based entirely on the premise of another's own superiority, breeds hate. In recent centuries, there has been no greater source of separation than that of racism. Racism is the separation of people through ethnicity, the belief that one ethnic group is better, or more important than another. Debates have raged on for generations as to what constitutes racism. One such debate involves the literary classic Heart of Darkness. Joseph Conrad's masterpiece has suffered much scrutiny over the past several decades from accusations of it having a racist nature. Heart of Darkness is the story of a man, Marlow, telling the epic tale of his life-altering journey up the Congo River, through the African jungle. Marlow, satisfying his boyhood fascination with central Africa, gains employment as a steamboat captain for a mysterious French company pursuing colonial endeavors in Africa. Marlow sails to

Africa and is then forced to hike for days to reach his vessel. Once he arrives, Marlow must then repair the steamboat and trudge down the treacherous river of the Congo to rescue an endangered Mr. Kurtz. While engrossed in the intrepid voyage from France to Kurtz, Marlow comes face to face with deceit, corruption, greed, and death. He also surprisingly discovers that Kurtz is in no need of rescuing. Although there is a separate narrator, the accounts of Africa are relayed totally through Marlow, which nearly encompasses the text in its entirety. As Marlow describes his journey, his in-depth descriptions of the Africans he encounters bring into question the possibility of his racism. Chinua Achebe, an esteemed and controversial literary critic, refers boldly to Conrad, in his essay “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*,” as “a thoroughgoing racist” (343). I am not scholarly qualified to argue the claim of Conrad’s racism, as I have yet to thoroughly study everything he’s written; however, I can dispute claims of racism regarding specific passages in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness that Achebe directly attacks. Careful examination of the language and meaning of the text can determine that Achebe’s assessment is quite unfair.

The passage of over a century since the publication of Heart of Darkness has brought forth many fundamental changes in social awareness and the referential usage to skin color. Conrad does, on more than one occasion, employ several, by today’s standards, derogatory statements in reference to Africans, and for this reason, Achebe’s claims are not without merit. Hunt Hawkins, another literary critic who is in agreement with Achebe, states, “Achebe is quite right that much of *Heart of Darkness* dehumanizes Africans. Conrad’s narrator, Marlow, often uses frankly derogatory language in



describing them. At various points in the story he refers to them as ‘savages,’ ‘niggers,’ and ‘rudimentary souls’” (366). Such naive bigotry was commonplace in the British high society, and since Marlow’s audience—the Director of Companies, the lawyer, the accountant, and the nameless narrator—aboard a yacht, all belonged to this upper-class, he uses their language to more convincingly relay his story. With these passages, however, either prior to, or following thereafter, Conrad’s language and descriptiveness, and often sympathy or admiration, eases the offensiveness, an aspect of the text that Achebe suspiciously omits.

The introduction of Africans is provided ten pages into the text in an admirable fashion. During the sluggish maritime expedition along the African coast, Marlow peacefully describes how, “The voice of the surf heard now and then was positive pleasure, like the speech of a brother. It was something natural, that had its reason, that had a meaning” (Conrad 13). Immediately following this passage is Marlow’s *first* contact with Africans:

Now and then a boat from the shore gave one a momentary contact with reality. It was paddled by black fellows. You could see from afar the white of their eyeballs glistening. They shouted, sang; their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks—these chaps; but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast. They wanted no excuse for being there. They were a great comfort to look at. (Conrad 13)

Achebe interprets this passage oddly. He attacks Conrad for presumably reducing the individuals in the boat to “things in their place” (340). He attempts to support this with his claim, “For Conrad things being in their place is of the utmost importance” (Achebe 340). This claim immediately leaps to his statement regarding Conrad’s presumed feelings: “Tragedy begins when things leave their accustomed place, like Europe leaving its safe stronghold between the policeman and the baker to take a peep into the heart of darkness” (Achebe 340). If this statement is true, then we must bring to question just who is out of place. Marlow and the other Europeans left their accustomed place and traveled to Africa; so does this mean that Conrad disapproves of Europeans? Achebe’s argument here is somewhat vague; it lacks substance because he fails to extrapolate thoroughly with any clear evidence of his claims. My observations of this passage differ greatly. Marlow clearly makes the comparison between the “peaceful pleasure” of the coastal surf from the earlier passage and the African men racing along-side his enormous transport vessel (Conrad 13). Setting up a positive premise, the extremely critical Marlow further describes them as “a great comfort to look at” (Conrad 13). Additionally, Marlow refers to them as “fellows” and “chaps” (Conrad 13). These labels hardly have any negative, or hatred-based connotations that might suggest any nuance of racism. It’s my opinion that Achebe stretched his argument for this passage in order to further support his thesis. Marlow is clearly mesmerized by the men and experiences some serene tranquility as he observes them. This first encounter leaves the reader expecting only similar experiences.

The second incident of encountering Africans occurs on Marlow’s arrival at the Company station. Here, Marlow’s capacity for pity is revealed as he witnesses the

Africans' pain. Momentarily settling for a needed repose from his journey, Marlow stumbles into a hideous grove obscured by a veil of death. This grove housed dozens of Africans, all desperately struggling for every gifted breath. Marlow illustrates to the reader a picture of agonizing, torturous death:

They were dying slowly—it was very clear. They were not enemies, 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 the 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. (Conrad 17)

Achebe coldly dismisses the passage as simple English liberalism, as he argues, “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...” (342). Referring to the workers as “nothing earthly now, nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation lying confusedly in the greenish gloom” (Conrad 17), isn't meant to pollute the western image of Africans, but instead meant to enhance the visual expression of the madness Marlow is witnessing, to appropriately convey the true anguish being suffered. In regards to the depiction of the scene, C. B. Cox expresses, “Conrad's language is bitter and furious at this wanton smashup, this dehumanization of landscape and people” (36). He then further elaborates with the compliment, “We admire Marlow because he feels such sympathies”

(Cox 36). Stressing the impact of Marlow's much needed, painfully descriptive illustration, Norman Sherry, a Conrad essayist, proclaims, "Conrad finds a forceful and representative image for the cruelty he knew existed. The cumulative effect of the 'grove of death' achieves more of the 'resonance' he desired than a mere recording of scattered and factual examples" (28). Additionally, Marlow's astonishment left him clueless as to what action to take next. He confesses, "I found nothing else to do but to offer him one of my good Swede's ship's biscuits I had in my pocket" (Conrad 17). Marlow's gesture of giving echoes the sounds of sympathy; again, this is hardly the act of a thoroughgoing racist. One critic calls the events that occurred at the company station "one of the greatest of Conrad's many moments of compassionate rendering" (Guerard 6). Furthermore, another critic enthusiastically comments, "The most obvious and important point to be made... is that it conveys a controlled but intense indignation against racial exploitation..." (Watts 179). The deathly imagery and heartfelt compassion used with Conrad's narrative is needed to awaken the imagination to the ghastly consequences of twentieth century European colonialism.

As Marlow ventures along the serpentine labyrinth of the Congo River, he is uncertain as to what to expect as he anxiously awaits each new split or bend in the river. With our next encounter, we are able to witness Marlow's natural and unrestrained reaction as he unexpectedly stumbles upon a large group of Africans. Up until this point, Marlow has only witnessed Africans from afar, safely aboard a ship or within a wicked cluster of suffering, anxiously awaiting death; he possesses many uncertainties about the African natives and their endless jungle. Prior to the encounter, he whispers,

We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness. It was very quiet there. At night sometimes the roll of drums behind the curtain of trees would run up the river and remain sustained faintly, as if hovering in the air high over our heads till the first break of day. Whether it meant war, peace, or prayer we could not tell. (Conrad 35)

This passage offers the slightest undertone of the lingering fear Marlow is feeling, if not that, then certainly apprehension of the situation. This passage is vital in understanding Marlow's reaction to the impending encounter. His intoxicating account of the upcoming vision transports the reader directly onto the riverfront of the Congo, amidst the native themselves:

But suddenly as we struggled round a bend there would be a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass-roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage. The steamer toiled 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 glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse. (Conrad 35)

Marlow's thunder stricken audience listens as he digresses from topic, he then returns with, "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... but if you were man

enough you would admit to yourself...” (Conrad 36). Achebe’s criticism is again superficial as he continues his assault. He states, “Having shown us Africa in the mass, Conrad then zeros in, half a page later, on a specific example, giving us one of his rare descriptions of an African who is not just limbs or rolling eyes” (Achebe 339). Failing to even mention the lines here that *could* suggest racism, Achebe dismissingly skips over the hidden message within these passages; the only part of these quotes he sees is “...a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage” (Conrad 35). Peter Firchow—in reference to Achebe and other Conrad accusers—accurately states, in his work “Envisioning Africa: Racism and Imperialism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*,” “...recent criticism treats *Heart of Darkness* more like a sociological text than a work of art...” (qtd. in Kuchta). It’s important to understand Marlow’s surroundings and his state of mind at this moment. The immensity of the jungle forces upon one a surreal loneliness, a false sense of solitude, and an unrelenting echo of fear, as the first quoted passage from this scene suggests. The shock of turning a corner and finding a dizzying array of mysterious tribesmen in an energetic, seemingly spiritual ritual will force any mind into an imaginative cascade. Marlow declares, with certainty, that the men are very much human. He is, however, guilty of this notion frightening him. It’s Marlow’s fear that labels the very notion of their humanity as “the worst of it” (Conrad 36). It’s the truest essence of his courage that asserts,

What was there after all? Joy, fear, sorrow, devotion, valour, rage—who can tell?—but truth—truth stripped of its cloak of time. Let the fool gape



and shudder—the man knows and can look on without a wink. But he must at least be as much of a man as these of the shore. He must meet that truth with his own true stuff—with his own inborn strength. (Conrad 36)

The sum of these passages offers a unique insight into Marlow's psyche. He undergoes a personal revelation about the natives, their humanity and their undeniable relation to his. Up to this point, the natives have been an enigma to Marlow, something observed, never associated with. Realizing their close kinship startles him, but he quickly realizes the importance of being able to accept such a discovery and pushes his audience, and the acute reader, into realizing the same.

Nearing the end of Marlow's jungle expedition, he reaches the Company's inner station managed by the enigmatic Mr. Kurtz. Upon his convoy's arrival, we're given the unanticipated opportunity to observe Marlow's reaction to his first encounter with an African woman. Conrad surprisingly allocates nearly an entire page for the intense description of the mystifying jungle priestess:

She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent... Her face had a tragic and fierce aspect of wild sorrow and of dumb pain mingled with the fear of some struggling, half-shaped resolve. She stood looking at us without a stir and like the wilderness itself, with an air of brooding over an inscrutable purpose. (Conrad 61)

Achebe, though misconstruing Conrad's purpose, is partially accurate with his explanation of this particular passage:

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 and murmured, 'I had heard you were coming.'... She had a mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering." (341)

Achebe again uses the ambiguous argument of Conrad's love for "things in their place" (340). The one side of his argument, being quite unsubstantiated, is offset by the worthy claim that the jungle temptress—and almost certain mistress of Kurtz—is the counterpart for Kurtz's intended, a sophisticated European woman. Achebe glosses over any reason as to why there's a need for an African counterpart to the intended, a point I will return to momentarily. He simply continues relentlessly with his assault: "But perhaps the most significant difference is the one implied in the author's bestowal of human expression to the one and the withholding of it from the other. It is clearly not part of Conrad's purpose to confer language on the 'rudimentary souls' of Africa" (341). Conrad's action of denying language to the African woman isn't meant to withhold human expression from Africans as a whole, it's merely meant to strengthen the reader's understanding that there exists a distinct communications barrier between the peoples of the two continents. Curiously enough, contrary to Achebe's claim, Conrad does indeed show several of the Africans verbally expressing themselves. One instance occurs when Marlow and his

steamer are stranded in the dense fog of the Congo, and when ominous shrieks are heard from close ashore, the leader of steamboat's cannibal crew speaks to Marlow: "'Catch 'im,' he snapped with a bloodshot widening of his eyes and a flash of sharp teeth—'catch 'im. Give 'im to us.' 'To you eh?' I asked; 'what would you do with them?' 'Eat 'im!' he said curtly" (Conrad 40). The second instance occurs immediately following the death of Kurtz, another one of Marlow's savage crew enters the dining area and announces, "Mistah Kurtz—he dead" (Conrad 69). With two lucid occurrences illustrated, Achebe's attack on Conrad for not granting the Africans language is lacking. Additionally, a direct explanation for the absence of language, within the tribal woman, leads us back to the claim of her being a direct counterpart to Kurtz's intended.

Furthermore, there does exist a valid explanation for the African woman being a total counterpart for the European intended. Let us not forget the solitary purpose of the novella, Marlow's vigorous expedition to locate and retrieve Mr. Kurtz from the inner station. Conrad tirelessly spends an astonishing amount of time mystifying Kurtz. Kurtz is a man that went to Africa on a mission, just like Marlow, and lost himself; he is a man torn between two worlds. The two women are representatives and the sole embodiment of the two worlds of Kurtz. With both of Achebe's arguments failing, it leaves the comprehensive detail of the encounter with the native woman entirely devoid of any racial connotations, superficial or otherwise.

The subject of racism is unquestionably one of the most difficult themes of literary discussion. It stirs passion within any heart, regardless of skin tone or ethnicity. The accusations of racism in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness sparks an enthralling

debate, primarily because it can be so well argued in either direction, as Chinua Achebe and others have so clearly demonstrated; and for opening this great scholarly discussion, we owe them a debt of gratitude. Achebe's complaints about the novella are warranted due to Conrad's employment of offensive references—"savage," "nigger"—that convincingly suggest prejudice. Unfortunately for Achebe, many readers feel there's a lack of malice behind Conrad's use of such terms. Lennard J. Davis thoroughly argues for Conrad against his malevolence, attempting to stress his naivety in regards to social and racial concerns by stating,

One stance I had taken in the past about works like this one, or, say, the work of Ezra Pound, who was anti-Semitic, or Ernest Hemingway, a notorious male chauvinist, was that the authors were simply reflecting the prejudices of their time. I had always argued that Conrad's use of the N-word, which he has Marlow say more than a few times, is typical of a man of his period.

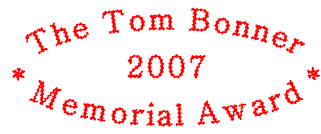
Peter Firchow additionally argues, "If Conrad or his novel are racist, it is only in a weak sense since Heart of Darkness acknowledges racial distinctions but does not suggest an essential superiority of any particular group" (qtd. in Lackey). Critics such as Achebe become blinded by moral indignation when there's clear usage of offensive language. Padmini Mongia reiterates my earlier assessment of Achebe: "...Conrad proffers many positive comments on Africans which Achebe chooses to ignore." She also suggests, "...although Africans are presented as negative, so too are Europeans, in fact even more so" (Mongia). This statement is in reference to Marlow's dislike of—among many other

Europeans—the General Manager of the Company’s Central Station. Marlow claims, “He had no learning, and no intelligence” (Conrad 22). He also states, “He was a chattering idiot” (Conrad 23). Although the derogatory statements may not have been purposely designed to offend or belittle any particular race, it’s unfortunate, yet quite evident that they do. A theory introduced by Hildegard Hoeller suggests that Heart of Darkness suffers from “getting trapped in a racist view of the world despite its sophisticated narrative structure, layers of irony, and experimental modes” (131). Essentially, the artistic genius of Joseph Conrad will forever be overshadowed by Achebe’s accusations of racism. And it can never be known for certain whether he used these bigoted terms naively or maliciously.

Though I have fought to defend Joseph Conrad, because I believe Heart of Darkness is not a racist text, I, in no way, condone or support the use of any labeling or singling out of any individual, nor any disrespect directed towards them. It is felt, however, that the claims of his racism are not entirely fair and the arguments overlook many key statements and references throughout the text. Racism is one of the greatest fears within society, whether it’s the fear of being discriminated against, or the fear of being accused of discrimination. It’s important to remember that race is a construct created entirely by man, in order to subvert our natural unity as one race. In essence, racism never existed, until we created it to purposely impose the unnatural division of humanity.

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