

Noah Lightman

Mr. Mahoney

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Conserving Conrad: Defending Conrad against Achebe's Allegations of Racism

Renowned non-violent activist and victim of European imperialism Mohandas Gandhi once remarked, "Just as a man would not cherish living in a body other than his own, so do nations not like to live under other nations, however noble and great the latter may be." Similar to Mohandas Gandhi, African author Chinua Achebe is a victim of European imperialism and a notorious non-violent leader working to ensure that history does not repeat itself. While African writers like Achebe expose the ill-nature of imperialism from a much more personal standpoint, Joseph Conrad, nevertheless, condemns the horrific realities of colonialism, yet from an outsider's perspective. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* examines the destructive conditions that European imperialism creates and how human morals will unfortunately bend for producing mere profit. Charlie Marlow, one of the two narrators, struggles to comprehend the heinous crimes committed by his fellow Europeans. Despite Achebe's proposal in "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'" that Conrad's prejudice toward blacks naturally exceeds any interests of exposing the evils of colonialism, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* successfully reveals the atrociousness of European presence in central Africa, exposing the harm inflicted on human decency.

Even though Achebe cites Conrad's first interaction with a black person in Haiti to suggest Conrad's natural racism, Conrad incorporates Marlow and Kurtz as symbols of guilt, apologizing for his behavior with the Haitian. As Marlow rambles to the other men of the ship – all of whom, by their own admission, pay little attention to him – he discusses the conquests by the Romans. Marlow notes that rather than occupying land from far away, they simply pilfer and flee. Conrad includes Marlow's story of the Romans in the beginning to elucidate that groups sought to take advantage of distant lands long before the present, producing purely adverse effects. To emphasize the futility of colonialism, Marlow comments that “the conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who carry a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much” (Conrad 69). Recognizing colonialism's danger, Conrad also reflects on its prejudice and despicable jingoism. Achebe asserts that Conrad's description of the Haitian as an “enormous buck nigger” (Achebe) solely describes Conrad's interpretation of Africans, but Conrad includes similar disrespectful language in *Heart of Darkness* – he calls them “savages” and “criminals” – to display cruel mentalities of many Europeans with a credence of African inferiority. Perhaps Marlow's story of the Romans' expeditions is Conrad's way of repenting for his fowl reaction to the Haitian. Covering a brief history of imperialism, Conrad espouses tolerance, condemning the immorality of taking advantage of those who are different.

Whereas Marlow represents Europeans with a conscience, Conrad detests and regrets once thinking like Kurtz who symbolizes hateful and unsympathetic Europeans. Kurtz, a successful ivory trader, is deployed to the Congo where he parades his deceitful personality to assume the role of an idol in the eyes of the Africans. Conrad labels Kurtz as a “pitiful Jupiter” (Conrad 135) to discuss the godliness Kurtz deviously elicits when the Africans carry him on a

stretcher to his respective compound, an unprotested event. Notwithstanding the horrific damage Kurtz inflicts onto the villages, the Africans are astonished by his merciless behavior and continue to protect him. While Achebe asserts that Conrad enlists Africans who protect and revere Kurtz – like Kurtz’s African lover – simply as a tool to “win Conrad’s special brand of approval” (Achebe), Conrad ironically divulges his intense disappointment with the African people through these figures. Moreover, the sophistication and firepower of weaponry dramatically increased during the nineteenth century and contributes significantly to the European ability to colonize. The gadgets and gizmos Kurtz introduces enthrall the Africans, causing them to overlook the reality of Kurtz’s detrimental impact on humanity. The technology and powerful spectacle Kurtz introduces captivates the Africans and, to Kurtz, justifies his treacherous behavior. Kurtz lacks empathy and correct faith in human morals, epitomizing many Europeans of the time.

To criticize the disgraceful purposes of colonialism, Conrad mocks the behavior of the colonists who believe they deserve absolute superiority. Many whites, like Kurtz, are compelled to civilize and tame the Africans. Cecil Rhodes, a proponent of European expansion proclaims that Europeans acquire a “duty to seize every opportunity of acquiring more territory and we should keep this one idea steadily before our eyes that more territory simply means more of the Anglo-Saxon race more of the best the most human, most honourable race the world possesses” (Rhodes 243). Rhodes serves as one of the many influential figures Conrad despises. Both individuals typify the tragic European confidence, assuming they possess complete free will, even though what they consider morally correct is extremely inhumane and an existential threat. While Achebe proposes that Conrad intentionally “sidesteps the ultimate question of equality between white people and black people” (Achebe), Conrad’s inclusion of Kurtz suggests the

depiction of the unfortunate racist and unfathomable views white Europeans such as Rhodes advocate. Exposing Kurtz assists Conrad to repent not only for insulting the black Haitian, but also for historical instances of dehumanizing Africans.

The Eldorado Exploring Expedition and Kurtz, archetypes of European maliciousness aid Conrad in exposing the unfortunate ruthlessness of European colonists. Contrary to Achebe's message that Conrad labels Africans as "savages" to reveal his racism toward blacks, Conrad allegorically attributes the same connotation to Europeans. *Heart of Darkness's* Eldorado Exploring Expedition assists Conrad's goal of attacking those who lie about their objectives. The company does not disclose its factual actions, calling itself an innocent ivory trading company. An uncertain Marlow considers their discussions "reckless without hardihood, greedy without audacity, and cruel without courage [...] with no moral purpose at the back of it than there is burglars breaking into a safe" (Conrad 99). The company represents the turning point of human morality, transforming a profitable enterprise to shameful fraudulence. Kurtz, a special agent of the Eldorado Exploration Edition, calls to "exterminate all the brutes!" (Conrad 123) in his pamphlet and suggests that his literature will help him with future career opportunities. Conrad inserts such language to reveal the barbaric reality of the Europeans. Not only do the Europeans exploit the resources, but they embrace genocidal intentions, as Kurtz unveils. While Achebe suggests that Conrad solely characterizes the Africans with the term "savage," Conrad presents the callous actions of the white Europeans to portray their equal uncivilized nature.

As Conrad attacks the wicked Europeans, he incorporates attitudes from historical records of European officers in Africa practicing a genocidal philosophy through Kurtz and the Eldorado Exploring Expedition. Colonel Richard Meinertzhagen – stationed in Kenya – documents the countless times his troops destroy innocent villages, even if a crime is committed

only by a single individual of those villages. Meinertzhagen recollects delivering “orders that every living thing except children should be killed without mercy [...] we burned all the huts and razed the banana plantations to the ground” (Meinertzhagen 261). The destruction of villages is a common parallel between the historical authenticity and the brutality inflicted by the whites in *Heart of Darkness*. Similarly, the Eldorado Exploration Expedition is a fictional example of the vicious European institutions that forces the Africans to work in concentration-camp like conditions to extract resources. In an interview by Roger Casement – British consul in the Congo – with two Africans, one reveals that in a six day trip the “chiefs were hanged, and we were killed and starved and worked beyond endurance to get rubber” (The Casement Report 258). Actions undertaken by the Europeans, whether for business or military purposes, represent the low morality and dignity of human life. Conrad’s loathing of European behaviors overrides Achebe’s displeasure with Conrad apparent racism.

Although Achebe stresses that the dual narration of *Heart of Darkness* represents Conrad’s “totally wasted” (Achebe) sympathy for the situational developments, Conrad employs both narrations to emphasize the disturbing reality of the European unwillingness to stand up to the inhumane treatment. Marlow’s aunt, who helps him become the skipper of a steamship, serves as a prime example for Conrad’s disappointment of Europeans, allowing the heinous crimes to continue casually. Prior to Marlow’s departure, he meets with her for tea where she converses about “weaning those ignorant millions from those horrid ways” (Conrad 76). Naturally, Marlow becomes uncomfortable after her statement; however, he does not challenge her comment and chooses to peregrinate to Africa, fully aware that his aunt knows about the company’s despicable conduct. Whereas Marlow has an opportunity to change his future, and even advocate against the company, he cowardly chooses to accept the intolerant words of his

aunt and continues with his journey. When Marlow reminisces about the events in the Congo, Conrad enlists a shadowy, unnamed narrator to describe Marlow's recitation. The narrator points out that no audience member on the ship, where Marlow recounts the events, listens to him. Marlow's story is "accepted in silence. No one took the trouble to grunt even" (Conrad 68). Conrad includes this to profess the disinterested Europeans, disinclined to comprehend meaning in something of existential importance. European reluctance augments Conrad's message in *Heart of Darkness* and becomes overlooked by Achebe.

Regardless of Achebe's assertion that Conrad seeks to degrade Africans, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* significantly exposes the harmful impact of colonialism, and nonetheless, illustrates the Europeans' shameful abuse. Achebe's Nigerian nationality considerably enhances his message in "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'," however it undermines Conrad's meaningful purpose for writing *Heart of Darkness*. Growing up during a period of intense societal bigotry toward blacks, readers expect Conrad to express mild intolerance in his literature. Maturely, Achebe recognizes Conrad's natural flaw, but focuses predominantly on this issue rather than accepting, and furthermore commending, Conrad's ability to uncover the horrors of colonialism despite popular beliefs in Europe. Nevertheless, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* does not intentionally dehumanize Africans, it reveals human immorality so history does not repeat itself.

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