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Joseph Conrad in the Popular Imaginary: The Case of *Heart of Darkness*

Harry Sewlall

Summary

In his defining work *The Great Tradition* (1948), F.R. Leavis declared, with characteristic asperity, that apart from Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad, “there are no novelists in English worth reading” (Leavis [1948]1962: 9). Notwithstanding Conrad’s canonisation in the pantheon of the “great tradition” of English literature, he has been a controversial figure, first, in his native country Poland, and subsequently in parts of Africa where Achebe’s *ad hominem* attack on the writer still echoes in the corridors of academe well into the 21st century. In this paper I argue that *Heart of Darkness*, as is often referenced in the media and the popular imaginary, is much more than just a journalistic shorthand or cliché for stereotypes about Africa or Conrad for that matter. Stated differently, the title of Conrad’s novella has become metonymic of anything and everything negative about Africa, which in turn has detracted from the story’s impact as an exposé of the evils of colonialism.

Opsomming

In sy bepalende werk *The Great Tradition* (1948), verklaar F.R. Leavis met sy kenmerkende felheid dat behalwe Jane Austin, George Elliot, Henry James en Joseph Conrad, “daar geen Engelse romanskrywer is wat werd is om gelees te word nie” (Leavis 1949: 9; my vertaling). Ten spyte van Conrad se kanonisering in die panteon van die “grootse tradisie” van die Engelse literatuur, was hy ’n aanvegbare figuur, ten eerste, in sy geboorteland Pole en gevolglik in dele van Afrika waar Achebe se *ad hominem* aanval op dié skrywer steeds in die 21ste eeu deur die gange van die akademiese wêreld weerklink. In hierdie artikel stel ek dat *Heart of Darkness*, soos dikwels daarna in die media en in die populêre fiktiewe verwys word, baie méér is as ’n joernalistieke kortbegrip of cliché vir stereotipes oor Afrika en selfs oor Conrad. Anders gestel, die titel van Conrad se novelle het die simbool geword van alles wat in Afrika verkeerd is en het gevolglik afbreuk gedoen aan die verhaal se onthulling van die boosheid van kolonialisme.

On 4 July 2013, I attended a one-day, in-house conference hosted by the English Department of the University of Pretoria with the express purpose of interfacing with some African scholars in order to gain insights into prevailing attitudes to Conrad generally and to *Heart of Darkness* specifically.¹ The keynote address, titled “Visions of the Future in Contemporary African Literatures and Cultures”, was delivered by the distinguished Australian scholar Bill Ashcroft. Although the programme did not feature a paper on Conrad per se, there were one or two delegates who, predictably, invoked Conrad’s embattled work *Heart of Darkness* in passing to exemplify the West’s negative stereotyping of Africa and its people. Admittedly, one or two negative views of African scholars at a one-day gathering that was not even dedicated to Conrad can hardly be considered as a valid position of African scholars in general on Conrad’s status in Africa. Indeed, according to a search conducted by my university subject librarian, Conrad’s works do appear on the shelves of universities in Botswana, Malawi, Namibia and Kenya. Whether they are being assiduously studied is another matter. One of the delegates at the conference, Solomon Azumarana, who felt strongly about the negative portrayal of Africans in *Heart of Darkness* wrote to me subsequently in response to my question on the status of *Heart of Darkness* at his institution:²

Yes, students study *Heart of Darkness* in my university. Some of the lecturers, including my humble self, believe that a proper understanding of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* can only be achieved if it is studied intertextually with Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. This is usually at the first or second year [level] when students offer “Introduction to the Novel” and “The Novel: Classifications and Techniques”

My thought on *Heart of Darkness* is in line with that of most African scholars that the novel was written to promote the Eurocentric ideology of the savagery of the African.

As to my question whether his university prescribed any other texts by Conrad besides *Heart of Darkness*, my correspondent replied, “No, students are not required to study any other of Conrad’s texts”. Conrad, at least at this institution, is not read for the reasons that Ngugi wa Thiong’o and his contemporaries once read him at Makerere University in the 1950s when

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1. I am indebted to Gail Fincham, a notable Conradian and a professor at the University of Cape Town, for making me aware of this conference and for encouraging me to invite myself to it. I am also beholden to Professor Russ West-Pavlov, the organiser of the conference, for extending a warm welcome to me despite my “gate-crasher” status!
 2. E-mail from Solomon Azumarana, University of Lagos (Nigeria). azumarana@yahoo.co.uk. 15 July 2013.

Ngugi initially adopted him as his role model (Sewlall 2003: 55-69), but because of the dialectical relationship between Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, which, from an Africanist perspective, is viewed as an exemplar of Afro-pessimism and racial stereotyping. Professor Azumurana's remark about how "most African scholars" view Conrad's novella, recalls the experience of South African academics Gail Fincham and Myrtle Hooper when they had embarked on their study on a "postcolonial" Conrad almost twenty years ago. Having invited universities in Kenya, Lesotho, Mocambique, Namibia, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe for contributions to their projected study, and having received a negative response to their invitation, they wrote in their introduction:

The picture that emerged was a depressing one; it appears to be unwise to teach Conrad. His texts evidently are often seen as monuments to white privilege, his ironic vision a threat to popular revolutionary fervour, his skepticism a confusion and an instrument of ideological control.

(Fincham & Hooper 1996: xiii)

It would be no exaggeration to suggest that Chinua Achebe's notorious denunciation of Conrad, in 1975, as a "thoroughgoing racist" (Achebe 1988: 257), which he subsequently revised to "bloody racist" (Achebe 1990: 124), not only contributed to the decline of Conrad's reputation in parts of Africa but also propelled him into the popular imaginary as a purveyor of racist stereotypes about Africa. The charge of racism, especially in the times we live in, is a serious one and when levelled at a writer – a canonical one to boot – it is bound to place that person in an invidious position. What is troubling in Conrad's case is that it has become almost *de rigeur* in some intellectual circles to dismiss the writer by simply acting as a mouthpiece for Achebe's ventriloquism.

But Conrad was no stranger to controversy, not least of all in his native country Poland. According to Wieslaw Krajka, a distinguished Conrad scholar from Poland, "an almost complete ban [was] imposed on Conrad in the Poland under Stalinist rule between 1949 and 1956" (Krajka 2004: 9). The person who spearheaded this campaign was none other than the celebrated Shakespearean critic Jan Kott, a strong Marxist at the time. In 1945 Kott contributed an essay to *Kuźnica*, a social and literary weekly, in which he attacked Conrad's ethos of individualism, heroism, unconditional faithfulness and loyalty which were seen as contrary to Marxist ideology. In a recent paper titled "Conrad and Censorship in Poland", Joanna Skolik, a Polish scholar, avers: "Kott claimed that when his generation learned that Conrad's reality was very different from their own, they became disappointed with Conradian ideals and deserted him" (Skolik 2013: 63). But political affiliations, like reading fashions, sometimes change, and when Kott lost his political influence with the Party, he changed his views and began to empathise with Conrad's world view. Whether intellectuals in post-

colonial regimes, under the strong influence of Achebe's indictment, will undergo a similar Damascene moment as that experienced by Jan Kott, is hard to tell.

In its hundred-odd years of existence since its first appearance in serial form in three instalments of *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1899, *Heart of Darkness* has been interrogated from an impressive range of theoretical perspectives such as the psychological, the social, the anthropological, the psychoanalytical and the postcolonial.³ We have witnessed the various shifts in focus – from the mysterious Mr Kurtz to the narrator Marlow; to the novel's alleged racism, its gender bias and its anti-imperialist sentiments. Stephen Ross writes:

Heart of Darkness is by now so familiar to us, so studied, commented upon, written about, argued over, appropriated, liberated, vilified, recuperated, rehashed, taught and retaught that it might seem as though there can hardly be anything left worth saying about it.

(Ross 2004: 65)

Despite the extensive scholarly work undertaken since the 1950s, in my view there are at least three good reasons for recuperating Conrad's famous but beleaguered text occasionally. In the first instance, it is a literary landmark in the art of fiction and a precursor to the high Modernist style of the early 20th century, which reached its apotheosis in the novels of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. In the second instance, *Heart of Darkness* has become a journalistic cliché for anything that is remotely connected to the Congo region, today known as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). To exemplify, Claire Soares, a journalist for *The Star*, Johannesburg's largest-selling daily, reporting on child soldiers in the DRC, writes that for foreigners the DRC still "conjures up the *Heart of Darkness* clichés bequeathed by Joseph Conrad's 1902 novella" (*The Star*, 1 February 2010: 11). According to this reporter, Conrad appears to be some dubious purveyor of clichés about the Congo region. Yet another illustration of journalistic licence is evident in a review of James Brabazon's memoir *My Friend the Mercenary*, based on the failed coup in Equatorial Guinea in 2005. The reviewer, Brendan Seery, ends with the following line: "But, if you're after a realistic, well-written, 21st century *Heart of Darkness*, this book is a compelling read" (*The Star*, 12 August 2010: 17). Such generalisations, valid as they seem in the context of a foreshortened book review, underscore the point that Conrad's novella has become a metonym for anything and everything that has to do with the contretemps of Central Africa, in the same

3. A worthy project demonstrating how the novella can be read from different theoretical perspectives is *Joseph Conrad – Heart of Darkness: A Case Study in Contemporary Criticism*. 1989. New York: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, edited and introduced by Ross Murfin.

way that George Orwell's *Animal Farm* is metonymic of corrupt governance and dictatorships in general. And the third and most compelling reason to continue reading and interrogating *Heart of Darkness*, in my view, is that Conrad has become a persona non grata in the public imaginary mainly as a consequence of a tendentious reading of his novella by a growing body of academics, public intellectuals and journalists mainly, but not exclusively, in Africa. The following trenchant critique by an African scholar epitomises this trend:

Conrad's novel presents, regrettably, a powerful convergence of most of the stereotypes which have been bandied about in regard to the nature and status of black people in the world. These stereotypes concern their supposed ignorance and barbarism, their assumed simple-mindedness, their being childish and childlike, their irrationality and excessive lustfulness and their animal-like status – to name only a few. African writers and thinkers have been laboring [sic] under the burden of such false images for a long time, and it would be surprising if anyone familiar with the suffering and history of black people can label *Heart of Darkness* a masterpiece when it distorts a whole continent and its people. There is a terrible parallel here between the economic rape which Africa suffered and the artistic loot that Conrad gets away with!

(Zhuwarara 2004: 240)⁴

Rino Zhuwarara's reading of *Heart of Darkness* is consistent with Achebe's and it must be conceded, at the outset, that Marlow's narrative does pander at times to archetypal depictions of the local population. In a dense fictional documentary (to coin an alternative, paradoxical descriptor for the novella) that numbers under 120 pages, and whose main focus is Marlow's journey in search of Kurtz, the actual instances when Marlow's comments about people of African origin may be construed as offensive will not even constitute more than two pages, or 2%, of the entire text. The following description by Marlow of his fireman might be considered as gratuitously offensive and patronising in the extreme:

And between whiles I had to look after the savage who was fireman. He was an improved specimen; he could fire up a vertical boiler. He was there below me, and, upon my word, to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind legs. A few months of training had done for that really fine chap ... and he had filed teeth, too,

4. Rino Zhuwarara's metaphor of looting ("artistic loot") refers, of course, to the Author's Note to *Almayer's Folly: A Story of an Eastern River and Tales of Unrest*. 1947. London: Dent Collected Edition, p. vii) where Conrad writes sardonically that the idea for his two stories on Africa ("An Outpost of Progress" and "Heart of Darkness") was "the lightest part of the loot" he carried off from Africa after his visit to the Congo.

the poor devil, and the wool of his pate shaved into queer patterns, and three ornamental scars on each of his cheeks. He ought to have been clapping his hands and stamping his feet on the bank, instead of which he was hard at work, a thrall to strange witchcraft, full of improving knowledge. He was useful because he had been instructed;

(Conrad [1902]1927: 97)⁵

Another description of black people, earlier in the text, might also be regarded as offensive, but not without a hint of Marlow's empathy with them as fellow humans:

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 the coast.

(*HoD* 61)

Heart of Darkness was first published in book form with two other stories in 1902. In 1917 Conrad penned his Author's Note to all three stories. Referring to the story that was to earn him both praise and notoriety, he writes:

Heart of Darkness is experience pushed a little (and only very little) beyond the actual facts of the case for the perfectly legitimate ... purpose of bringing it home to the minds and bosoms of the readers That sombre theme had to be given a sinister resonance, a tonality of its own, a continued vibration that, I hoped, would hang in the air and dwell on the ear after the last note had been struck.

(*HoD* xi)

The main challenge for most students and first-time readers of the novella, not to mention the impatient critic, is mediating their way through the dense, repetitive prose that is evocative of the fecund natural vegetation through which Marlow and his crew wend their way up the Congo River. No less a reader than the formidable F.R. Leavis had found the "adjectival insistence" of *Heart of Darkness* quite "exasperating":

Hadn't he, we find ourselves asking, overworked "inscrutable", "inconceivable", "unspeakable" and that kind of word already? – yet still they recur The same vocabulary, the same adjectival insistence upon inexpressible

5. Henceforth, citations from the text will be referenced as *HoD* followed by the page number(s). The references are to the authorised Doubleday Edition of Conrad's works, whose pagination corresponds with that of the Dent Collected Edition.

and incomprehensible mystery, is applied to the evocation of human profundities and spiritual horrors

(Leavis [1948]1962: 204)

Another challenge confronting the reader is the complex narrative structure, with its frame-within-a-frame and the periodic interventions of the frame narrator in Charles Marlow's narrative. What complicates Marlow's narrative further are the flashbacks and fast-forwards; for example, long before he meets Mr Kurtz, he mentions in passing that he had seen Kurtz's report to the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs, which ends with the recommendation: "Exterminate all the brutes" (*HoD* 118). The next time, and the last time, we come across this document is on page 153 – after Kurtz's death – when Marlow hands over the report to an official of the Company with "the postscriptum ['Exterminate all the brutes'] torn off" (*HoD* 153). This disjuncture between Marlow's first impression of a sense datum and his subsequent understanding of its full significance has been characterised as "delayed decoding" by Ian Watt, a fond but discerning reader of Conrad. As an illustration of this notion, Watt refers to the moment Marlow's steamer is under attack. At first he sees "sticks, little sticks, were flying about". Only moments later he is able to "finally decode the little sticks: ... Arrows, by Jove! We were being shot at!" (Watt 1980: 177). Another good example of delayed decoding occurs later when Marlow spies through his binoculars what appear as "ornamentation" (*HoD* 130) around Kurtz's camp. He is subsequently shocked to discover that these "round knobs" (*HoD* 130) are human "heads on the stakes" (*HoD* 130).

Marlow's realisation that these knobs are human heads leads to the following insight into Kurtz's character: "They only showed that Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts, that there was something wanting in him – some small matter which, when the pressing need arose, could not be found under his magnificent eloquence" (*HoD* 131). Further down the page comes another comment about Kurtz, in a phrase that has become a part of the English idiom: "... he was hollow at the core" (*HoD* 131). Such strong judgmental statements about Kurtz, towards whom Marlow is generally empathetic, pale into insignificance in comparison with Marlow's withering condemnation of the colonial enterprise in general. To illustrate this point, it would be apposite to consider the casual opening of Marlow's narrative after the frame narrator has set the scene: "'And this also,' said Marlow suddenly, 'has been one of the dark places on the earth'" (*HoD* 48). Instead of allowing Marlow to continue, the frame narrator intervenes to tell us more about Marlow's style of telling stories:

The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical ... to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in

the likeness of one of these misty halos that, sometimes, are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine.

(*HoD* 48)

This often-quoted aside on Marlow and his method of narration should alert the reader to be very attentive to what he says because he does not tell a story in a plain and straightforward manner. In a word, Marlow can be obscure, not because he wants to frustrate the reader but because he tries to make sense of the depraved and depraving nature of the greed and accompanying violence that he encounters at every turn on his nightmarish journey into the heart of darkness. After the frame narrator's digression of almost thirty lines, Marlow is allowed to continue his narrative.

I was thinking of very old times, when the Romans first came here, nineteen hundred years ago – the other day ... But darkness was here yesterday. Imagine the feelings of say a commander of a fine – what d'ye call 'em? – trireme in the Mediterranean, ordered suddenly to the north Imagine him here – the very end of the world, a sea the colour of lead, a sky the colour of smoke, ... sandbanks, marshes, forests, savages – precious little to eat fit for a civilized man, nothing but Thames water to drink. No Falernian wine here

....

(*HoD* 49)

This is not a very flattering picture of Britain and its inhabitants during the height of the Roman Empire. What the sophisticated Romans would have seen in Britain are “savages”. Such is the nature of conquest and the march of history. Few will disagree that to describe the indigenous British population as “savages” must have required of the writer a high degree of impartiality, not to mention authorial integrity, given that he was a foreigner in Britain who was starting his second career as a writer. Eloise Knapp Hay, who, as early as 1963 characterised *Heart of Darkness* as a “political” novel, writes: “[W]hen Conrad began the actual writing of *Heart of Darkness*, he was deeply absorbed in two questions: his loyalty, both as man and as writer, to England, and his acute mistrust of the way the ‘civilizing work’ was being accomplished by the European powers in south-east Asia and in Africa” (Hay [1963]1981: 121). Barely five pages into the text, Conrad has inaugurated, in his highly condensed if not cryptic narrative, the modern discourse on the vexed subject of colonisation, civilisation and so-called savagery. Marlow, a British patriot, or Conrad the aspiring British citizen, comes to the rescue of British colonisation by suggesting that the British Empire was efficient in its administration, unlike the early conquerors of the British Isles:

What saves us is efficiency – the devotion to efficiency. But these chaps were not much account, really. They were no colonists; They were conquerors They grabbed what they could get and for the sake of what was to be got.

It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind – as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness. The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. (HoD 50-51)

Marlow's colloquial register and understated irony are at work again in the following excerpt where he tells his audience of an apparently trivial incident that led to his appointment as a skipper of a steamboat to take him up the Congo:

I got my appointment – of course; and I got it very quick. It appears the Company had received news that one of their captains had been killed in a scuffle with the natives It was only months and months afterwards, when I made the attempt to recover what was left of the body, that I heard the original quarrel arose from a misunderstanding about some hens. Yes, two black hens. Fresleven – that was the fellow's name, a Dane – thought himself wronged somehow in the bargain, so he went ashore and started to hammer the chief of the village with a stick [H]e whacked the old nigger mercilessly, while a big crowd of his people watched him, thunderstruck, till some man – I was told the chief's son ... made a tentative jab with a spear at the white man – and of course it went quite easy between the shoulder blades. Then the whole population cleared into the forest, expecting all kinds of calamities to happen What became of the hens I don't know either. I should think the cause of progress got them anyhow. However, through this glorious affair, I got my appointment

(HoD 54)

Far from being a “glorious affair” as Marlow ironically puts it, this is a shocking and disgraceful spectacle of a white captain beating the hell out of an old African chief in the presence of his people and his son. What makes the incident so degrading is the fact that this captain, who is supposed to be a representative of Empire, loses his life over a trivial issue involving two hens. As for Marlow to suggest tongue-in-cheek that the hens were sacrificed to “the cause of progress”, this is yet another ironic broadside at the purported civilising mission of Empire. And what about Marlow's racist language, “old nigger”? I will touch upon this briefly later.

The history of civilisation has been a bloody and brutal one. From pre-Christian times right up to our present era, history bears testimony to the baser motives of so-called civilised nations “going at it blind”, pillaging and raping, and destroying the religious and value systems of ancient civilisations under the grand illusion of bringing the torch of enlightenment where there is so-called darkness. Dennis Walder, a postcolonial scholar, writes:

The year 1492 also marks the defeat of Islam in Spain, and the dispersal of a culture which, ironically enough, had first brought the astronomy and mathematics upon which European navigational supremacy was based. Like the Arabs, the Mayas, Aztecs and Incas of Central and South America all had mature and complex civilizations – the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan (later Mexico City) was five times larger than Madrid at the time of the Spanish conquest In Africa, a number of rich and ancient societies still flourished when Europeans began to arrive at the coasts; and although non-literate, these societies exhibited great confidence, coherence, moral and artistic vigour.

(Walder [1998]2004: 1077-1078)

In order to justify conquest and subjugation, a dubious taxonomy had to be created about superior and inferior races, and no less a personage than David Hume argued in 1753 that Negroes and in general all the other species of men were naturally inferior to whites on the grounds that blacks in our colonies and throughout Europe lacked the civilised arts, in particular, of writing (Walder [1998]2004: 1083). It is against the cumulative weight of such intellectual discourses on race and ideology, buttressed by centuries of racial prejudice, that Conrad's slim but dense novel takes a stance.

In the following extract we witness the callous disregard shown by the colonial master towards the carriers – once again recorded as a casual observation by Marlow:

Day after day, with the stamp and shuffle of sixty pair of bare feet behind me, each pair under a sixty-pound load. Camp, cook, sleep, strike camp, march. Now and then a carrier dead in harness, at rest in the long grass near the path, with an empty water-gourd and his long staff lying by his side. A great silence around and above. Perhaps on some quiet night the tremor of far-off drums, sinking, swelling, a tremor vast, faint; a sound weird, appealing, suggestive, and wild – and perhaps with as profound a meaning as the sound of bells in a Christian country.

(*HoD* 71)

Immediately following the observation regarding the dead carriers, comes another sense datum, namely the “wild” drums of Africa and their “weird” sound. Marlow might seem to sponsor another stereotype about Africans and their seemingly barbarous culture but this notion is immediately dispelled in that very same sentence when he compares the drums to the church bells in a Christian country. That Marlow, who at other times can be obtuse to the point of sounding racist, should see something “profound” in the cultural practices of the other, is an unqualified endorsement of the affinities between different races and cultures and their common humanity.

Marlow's undisguised contempt for people of his own race who have abandoned all sense of morality in their pursuit of wealth is evident in the following extract:

This devoted band called itself the Eldorado Exploring Expedition, and I believe they were sworn to secrecy. Their talk, however, was the talk of buccaneers: it was reckless without hardihood, greedy without audacity, and cruel without courage; there was not an atom of foresight or of serious intention in the whole batch of them To tear treasure out of the bowels of the land was their desire, with no moral purpose at the back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe.

(*HoD* 87)

The trope of cannibalism has served colonial literature well to signify the “other”, especially those inhabitants from far-flung continents. The word “cannibal”, most likely used for the first time by Christopher Columbus in his journal entries, has “played a significant role in the lexicon of colonial discourse as a signifier of alterity” (Sewlall 2006: 158). As a writer, Conrad did not shun the subject of cannibalism as is evident in his short story “Falk”, the plot of which hinges on the confession of a man – a white man – to eating human flesh *in extremis*. In *Heart of Darkness* Conrad deploys the trope of cannibalism once again to serve as an ironic counterpoint. Noting that the local members of his crew have brought on board nothing but rotting hippo meat to eat, Marlow wonders why they have not made an attempt on the lives of the white men, considering that they are big, powerful men who outnumber the whites by thirty to five:

Restraint! What possible restraint? Was it superstition, disgust, patience, fear – or some kind of primitive honour? No fear can stand up to hunger, no patience can wear it out, disgust simply does not exist where hunger is And these chaps too had no earthly reason for any kind of scruple. Restraint!

(*HoD* 105)

It is no accident that the word “restraint” appears three times in this passage. It is echoed about thirty pages later in an entirely different context but one that is highly ironic. When Marlow later meets Kurtz and discovers the heart of darkness within the man’s soul, he contemplates the heights and depths of his moral degeneration:

There was nothing either above or below him, and I knew it. He had kicked himself loose of the earth. Confound the man! He had kicked the very earth to pieces He struggled with himself, too. I saw it – I heard it. I saw the inconceivable mystery of a soul that knew no restraint, no faith, and no fear, yet struggling blindly with itself.

(*HoD* 144-145)

The notion of “restraint” – an enduring touchstone of moral probity in Conrad’s oeuvre – continually reminds us how even a momentary lapse of inhibition can have disastrous consequences for an individual. Kurtz’s lust for wealth and power has corrupted him irredeemably to the extent that

Marlow feels that compared to the cannibals abroad the steamer, Kurtz, that epitome of genius whom the whole of Europe had been responsible for shaping, is morally hollow at the core. He is totally lacking in the virtue of restraint which is exhibited in abundance by the so-called savages. The word “restraint” is used yet once again by Marlow when he realises that what he had assumed to be ornamental knobs decorating Kurtz’s camp are human skulls: “[These heads] only showed that Mr Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts ...” (*HoD* 131). Not only is this a searing indictment of Kurtz, who has shed all vestiges of restraint by implicitly engaging in satanic or cannibalistic rituals, but also a condemnation of the atrocities that were perpetrated on the people of the Congo by the Belgian regime of King Leopold II. According to an insightful gloss by Owen Knowles, in his 2007 edition of *Heart of Darkness*, this incident in the book has a historical precedent: After a punitive military expedition against some African rebels in Stanley Falls in 1895, “[m]any women and children were taken, and twenty-one heads were brought to the falls, and [had] been used by Captain Rom as a decoration round a flower bed in front of his house” (Knowles 2007: 129-130). Leon Rom was a Belgian soldier and administrator in the Congo at the time Conrad visited the Congo.

To the detractors of Conrad and his novella it might appear that I am reading a different version of the text *Heart of Darkness* which Achebe read almost forty years ago. There are ways of reading as indeed there are ways of interpreting. Let us consider the context of Chinua Achebe’s denunciation of Conrad when he (Achebe) delivered the second Chancellor’s Lecture at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, on 18 February 1975. He began the lecture by recalling an incident in the previous year:

In the fall of 1974 I was walking one day from the English Department of the University of Massachusetts to a parking lot An older man ... asked me What did I teach? [Achebe replied] African literature It always surprised him, he went on to say, because he never thought of Africa as having that kind of stuff, you know. By this time I was walking much faster.
(Achebe [1963]1988: 251)

Although Achebe does not mention the race of this “older man”, the context suggests that he was white. A few weeks later Achebe received “two very touching letters from high school children” who had just read his novel *Things Fall Apart*. One student, Achebe tells us, was “particularly happy to learn about the customs and superstitions of an African tribe” (p. 251).

Achebe continues, “I propose to draw from these rather trivial encounters rather heavy conclusions which at first sight might seem somewhat out of proportion to them. But only, I hope, at first sight” (p. 251). In his view, these two brief encounters are indicative of a “need in Western psychology to set up Africa as a foil to Europe, a place of negations at once and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe’s own state of spiritual grace will

be manifest” (pp. 251-252). Two paragraphs later Achebe asserts: “*Heart of Darkness* projects the image of Africa as ‘the other world’, the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilisation, a place where man’s vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality” (p. 252). To gain a sense of the kind of criticism that Achebe engages in, let us consider the point he makes about the River Thames where the story begins. Because the Thames is described by Marlow as a river that has done “good service ... to the race that peopled its banks”, Achebe caustically observes: “But the actual story will take place on the River Congo, the very antithesis of the Thames. The River Congo is quite decidedly not a River Emeritus We are told that ‘Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world’” (p. 252). Thus Achebe, after a relentlessly unmitigated interrogation of Conrad’s novella, in which he, incidentally, also accuses the author of xenophobia and anti-Semitism, arrives at his notorious denunciation of Conrad:

The point of my observations should be quite clear by now, namely that Joseph Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist. That this simple truth is glossed over in criticisms of his work is due to the fact that white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely unremarked.

(Achebe [1963]1988: 257)

Without going into the debates energised by Achebe’s critique, which has inspired a sizeable critical industry in its own right, suffice to say that his views have been endorsed by many postcolonial critics, and by the same token challenged by other readers.

So much has recent scholarship been preoccupied with the politics of the novel that we seem to overlook some of the eternal verities articulated in the text. One of them is the existence of earthly love between a man and a woman unfettered by the constraints of race, culture, class or creed. One of the most memorable scenes in this novella is the brief, poignant moment when the African woman in Kurtz’s life (usually referred to as Kurtz’s “mistress”) raises her arms as the dying Kurtz is being taken away by Marlow and his crew. When Marlow realises that the so-called pilgrims on his steamer have taken out their rifles and are about to shoot at her people, he pulls the string of the whistle to frighten them off. All of them flee from the sound, except for the woman: “Only the barbarous and superb woman did not so much as flinch, and stretched tragically her bare arms after us over the sombre and glittering river” (*HoD* 146). If, à la Achebe, one begins to quarrel with Conrad’s use of the word “barbarous”, whilst conveniently ignoring that it is juxtaposed with “superb”, one risks losing the sentiment and emotional impact conveyed in this very brief scene, which, in effect, conveys a woman’s muted, melancholy gesture of farewell to her dying lover who is being taken away from her and her people against his will.

Geoffrey Haresnape, a South African academic and a poet of note, has taken this understated theme of love in *Heart of Darkness* and fashioned it into a short story titled “Straight from the Heart”. Framed as a dialogue, the story dramatises a conversation between Kurtz’s African paramour and a European who visits her twelve years after Marlow’s departure. The visitor brings the woman a copy of Marlow’s account of his journey into the “heart of darkness”. Some time after the visitor has left, the woman, who is given the name Sala Mosongowindo, writes to her European acquaintance challenging some of Marlow’s misconceptions about her people and her lover, Kurtz. In her letter she conveys her son’s greetings:

My son, Ludingo, sends his greetings. He’s growing well and continues in good health. I’m teaching him to have kind thoughts of the father whom he will never see in this cycle But in Ludingo are returning the same remarkable mind, deep eye and lofty forehead which were parts of the person I once loved.

(Haresnape 2002: 414)

Haresnape’s intertextual excursion serves to highlight the infinite variety of a text such as *Heart of Darkness*. The pathos and sentiment that the story evokes constitute one of many delicate wefts that are intricately woven into the texture of the novella. Of course it would be a good idea to get students to read Haresnape’s story side by side with Conrad’s text, just as it would be a good idea to read *Heart of Darkness* side by side with Conrad’s only other work set in Africa, the short story “An Outpost of Progress”. In this story we are presented with the character of Makola who is not only accorded agency and authority, but is shown to be far superior in intellect to the two blundering whites who lose their lives squabbling over a few lumps of sugar.

Bernard Bergonzi, writing about the evolving state of the novel in the late 1960s, pointed out the shortcomings of the art of fiction in his Preface:

Even the best literature – and specifically fiction – is full of contradictions and even cowardice, shown by retreats into the generic or the culturally conditioned; a tendency to play the little world of art against the large world of human freedom; or a grateful falling back on the stock response when the material gets out of hand. Like people, literature is deeply imperfect.

(Bergonzi [1970]1972: 8)

Bergonzi’s general comment is pertinent to Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. As we plod through the dense novella, we witness its many imperfections. We see the narrator Marlow retreat into “the generic and culturally conditioned” and the “stock response”, especially when confronting, and trying to understand, the other. The modern reader will justifiably find the use of the word “nigger” offensive, notwithstanding that it was still a part of our lexicon in the early 20th century. I am reminded of Agatha Christie’s famous

play, *Ten Little Indians*, written in the 1930s, which had the taboo word “niggers” in the original title. Eschewing political correctness or language sensitivity for a moment, the question remains: How and why should students in Africa read *Heart of Darkness*, given its controversial nature and the opprobrium it inspires in the popular imaginary?

On the centenary of the publication of *Heart of Darkness*, the American scholar J. Hillis Miller posed a similar question, not specific to readers in Africa but to the general reading public, and arrived at the following conclusion:

Should we, ought we, to read “Heart of Darkness”? Each reader must decide that for himself or herself. There are certainly ways to read “Heart of Darkness” that might do harm, for example if it is read as straightforwardly endorsing Eurocentric, racist and sexist ideologies. If it is read, however, as I believe it should be read, as a powerful exemplary revelation of the ideology of capitalist imperialism, including its racism and sexism, ... then, I declare, “Heart of Darkness” should be read, ought to be read. There is an obligation to do so.

(Miller 2002: 39)

Did Chinua Achebe, who died in 2013, change his views about Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*? Achebe was about 45 years old when he first denounced Conrad at the University of Massachusetts in 1975. Interviewed by Robert Siegel in 2009, when he was almost an octogenarian, he said, “The language of description of the people in *Heart of Darkness* is inappropriate” (Chinua Achebe). Despite his lifelong stance, Achebe, according to Siegel, “does not feel that *Heart of Darkness* should be banned” (ibid.). Despite Achebe’s serious reservations about the text, it still remains the most savage critique of Empire in literature. Conrad’s remark in his Author’s Note relating to the novella, namely, that he hoped to create a theme whose vibration would “hang in the air and dwell on the ear after the last note had been struck” (*HoD* xi), has assumed an ironic prescience in the light of the text’s enduring, if not troubled reputation.

This paper has not been an attempt to “rescue Conrad”, a term that Padmini Mongia once used pejoratively to describe the attempt of mainly white male critics to defend Conrad (Mongia 2001). If anything, Conrad needs no defence from scholars. But, once in a while, it becomes a categorical imperative to revisit the text of *Heart of Darkness* when we encounter influential journalists and academics accusing Conrad of a range of sins, including sexism, racism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism. A case in point would be the following opening sentence of a book review by Percy Zvomuya in *Mail & Guardian*, a respected South African weekly. The book under review, titled *Crossbones*, was by the noted Somali writer Nuruddin Farah: “It is possible that, since Joseph Conrad’s myths about the Congo, there have been no greater lies and half-truths told about any country than

those related about Somalia” (*Mail & Guardian*, 21 to 27 September 2012: 6-7). To think that a journalist of *Zvomuya*’s cachet should remember Conrad as a peddler of myths and lies about the Congo (which is still one of the most conflicted states in Africa), is something that should make academics and teachers sit up and take note. It is my contention that such generalisations play no small part in creating negative perceptions in the public imaginary about Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski, alias Joseph Conrad, whose parents, on account of his politically active father, were sent into exile by their Russian oppressors and who died while in exile. What Eloise Knapp Hay once said about *Heart of Darkness* has lost none of its cogency: “In *Heart of Darkness* one major theme, if not the ruling theme, is that civilisation depends for its conquest of the earth on a combination of lies and forgetfulness” (in Hay [1963]1981: 153).

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