INAUGURAL LECTURE

18 APRIL 2013

“Unbanning” Joseph Conrad in the Popular Imaginary: The Case of
Heart of Darkness

by

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INTRODUCTION

So much has been written and so much said about Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* since its publication over 100 years ago that there seems nothing new can be said about it. In my lecture this evening, I do not intend to re-hash what has already been said by generations of scholars about Conrad’s controversial novella, but rather to challenge those who have essentialized Conrad as a racist to reconsider their self-imposed censorship on this writer in general and on *Heart of Darkness* in particular. This would be a much-needed corrective to the counter-discourse on Conrad which has seen the writer in recent times reduced to an apologist for imperialism and his text *Heart of Darkness* become a blueprint for the racial stereotyping of Africans.

I will argue, Mr Rector, that as much as Conrad needs no rescuing from Chinua Achebe’s notorious denunciation of him as a “bloody” and “thoroughgoing” racist in the mid-1970s, there is an obligation on us as informed readers, academics and public intellectuals to approach the text of *Heart of Darkness* with an open mind. If we ignore this imperative we risk foreclosing on the relevance of this powerful anti-imperialist document to our times and future generations. Additionally, Mr Rector, distinguished guests and members of the academic fraternity – among whom I regard the students seated here today – I will argue that *Heart of Darkness*, as is often referenced in the media and the popular imagination, is more than just a journalistic shorthand or cliché for a politically failed state or a depraved government in Africa or anywhere else in the world. Simply put, in the popular media, the title of Conrad’s novella becomes a convenient signpost for anything and everything negative about Africa.

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INTRODUCTION

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In the early 1990s two South African academics, Gail Fincham and Myrtle Hooper, invited universities in Kenya, Lesotho, Moçambique, Namibia, Swaziland, Zambia and
Zimbabwe for contributions to their projected study on a “postcolonial” Conrad. After
the negative response they received, they wrote:

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 and Hooper 1996: xiii)

From this comment by Fincham and Hooper, it would seem that Conrad has been all but
banned – albeit unofficially – in some universities in Africa. But Conrad is no stranger to
controversy, least of all to being officially banned. According to Wieslaw Krajka, a noted
Conrad scholar from Poland, the country of Conrad’s birth, “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. The latter had attacked
Conrad’s ethos of individualism, heroism, unconditional faithfulness and loyalty which were
seen as contrary to Marxist ideology. 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 identify with Conrad’s world view. Whether those readers,
negatively influenced by Achebe’s criticisms, will undergo a similar Damascene moment as
that experienced by Jan Kott, can only be left to healthy speculation!

In an essay published in 2004, Stephen Ross wrote:

*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).
In its hundred-odd years of existence since its first appearance in serial form in *Blackwood’s Magazine* in 1899, the book has been interrogated from an impressive range of critical perspectives such as the psychological, the social, the anthropological, the psychoanalytical and the postcolonial. 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. Yet despite the extensive and intensive scholarly work undertaken for the past century, in my view there are perhaps still three good reasons for recuperating Conrad’s well-known and controversial work from time to time.

In the first instance, it is a modernist masterpiece and like any classical artefact it merits the attention of scholars and even the general reading public for no other reason than a classical work of art reveals some eternal truth about humanity every time one visits it. 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). 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” (Soares, *The Star* 2010: 11). According to this journalist, Conrad appears to be some dubious purveyor of clichés about the Congo region. Yet another instance of journalistic licence is evident in a book review in the same newspaper. The book in question is a memoir by James Brabazon titled *My Friend the Mercenary*, based on the failed coup in Equatorial Guinea in 2005. The review 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” (Seery, *The Star* 2010: 17). Such generalizations, valid as they may be in the context of a book review, underscore the point that Conrad’s novella has become a journalistic cliché for the contretemps of Central Africa.

A similar tendency to generalize is also discernible in the corridors of academe, where Chinua Achebe’s indictment of Conrad as a racist is taken to be the last gospel on the writer and his work. For such academics, and unfortunately for their students, this
assessment of Conrad – first made in 1975 by Achebe – absolves them from the exacting task of even trying to come to grips with the text. What’s more worrying about such generalizing is that students, who should be encouraged to read the classics – be they African, British, European, American or Worldwide – are unfairly disadvantaged by their very mentors whose prejudices rub off onto their students. And this, for me, is the third and most important reason why it is necessary to recuperate Heart of Darkness.

THE TEXT IN A NUTSHELL

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.

(Conrad [1902]1927: xi)

Conrad’s novella is a precursor to the high Modernist style of the fiction of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. It combines conventional story telling with the experimental narrative techniques characteristic of Modernist and Postmodernist writers. Meaning is often deferred so the reader has to be diligent in pursuing the plot in the narrative. In Conrad’s tale, a frame narrator sets the scene and then allows the principal narrator Charles Marlow to take over. What complicates Marlow’s narrative 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 2007:...
The next time, and the last time, we come across this document is on page 89 – 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* 2007: 89). Whenever Marlow pauses in his story-telling, indicated by means of closed inverted commas, the frame narrator steps in to comment, sometimes very briefly, on the *mise-en-scène*.

In a nutshell, the main narrative traces the journey of Marlow up “a mighty big river” (*HoD* 2007: 9) to rescue an agent of the Company by the name of Mr Kurtz. The river, incidentally, remains unnamed, as is the case with V. S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* (controversially compared with *Heart of Darkness* by some critics) in which the river, assumed to be the Congo, is not named. Kurtz, who has amassed himself a fortune in ivory, is very ill. Marlow has never met Kurtz but on his way to the latter's station he meets several people who tell him about Kurtz. From a brief reference to a painting at one station, we, and Marlow, discover that Kurtz is an artist. By the time Marlow’s narrative is over, we have a composite picture of Kurtz’s achievements from the many vignettes we are given about him by different admirers. We know he is a gifted individual – an artist, a writer, a visionary, and above all, an eloquent human being. When Marlow is quite close to Kurtz’s station, his steamer comes under attack from the local inhabitants. We learn later (in a flashback) that the attack had actually been ordered by Kurtz himself because he did not want to go back to Europe. Indeed, he never returns to Europe because soon after Marlow and his crew bring Kurtz abroad, he dies but not before he has spoken vaguely to Marlow about his ivory, his fiancée in Europe, whom he refers to as his Intended, and his grand plans. He even entrusts to Marlow a sheaf of personal papers and a photograph of his fiancée. Two important details to note at this point are, one, before Marlow reaches the inner station to rescue Kurtz, who does not want to be rescued, he sees a majestic African woman who stands out from the crowd. This woman later raises her arms in a gesture of farewell to Kurtz. Two, after Kurtz has been confined to the steamer, he tries to escape one night but is brought back by Marlow. Minutes before Kurtz dies, Marlow hears him utter two words: “The horror! The horror!” (*HoD* 2007: 86). What Kurtz meant by these two words has
added to the epistemological conundrum facing readers of *Heart of Darkness* for the past century.

If these are the bare bones of the plot, what makes the book memorable, or controversial, or worthy of our attention? What makes it a text that generations of critics have pondered over, dissected, praised and condemned in equal measure? To answer these questions, one needs to pay attention to what happens in the interstices of this densely-plotted novella: what Marlow observes and comments on, what we observe and bear testimony to, and most importantly, what Marlow implies, often obliquely. There are books – important books in the canon of English literature – where one could skim a page or two and still make sense of the text. Unfortunately for most students, *Heart of Darkness* is not one of those texts! It is like an elaborately constructed poem in which words and images are juxtaposed for effect and resonance, hence, skimming a page is not an option.

**A CRITIQUE OF EMPIRE**

After the frame narrator has set the scene, Marlow begins with the words, “And this also … has been one of the dark places of the earth” (*HoD* 2007: 48). Instead of allowing Marlow to continue, the frame narrator intervenes to tell us more about Marlow. Marlow, he informs us, is a typical sailor who loves to share stories about his adventures, but unlike other sailors there is a difference about the way in which Marlow tells a tale. We are told that to Marlow “the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping a 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* 2007: 6). This famous aside on Marlow and his method of storytelling 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, violence and colonial propaganda that he encounters at every turn on his nightmarish journey into the
heart of darkness. Above all, he tries to come to terms with the gifted but morally-conflicted, Macbeth-like character of Kurtz.

After this digression of almost thirty lines by the frame narrator, 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 2007: 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 moral courage, given that he was a foreigner in Britain who was starting his second career as a writer. Barely five pages into the text, Conrad has initiated, in his very condensed if not cryptic manner, the entire discourse on the vexed subject of colonization, civilization and so-called savagery. Marlow, a British patriot, or if you prefer, Conrad the aspiring British citizen, comes to the rescue of British colonization 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 2007: 7).

It is significant that the River Thames forms the backdrop to the opening scene of the book. Apart from its thematic link to that mighty river in Africa, the Congo, which is the setting of the action in Heart of Darkness, the Thames represents the centrifugal force of the British Empire in its heyday. Notwithstanding Conrad’s implicit defence of British imperialism, his condemnation of the colonial enterprise in general is unmistakeable and unmitigated. What we see in this extract, besides its evocation of the sheer brutality of conquest, is the kind of colloquial register and irony that will characterize much of Marlow’s narrative. If the reader is not alert to Marlow’s irony, he or she will miss much of Marlow’s understated condemnation of the colonial enterprise in the Congo, and by implication, elsewhere in the world. An example of such irony in the extract just referred to is: “men going at it blind – as is proper for those who tackle a darkness”.

Marlow’s colloquial register and understated irony are at work in the following lengthy extract 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. … he 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 2007: 10-11).

Far from being a “glorious affair” as Marlow colloquially 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 and 
depraved 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. I don’t know why Marlow mentions 
the fact that the hens were black – perhaps he, or his creator Conrad, is a subliminal 
racist after all! But that’s a subject for another day. As for Marlow to suggest tongue-in-
cheek that the hens were sacrificed to “the cause of progress”, this is yet another ironic 
thrust at the purported civilizing mission of Empire.

The history of civilization, as we know, 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 civilized nations “going at it blind”, pillaging and raping, and destroying the 
religious and value systems of ancient civilizations under the pretext 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 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.


With colonization was born the notion of “otherness”, or “alterity”. In order to justify conquest and subjugation, a myth had to be created about superior and inferior races, and no less a person than David Hume, one of the most representative of Enlightenment figures, 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 civilized arts, in particular, of writing (Walder in Rivkin and Ryan [1998]2004: 1083). It is against the accumulated 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. To what extent it succeeds in doing so, will be left to the discerning judgement of the reader.

Describing the “other”, or people of a culture different from one’s own, is never an easy task for the novelist. What we are given in Heart of Darkness, a highly-cryptic narrative of a journey to the heart of the Belgian Congo, are fleeting impressions of Charles Marlow, a product of an English-school education with all the baggage this implies. These impressions and the words that accompany them will certainly be offensive to the sensitive reader in our age, but no sooner are we over these offensive parts than we are given something crucial to ponder over, as the next extract will illustrate:

“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. For a time I would feel I belonged still to a world of straightforward facts; but the feeling would not last long. Something would turn up to scare it away. Once, I remember, we came upon a man-of-war anchored off the coast. There wasn’t even a shed there, and she was shelling the bush. It appears the French had one of their wars going on thereabouts” (HoD 2007: 16).

The comparison of their faces to “grotesque masks” will certainly offend a reader like Chinua Achebe, but this description is soon undercut by the sentiment that they were a “great comfort to look at” because they seem to confirm Marlow’s trust in reality, in “straightforward facts” and not the facts invented about the other by Empire. But this comfort does not last long because something would happen to dispel it. And the source of this discomfort comes from seeing a French warship firing into the bush, at no perceived enemy. What is a French warship doing on the coast of Africa? Unlike the “black fellows” who wanted “no excuse for being there”, this French warship has no business to be here. To penetrate to the truth in *Heart of Darkness*, the reader must be prepared to see beyond the bluff manner of Marlow.

In the following extract we witness a disturbing fact about the colonial enterprise – 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 2007: 23).
This is yet another instance of Conrad’s understated approach to critiquing Empire and its disregard for the lives of the other. Each carrier has a load of sixty pounds, but when he dies of exhaustion, the colonial master does not even have the decency to bury him. Soon after this casual observation regarding the dead carriers, comes another sense datum, namely the “wild” drums of Africa and their “weird” sound. Marlow, or his creator Conrad, 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 Marlow compares the drums to the church bells in a Christian country. This is indeed the sign of an iconoclastic observer (Marlow), or a writer (Conrad) who sees something “profound” in the cultural practices of the other, thus endorsing the affinities between different races and cultures and asserting 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 registered 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 2007: 37).

**DISMANTLING COLONIAL STEREOTYPES**

The notion of cannibalism has served as a common trope in colonial literature to signify the “other”, especially those inhabitants from far-flung continents. From literary, artistic and cinematic representations we are all too familiar with the image of the African pot in which somebody is being boiled or cooked for the evening meal, or of local inhabitants
feasting over the bodies of other humans. 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 shy away from 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 2007: 50).

It is no accident that the word “restraint” appears thrice 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 in person and discovers the “heart of darkness” within the man, 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 2007: 82-83).

The notion of “restraint” – an important marker of moral fixity in Conrad’s oeuvre – continually reminds us how even a momentary lapse of inhibition or judgement 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 in a devastating critique of Kurtz’s megalomania in his pursuit of power. This time, approaching Kurtz’s inner station, he espies through his binoculars round knobs placed on stakes outside Kurtz’s camp. It comes as a shock to him that these white knobs are in fact human skulls placed on stakes:

“Now I had suddenly a nearer view, and its first result was to make me throw my head back as if before a blow. … These round knobs were not ornamental but symbolic; … [They were] heads on the stakes … black, dried, sunken, with closed eyelids – a head that seemed to sleep at the top of that pole … [These heads] 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 2007: 71-72).

This excerpt constitutes not only an unqualified condemnation of Kurtz, who has shed all vestiges of restraint, but also an indictment of the atrocities that were perpetrated on the people of the Congo by the Belgian regime of King Leipold 11. When Marlow is told by the admirer of Kurtz that these are the heads of rebels, Marlow’s response is: “I shocked him excessively by laughing. Rebels! What would be the next definition I was to hear? There had been enemies, criminals, workers – and these were rebels. Those rebellious heads looked very subdued to me on their sticks” (HoD 2007: 73). Neither the high-sounding rhetoric of King Leipold 11 to justify his atrocities in a colonized land nor the “magnificent eloquence” of the gifted Mr Kurtz can disguise the truth from Marlow. According to an insightful gloss by Owen Knowles, this incident in the book has a historical precedent: After a punitive military expedition against some African rebels in Stanley Falls in 1895, “Many 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” (HoD 2007: 129-130). Leon Rom was a Belgian soldier and administrator in the Congo at the time Conrad visited the Congo.

WHY DID ACHEBE ATTACK CONRAD?

If my reading of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* thus far seems to suggest that I am reading a different version of the text read by Chinua Achebe almost forty years ago, or the text read by those who support Achebe’s claim that Conrad is a “bloody” or “thoroughgoing” racist, it is not so. Indeed, we are reading the same text but we are reading it differently. There are ways of thinking and writing, as indeed there are ways of reading and interpreting literary texts. Reading, writing and thinking always occur in a context which in turn determines how we think and speak about a text. 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.


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” (ibid.: 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” (ibid.: 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” (ibid.: 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 civilization, a place where man’s vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality” (ibid.: 252). To gain a sense of the kind of criticism that Achebe engages in, let us take 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 sardonically writes: “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’” (ibid.: 252). Thus Achebe, after a sustained critique in which he juxtaposes images depicting the Congo with images of Europe and of things European, arrives at his notorious denunciation of the writer 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.


Without going into the debates inaugurated by Achebe’s indictment, suffice to say that his views have been endorsed by many postcolonial critics, and by the same token challenged by other readers. Padmini Mongia, who exemplifies the former category, writes: “What is at stake if we agreed with Achebe that Conrad was racist? … [S]urely we should be able to call a work racist because we think it is so, without claiming that
some abhorrent and irreparable damage has been done to the institutions of high culture" (Mongia 2001: 159). Contrariwise, another critic writes,

These tensions and conflicts are central to the novel and can be found throughout: racist elements cluster beside elements of admiration, approval and, possibly, even affection. But Achebe does not see these latter elements. He is fixed on the racist elements and he therefore misses the conflicts that are fundamental to the novel. (Curtler 1997: 35).

Perhaps at this juncture we might pose the question: Who was Joseph Conrad as a person and a writer? He was, in fact, born in Russian Poland in 1857 and was named Jozef Korzeniowski. His parents resisted their Russian oppressors and were sent into exile. They died of their hardships suffered during exile when Korzeniowski was still a boy. Around the age of seventeen he left Poland and headed for France where he joined the French marine service. For twenty years the future writer sailed the seas, as a seaman, a gun-runner, a mate and a captain before he settled in England to begin the next arduous journey of his life, this time as a writer in English – his third language – under the name Joseph Conrad. He died in his sixty-seventh year, not long after he had declined several honorary doctorates as well as the knighthood (Batchelor 1994: 277).

This Polish-born writer was placed among the five great writers in the English language by none other than one of the most respected and formidable critics of all time, F.R. Leavis. In his seminal study, The Great Tradition, first published in 1948, Leavis declared that there were only five novelists in English that were “worth reading” (Leavis [1948]1962:18). These were Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, D. H. Lawrence and Joseph Conrad. The stringent criterion that Leavis applied to place Austen, Eliot, James, Lawrence and Conrad in the “great tradition” of English literature is that all five of these writers “are distinguished by a vital capacity for experience, a kind of reverent
openness before life, and a marked moral intensity” (ibid.: 18). Leavis had spoken from his high pulpit and so it came to pass that for the next thirty years or so his gospel was preached unquestioningly in all university English departments across the world, including Kenya’s Makerere University where one student named James Ngugi, later known to the literary world as Ngugi wa Thiong’o, adopted Joseph Conrad as his early role model. It is commonly acknowledged that Ngugi’s novel *A Grain of Wheat* has strong thematic parallels with Conrad’s *Under Western Eyes*.

**A REPOSITORY OF HUMAN VALUES**

Good literature is meant to be enjoyed by any person who has the ability to respond to the various facets of lived experience – be it joy or sorrow; friendship or betrayal; love and infidelity; life and death; belief and unbelief. So much have we been preoccupied in recent criticism with the politics of the novel, its arcane, esoteric and abstract nature rendered even more arcane by abstract critical evaluations of the book that we have become insensitive to some of the universal verities articulated in the text. One such truth, or reality, is the existence of earthly love between a man and a woman unfettered by the constraints of race, culture, class or creed. For me, one of the most memorable scenes in this novella is the poignant moment when Kurtz’s African lover (referred to as Kurtz’s “mistress” by most critics) raises her arms as the dying Kurtz is being taken away by Marlow and his crew. When Marlow realizes 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 2007*: 84). If, *a la* Achebe, we begin to quarrel with Conrad’s use of the word “barbarous”, we risk losing the sentiment and emotional impact conveyed in this very

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brief scene, which, in effect, conveys a woman’s silent, 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 love story, which, like most other events in the novella is merely hinted at, and fashioned a short story titled “Straight from the Heart”. Framed as a dialogue, the “short story” dramatises a conversation between Kurtz’s African lover 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 friend interrogating some of Marlow’s misconceptions about her people and 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 in De Lange and Fincham 2002: 414)

Haresnape’s intertextual excursion serves to highlight the richness of a text such as Heart of Darkness. The pathos and sentiment that Haresnape’s story evokes provide 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 fighting over a few lumps of sugar.
The literary critic, Bernard Bergonzi, once pointed out the shortcomings of a work or art such as a novel:

> 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)

As we plod through the text of *Heart of Darkness* (there can be no other way of describing our journey into the text but as sheer plod), we will see many imperfections. We will see Conrad (or his 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 Agatha Christie once used it in the original title of her famous *Ten Little Indians*. Eschewing political correctness or language sensitivity for a moment, the question remains: Should our students, or any serious reader for that matter, read Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, or Conrad generally, given that he was canonized by F. R. Leavis?

On the occasion of the centennial of the publication of *Heart of Darkness*, the American scholar J. Hillis Miller, reflecting on the future of the novel, wrote:

> 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.

(Hillis Miller in De Lange and Fincham 2002: 39)

Did Chinua Achebe, who died on 21 March 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. Unlike the Shakespearean critic Jan Kott, who headed the campaign to have Conrad banned in Poland and later embraced him, Achebe did not relent in his criticism of Conrad. Interviewed by Robert Siegel in 2009, when he was almost eighty years old, 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, “[did] not feel that Heart of Darkness should be banned” (ibid.). For every instance of an “inappropriate” or offensive term or description of the “other” in the novella, the reader will find an equally offensive term to describe members of Marlow’s own racial group. Despite Achebe’s serious reservations about the text, it still remains the most savage critique of Empire in literature. When Conrad wrote in his Author’s Note 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” (Conrad [1902] 1927: xi), he was perhaps unaware of the prescient irony in his remark or of its enduring quality.

CONCLUSION

This paper has not been an attempt to “rescue Conrad”, a term that Padmini Mongia, a feminist critic, once used pejoratively to describe the attempt of mainly white male critics to defend Conrad. If anything, Conrad needs no defence from scholars. His work is its own defence. It is quite true that the Conrad/Achebe debate has been exhausted over the years, but once in a while, it becomes necessary to revisit this issue when we encounter journalists and academics who accuse Conrad of peddling clichés or racist
sentiment. A case in point would be the following opening sentence of a book review by Percy Zvomuya of *Mail & Guardian*. The book he was reviewing was by the noted Somali writer Nuruddin Farrah, titled *Crossbones*: “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” (Zvomuya *Mail & Guardian* 2012: 6-7). To think that a respected reviewer such as Zvomuya should foreground his review of an African writer with an allusion to Conrad who is remembered as the arch-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. As serious readers of literature, it is incumbent on us to remove the shackles imposed on our minds not by Achebe, but by ourselves, for indeed these “mind-forg’d manacles” that the poet William Blake wrote of (quoted in my epigraph) are harder to remove than those imposed by state sanctions.
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<td>Those who escape the carcass of Somalia get to set the record straight. <em>Mail &amp; Guardian</em> Friday, September 21 to 27, pp. 6-7.</td>
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Professor Harry Sewlall, the youngest of five siblings, was born on 30 December 1948 in Springfield on the outskirts of Durban. His parents were humble market gardeners on the Springfield flats. He lived not far away from the home of the journalist Mr G. R. Naidoo, with whom Nelson Mandela and friends partied the day before Mandela was arrested. Prof. Sewlall, who was 14 years old at the time, pleads innocent of any charges related to Mandela’s arrest!

After matriculating with an exemption at Centenary High, he proceeded to the Springfield College of Education – a three kilometre walk from his home – where he enrolled for a two-year primary teacher’s diploma. This was the quickest and least expensive way to enter a profession and to provide for his ailing parents. Professor Sewlall grew up in the years when the apartheid ideology of the government in power circumscribed the lives of people like him who were barred from most of the exciting occupations we now take for granted.

Prof. Sewlall began teaching at the age of twenty at a rural school in Glendale on the north coast of KwaZulu-Natal. While teaching junior primary classes, he began further studies with Unisa, completing his BA degree with majors in English and Philosophy. On returning to Durban three years later, he was recruited to teach English at a secondary school. During this period he completed his Bachelor of Education and English Honours degrees with Unisa. Between 1981 and 1984 he was seconded on two occasions to his alma mater, the Springfield College of Education, to lecture in English Literature and Methodology.

In 1984 he published the first of his four articles in Crux: A Journal on English Teaching. It proposed a focused curriculum in language teaching, based on his experiences as a high school teacher. In 1985 he was promoted to Head of English at Marklands Secondary in Durban. In 1989 he received his Master’s degree with distinction from Unisa. His dissertation was titled “Philip Larkin: A Study of the Relationship between his Poetic Theory and Practice”. Around this time, he was elected Chairman of the English Society of the Teachers’ Association of South Africa (TASA). His task was to promote the professional development of teachers of English and to improve their morale.

In July 1991 he was promoted to Superintendent of English for schools in the old Transvaal. This was one of the biggest ironies of his professional life because he had been an activist in the teacher union TASA which strongly opposed the high-handed manner of school inspectors. Now that he was a school inspector himself, he immediately introduced radical changes to the way teachers of his subject were supervised. He began by giving principals and teachers advance notice of his visit to schools. This earned him the respect and loyalty of his teachers but it also brought him into conflict with some of his colleagues and
superiors because not everybody approved of his revolutionary style of leadership. He voluntarily left the department of education in 1996, having served the formal education sector for 27 years.

Prof. Sewlall embarked on his second career – that of an academic – in 1998 at the Vista University Distance Education Campus. After the university mergers in 2002 – 2003, he found himself in the English Department at Unisa. In 2004 he received his PhD from North-West University (Potchefstroom Campus). His thesis was titled “Joseph Conrad: Situating Identity in a Postcolonial Space”. An eclectic researcher, Prof. Sewlall has published on a wide range of subjects, including Conrad, Ngugi, Orwell, Dostoevsky, Coetzee, Kundera and Zakes Mda. He has also published in the field of Popular Culture, notably, rock ‘n’ roll and Elvis Presley. He is a regular presenter at the Popular Culture Association conferences in the USA. He has also contributed book chapters in the field of Ecofeminism, Animal Ethics and Ecocriticism.

In 2006, in his ninth year in academia, Prof. Sewlall received the L-rating from the National Research Foundation. In January 2007, he left Unisa to take up the post of Associate Professor at the University of Fort Hare. In June 2008 he resigned from Fort Hare to spend time with his wife who was terminally ill with brain cancer.

In November 2008, Prof. Sewlall was appointed Associate Professor at North-West University, Mafikeng Campus. In June of the following year he was called upon to act as Dean of the Faculty of Human and Social Sciences. Desirous of returning to teaching and research, he requested to be relieved of this post at the end of September. In January 2010 he was promoted to full Professor. At the end of 2012, Prof. Sewlall received his second NRF-rating, a C2 which is valid till the end of 2017. He is an Associate Editor of Journal of Literary Studies, as well as a reader for Literator, the English Academy Review, and Conradiana: The Journal of the Joseph Conrad Society of America.

Professor Sewlall, who lives in Parkmore, Johannesburg, has two children. His first-born, a son, is a specialist in Internal Medicine, Pulmonology and Critical Care at the Morningside Medi-Clinic in Sandton. His daughter, who holds a master’s degree in Pharmacology, works for the drug company, Pfizer. Prof. Sewlall’s leisure activities include swimming, the cinema, strumming his guitar, oil painting, walking the family dogs and doing general maintenance around the house. And of course, listening to rock ‘n’ roll music!