

Södertörns högskola | Institutionen för Utbildningsvetenskap
Kandidat/Magisteruppsats 15 hp | Engelska med didaktisk inriktning|
Vårterminen 2008

Chinua Achebe & Joseph Conrad

– A comparison of two authors who present
Africa in different ways.

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Introduction – thesis statement and approach

In this essay I will focus on the realism of two well known novels. My main aim with this essay will be to compare Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Both books deal with colonialism and imperialism in one way or another and that is a subject that I will present in the essay. I feel that in order to make the comparison as valid as possible I need to bring in some research on Africa in order to know what Africa was like during the time period described. After this contextualisation it will be easier to see which of the two authors who gives us the most realistic view of Africa. Another area I will discuss concerns aspects that may have had an effect on the two author's view of Africa, such as racial issues. The theme racial issues will be a big part of this essay. The focus will mostly lie on the racial perspectives of both novels and how the white people treated the Africans. All of this leads to my main questions, which can be formulated thus: which author gives us the most realistic view of Africa, and what effects do their writings really have?

I will explore answers to my questions with the help of literary theories of realism and the sociology of literature. Building on these theories I will look for reference points in the two novels, *Heart of Darkness* and *Things Fall Apart*. I will also present some of the criticism that the authors have received for these novels. It will be interesting to see if the criticism is similar, but also to see why Achebe criticizes Conrad.

Chinua Achebe – Things Fall Apart

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is a very interesting book. The story takes place in Africa during the time of colonialism. In this novel we follow the life of a man named Okonkwo and his experience of the colonisation of Africa. The book is divided into three parts. Part one is about Okonkwo's life in his tribe and about how successful he was until he committed an awful crime by mistake. In part one we are introduced to African culture through Achebe's description of the Ibo tribe. One may think that these Africans are savages, but actually they had many great abilities. The art of conversation and the use of proverbs are regarded very highly by this tribe. We also read about their clothing and food customs. Another thing that is good with part one and the description of the tribe is that Achebe is realistic. He does not try to make the Ibo-tribe look good, instead he shows us their good and bad sides, if one is allowed to call them that. One thing that makes the reader think of the people in the tribe as savages is some of their customs. When a man returns from war

with the head of the enemy he is celebrated, somehow that gives you the impression that the people are not satisfied with just protecting their village. They want to kill their enemies and do it brutally.

Young girls are treated like trading goods, which is another bad thing. When a crime has been committed affecting different clans, a meeting is held and the clans decide if they will go to war with each other or if the clan affected will have a compensation for the crime that was committed against them. The compensation may be that the clan receives a young girl who is a virgin or, sometimes, a boy who can be helpful during working seasons. Sick people are not treated, instead they are put in to exile and thrown away to an evil forest and left to die. Thus, in part one we learn a great deal about the good and bad sides of this African tribe, but the main thing is that we are introduced to their culture and because of this we understand them better. Religion is an important aspect throughout the story and in part one we are told about the Ibo-tribe's spiritual life. They all have personal gods called *chi* and for consultation they have an oracle and the oracle's priestess, and these two have been given the power of their god.

The Africans in the Ibo-tribe can sometime behave like savages, "In Umuofia's latest war he was the first to bring home a human head. That was his fifth head; and he was not an old man yet. On great occasions such as the funeral of a village celebrity he drank his palm-wine from his first human head." (Achebe 2000, 8). Although the Africans in this tribe sometimes behave like savages they are still very civilized. In the case of a crime within the same clan they have a trial where both the affected parties are allowed to present their cases, after which a decision is taken. One thing worth mentioning is the treatment of women. Throughout the whole book women are presented as less valuable than men. Men who show affection are seen as women since affection is considered to be a female ability. The only emotion that is considered to be "male" is the emotion of anger.

The second part of the story is about Okonkwo's seven years in exile, his punishment for committing a crime. During this second part of the story we are also introduced to the white people for the first time. The news about how the white people wiped out the whole Abame clan, reached Okonkwo. The power of the white people grows stronger and stronger. They have taken over Umuofia, they start to build churches and convert people to Christianity. A problem occurs when the Africans see how the white people neglect their gods and ancestral spirits. Because of that, the Africans chose to excommunicate all the people from the tribe who had converted.

Part three is about the domination of the white people but also about

Okonkwo's return to his village after seven years in exile. In this part, we can see how the whites have destroyed the Africans lives and their beliefs completely. The Africans who did not follow the laws that were made by the Europeans were thrown in to jail. There is a passage in the book, that I find very interesting. It is where Okonkwo and Obierika have a discussion, "Does the white man understand our custom about our land? How can he when he does not even speak our tongue? But he says that our customs are bad..." (Achebe 2000, 124). This passage is very interesting and could be connected with the other novel I will focus on, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. In connection to Okonkwo's and Obierika's discussion I would like to quote Edward Blyden: "only the Negro will be able to explain the Negro to the rest of mankind"(Ahluwalia 21). I see this quote as a kind of answer to Obierika's question, and Blyden's words seem very truthful in connection to the novel. That the white people truly do not understand the black peoples customs and culture, and they will only understand it if the black people teach them.

What Obierika says is completely correct but what he must know is that even if he thinks that the white people have come to save the Africans they also have thoughts of bringing something of value back to their homes. Of course, all white people were not evil, they helped the Africans by opening trading markets so that the Africans could trade many of their things and receive money. "The white man had indeed brought a lunatic religion, but he had also built a trading store and for the first time palm-oil and kernel became things of great price, and much money flowed into Umuofia." (Achebe 2000, 126). Schools were also opened to help the Africans become educated, "And so he built a school and a little hospital in Umuofia." (Achebe 2000, 128). One of the main reasons why the relationship between the black and the white people never was good was that they never made any real attempts to understand each other better. Mr. Brown made some attempts but after that there was no communication, so that may be one of the reasons why the situation developed as it did. "Whenever Mr Brown went to that village he spent long hours with Akunna in his obi talking through an interpreter about religion. Neither of them succeeded in converting the other but they learnt more about their different beliefs." (Achebe 2000, 126.)

The thing that makes Achebe's book so great is that he uses African words and that his descriptions of different situations gives the reader the impression that Achebe has been a part of that culture. For example, Achebe tells us about different seeds that are planted and different types of food, which gives us reason to think that his description of Africa is realistic. Without doubt the thing that makes the story so good is the description of the culture of this African tribe, which is in the centre of the story.

Joseph Conrad – Heart of Darkness

Achebe's novel is very different from *Heart of Darkness*. In Conrad's story, we follow a white man and his journey through Africa. This book is also divided into three parts. One thing that is very interesting in this story is the narrator. The story is told through one of four people who sit and listen to Marlow, who is narrating the whole story. Sometimes this can be really confusing. Deeper into the story we follow Marlow's journey to find Kurtz. Marlow is chosen to be the captain of a steamboat since the earlier captain had died. Marlow has a mission to take the boat down Congo River, at least this is the impression, all the way to the coastal station. At one point Marlow says:

“The best way I can explain it to you is by saying that for a second or two I felt as though instead of going to the centre of a continent I were about to set off for the centre of the earth” (Conrad 13). This passage is very interesting considering Marlow's view of Africa otherwise. Why does he see Africa as the centre of the earth? In another passage, after seeing Africans living their normal lives undisturbed by the white people, Marlow believes that he is seeing the prehistoric man, and sees himself and his crew as wanderers on a prehistoric earth. He even starts to resemble these “savages”, as he calls them.

“They howled and leaped and spun and made horrid faces, but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity-like yours- the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough...” (Conrad 36)

One important aspect and a main theme in the book is Marlow's criticism of imperialism. He criticizes imperialism but not from the perspective of the colonized people; he does not care about them. Instead, he criticizes it because of what it does to the white man who has to spend time in an uncivilized country. In his view, the white man is taken from the “civilized” Europe into uncivilized countries where he grows violent because of the lawless environment. “I could see every rib, the joints of their limbs were like knots in a rope, each had an iron collar on his neck and all were connected together with a chain whose bights swung between them, rhythmically clinking” (Conrad 15). This quote shows us one of the effects of colonization and imperialism. Instead of helping the Africans, the Europeans used them as slaves and treated them as animals. In my view, this quote is very useful in describing the effects of colonization. Throughout the story one gets a sense that Conrad may not be the most loving and caring person in the world. In several passages one gets the impression that he is a racist. “Well if a lot of mysterious niggers armed with all kinds of

fearful weapons suddenly took to travelling /.../ I fancy every farm and cottage thereabouts would get empty very soon.” (Conrad 19). He uses the word nigger several times in different passages and even though it is not the author who narrates the story, he still is a white author. When a white author uses the word nigger in his book, one may think that he has some anger towards the black race. Could this be the reason why he refers to Africa as the heart of darkness? Conrad truly does not see the good things that can come out of this darkness. Instead he judges them instantly.

There are some things that make this story realistic, for example the descriptions of how the Africans are treated. Conrad himself had been in Congo for six months but due to sickness he had to return to Europe. So there is no doubt as to whether Conrad had seen Africa or not. But the question is how he presents Africa,

“in and out of rivers, streams of death in life, whose banks were rotting into mud, whose waters, thickened into slime, invaded the contorted mangroves that seemed to writhe at us in the extremity of an impotent despair.” (Conrad 14). Was there only darkness in Africa? Were all the people savages? It seems that he gives us a picture of Africa where the reader is left thinking that there is no more to Africa than ivory. All this can of course depend on the lack of knowledge about Africa. We cannot expect Conrad to know everything about Africa and their culture after only being there for six months.

Criticism of Conrad

Achebe has written in his essay, *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness*, about what he sees as racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. In his essay he writes:

“Quite simply it is the desire – one might indeed say the need – in Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest” (Achebe 2006, 337). According to Achebe, *Heart of Darkness* is the book that represents this need or desire more than many other novels (Achebe 2006, 337). One thing that concerns Achebe is the influence that Conrad has in the academic world. He realizes that there are other books about the same things that Conrad has written about but he sees Conrad as one of the great stylists of modern fiction and as a good storyteller. This is why Achebe thinks that Conrad is on a whole different level than most authors, he sees Conrad's literature as standing, lasting, literature that serious academics constantly will form a high opinion

about. This is one thing that concerns Achebe because of the great acclaim of the book along with the celebrations of it. The image that *Heart of Darkness* projects of Africa is an image of another world, the opposite of Europe, and since Europe is known for its advanced civilization, Africa becomes an opposite of civilization.

Conrad's narrative is another thing that Achebe finds interesting but that he also questions. Achebe states that Conrad is trying to escape reality by having a narrator behind the narrator. Marlow is the primary narrator who is telling the story to a second mysterious narrator. Another thing that disturbs Achebe is Conrad's connection with the black people. When Conrad describes the Africans he also states that he can connect to them but he describes that the closest he ever comes to the Africans is a feeling of kinship. Even though Conrad claims that he feels some kinship to the Africans he still dehumanizes them. This leads to Achebe's main point, which is what he sees as the dehumanization of Africa and Africans, and this makes him wonder if one can really call a novel which celebrates the dehumanization and that depersonalizes large portions of human race a great work of art. Of course, Achebe thinks one cannot call it a great work of art for the above mentioned reasons, but even if he thinks so he never denies that Conrad has talent. Instead, he just wants to focus on the issues of racism since he thinks that Conrad's good sides already have been praised for so many years.

A central concern in my essay is realism and the question of how realistic these two authors actually are. In Achebe's criticism of Conrad he has some thoughts regarding the realism of Conrad's stories. Achebe brings up the fact that Conrad travelled to the Congo during his lifetime but he refuses to believe Conrad since he feels that he is not objective in his descriptions. He also refers to Conrad's own biographer who says that Conrad is "notoriously inaccurate in the rendering of his own story" (Achebe 2006, 346).

Hunt Hawkins is another critic who has written an essay, *Heart of Darkness and Racism*, about Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Hawkins brings up the subject of the description and presentation of the Africans. According to him, the awful presentations of the Africans are based on Conrad's lack of knowledge. The Africans in the story do not have any names and they do not even participate in real conversations. Conrad's descriptions of them are animalistic. They appear only sporadically in the text. It is rare to see an African in a longer part of the story. This means that we are not introduced to the African point of view of the actions taking place. We only get to take part of the "white" side of the story. Conrad's lack of knowledge is understandable since he spent only about six months in Congo without having any knowledge of the language spoken and he was only in the company of white men

(Hawkins 366).

Patrick Brantlinger has written an interesting article, *Imperialism, Impressionism, and the Politics of Style*. He claims that interpretations are made based on the reader's world views and that readers who read the story as racist therefore are imperialists, while those who read it as antiracist are anti-imperialists (Brantlinger 386). Brantlinger also discusses the narrative form. He claims that one can never be certain that Conrad's own values are being presented through Marlow. Often in imperialist texts the voices that often affect the reader are white and male. This is the case also with *Heart of Darkness*.

Criticism of Achebe

For this part of the essay I have chosen to focus on the book *Things Fall Apart – A casebook*, edited by Isidore Okpewho, a casebook of criticism which focuses on the different criticism that Achebe's book has received. Neil ten Kortenaar, one of the critics included in the book, has written in his essay, *How the Center Is Made to Hold in Things Fall Apart*, about how Achebe presents both Africa and Europe and about how objective Achebe really is when he describes the different cultures. Kortenaar sees a problem with describing or comparing two cultures in the same part of the world and he argues that objectivity is important. One can easily choose one culture over the other and appreciate that culture more. For the sake of objectivity the reader is allowed to stand outside both cultures and view the different characteristics of them.

This is where Achebe comes in. Kortenaar claims that Achebe cannot be objective in his comparisons since he is connected to the Igbo tribe. The comparison cannot be fair to the reader or to the tribe. Another thing, which Kortenaar brings up in his criticism, is the use of African Igbo words. The reason why Kortenaar is negative about the use of these words is because of the difficulty of comprehension among non-African readers. Another thing regarding the comprehension is the description of the Igbo-tribe's beliefs and rituals. One example is when the medicine man tries to get rid of the *ogbanje*, an evil spirit which comes back to haunt the mother after she has had a miscarriage, and wants the sick girl to show him where she has hidden her *iyi-uwa*, a stone which needs to be destroyed in order to get rid of the *ogbanje*. All these rituals and words really put the non-African or non-Igbo reader in an uncomfortable situation, either the reader goes on reading without knowing exactly what the words mean and why some rituals take place, or he can find out about them by reading historical books. One thing that we have to keep in mind is how difficult it is for

the author to present this tribe, their tradition and history. The tribe never had a culture where they spread ancient stories or cultural rituals and beliefs through written texts, instead everything was passed orally from generation to generation. This means that they have not left anything for the coming generations except the things they have heard and remember. That is the problem with transmitting your whole history from mouth to mouth, orally, instead of writing it down and passing it from generation to generation. Therefore, it is hard for Achebe to translate all these oral stories into a text that non-Igbo readers can understand.

Kortenaar responds to what Abdul JanMohamed, another professor and critic, says about Achebe. JanMohamed suggests that this way of writing, a form of oral storytelling, was Achebe's writing style. It seems that Achebe wanted to keep the feeling of oral storytelling in his writing and it may therefore be hard for a non-Igbo reader to understand some situations in the book. Kortenaar follows in the footsteps of JanMohamed saying that there is no documentation of history since the Igbo had no writing. Therefore there is a problem with writing about Igbo history (Kortenaar 135). There is an interesting quote by JanMohamed that Kortenaar brings up, in his essay, about the historical accuracy in Achebe's writing: "Of course, what Achebe has written is fiction and does not have to be faithful to the calendar in the same way as history has to be. But in not being faithful to dates, he suggests his narrative has come loose from history, as in a way it has" (Kortenaar 138). According to JanMohamed, then, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is fiction and not reality but at the same time he argues that such a story does not have to be as accurate as history must be.

Ato Quayson is another critic included in the casebook and he has written an essay, *Realism, Criticism and the Disguises of Both*. Quayson, like Kortenaar, focuses on the realism of the story. He claims that there are different levels to the story. One level, that is interesting in the case of realism, is when Achebe describes African culture and how it becomes subverted due to contact with Western imperialism (Quayson 232). To sum up, one can say that a great deal of the criticism is focused on Achebe's descriptions and the comprehension of Achebe's writing. Two parts that are important since the reader is directly affected by them and the whole story can seem great or awful because of them. The thing that we need to keep in mind is the importance of having the reader in focus. In Achebe's case a reader who is not an African may have a hard time understanding the story and that is why the description and comprehension are so crucial.

Colonialism, imperialism and politics in Africa

In order to be able to present a good case for which author who gives us the most realistic presentation of Africa I need to present some African history. I will present some aspects of politics, colonialism and imperialism, since these issues are central aspects in my two novels.

The bond of 1844, a certificate issued by a government or a public company promising to repay borrowed money at a fixed rate of interest at a specified time¹, gave Britain the right to trade in the country of Ghana, formerly known as the Gold Coast. Trade links and diverse interests brought the Europeans to Africa. In the beginning the commerce was friendly but later on it was because of these trading rights that Britain could gain political control of the Gold Coast. There were other dominating countries such as Germany, Spain, Portugal and France who had not only political but also ideological and economical control over different countries in Africa. A prime issue for these imperial and colonial lords was the independence of the Gold Coast in 1957 (Assensoh 2). The independence of this country was actually not the problem, but how the remaining countries and their lands would be divided among the ruling powers. Either they could stay under British administration or be united with the Gold Coast in their mission of independence. Many countries such as French Togoland and Tanzania, which then consisted of Tanganyika and Zanzibar, chose to unite with the Gold Coast and become independent. Unfortunately, the situation did not go so well for all the countries, and one example of this is Nigeria, Chinua Achebe's home country.

The colonial period had brought nothing but trouble to Nigeria. Because of colonialism, a political imbalance was created in the country. This, along with rivalry between different ethnic and religious groups, was the reason why the country's stability demolished. On July 5, 1967, the Nigerian civil war was started. The reason for the civil war was that Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu was putting pressure on General Gowon, who was the head of state. The issue was that Odumegwu Ojukwu, who was the eastern regional Governor during that time, along with his officers, who belonged to the ethnic Igbo tribe, wanted to declare independence for the eastern region of Nigeria. General Gowon chose to fight against these men instead of giving in to their demands. A state of emergency was declared by General Gowon and the whole nation's military powers were gathered and the war broke out. There were also problems of ethnicity during the war and one thing that is interesting in connection to this is that in Achebe's book, *Things Fall Apart*, the main tribe in focus is the Igbo tribe and that the officers of Odumegwu Ojukwu belonged to this Igbo tribe. The Igbo

¹ http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/bond?view=uk

tribe fought for the independence of the eastern region, so in a way they were rebels who wanted to break free from their ruling country and create their own (Assensoh 3).

In some parts of *Things Fall Apart* we can see how the Igbo tribe tries to break free from the white people. So the war went from just trying to capture Odumegwu Ojukwu to a civil war with many innocent casualties. In 1970, the leaders finally came to their senses and put an end to the war and made oral agreements. So whose fault was the war? According to Assensoh, if any country should be blamed it is Great Britain. Nigeria was divided into different regions and one reason why it was divided was because of ethnic differences. Muslims lived in north and Christians lived in south. This split and rivalry between the two dominant religions and ethnicities was encouraged by Great Britain (Assensoh 4). Therefore, Britain was blamed for this civil war. Religion had a great role in colonialism, as we can see here. Even in *Things Fall Apart* the white people came and built their churches and tried to convert as many Africans as they could. If we look at *Heart of Darkness* this is not as easy to see since in that story the white people are already there, but judging from the text it seems that the Africans probably did not agree with the white people's beliefs, since they are treated like animals. In *Things Fall Apart* the Africans who converted to Christianity were treated like humans.

If we look at colonial native policy we can see that France had a big influence on the other great nations of the world. One of the main tenets in French policy was assimilation. The assimilation policy made the colonists see their colonies as extensions of their own land. Even though the colony was placed thousands of miles away from the motherland it was still seen as a part of it, and it was ruled by the same laws and regulations. If we connect this assimilation policy to the two novels we can see that it has some resemblance with the novels sometimes, even if the Frenchmen are not part of these stories. In *Heart of Darkness* it is the Belgians who rule, and that is perhaps why the black people did not become assimilated. In *Things Fall Apart* it is Great Britain that rules in Nigeria, which is a historical fact, and in this case the black people had a chance of being assimilated, and some of them took that chance, even though the price was that they had to convert to Christianity. If they did so they were excommunicated from their own society, “‘the village has outlawed us,’ said one of the women. ‘The bellman announced it last night? ...’” (Achebe 2000,114). During Africa's “dark” period when colonizers came and took Africans and sold them as slaves, the existing culture came to be changed when slaves were taken to other countries where they were forced to make contact with people and adapt to the language that was spoken there. This contact that was forced upon the Africans was one reason why their

culture would change forever, since they had to adapt to the culture of the people whose slaves they were.

“Racism is the psychology of imperialism, the spirit of empire, because racism supplies the element that makes for the righteousness of empire. Hence racism is not simply a by product of empire, but ... part of the intestines of empire”². Cultural imperialism is one of the reasons why the West had so much power. To be able to reshape the whole world to fit the country’s own image by total power is cultural imperialism. When the white people started to spread around the world, “Anglo-Saxonism” was strengthened among the countries invaded. The “Anglo-Saxon” was a common identity for the white people who shared the same cultural history and sense of racial superiority but most of all their “home” was the centre of imperialism. This spreading or diaspora of white people guaranteed that Western culture would spread around the world. It was because of racism that white people could stay together and help each other out and instead of racism being like shackles, the white people used it as a way of uniting with each other in order to become stronger. So imperialism and racism have always gone hand in hand through history, as Barbara Bush mentions in her book *Imperialism, Race and Resistance*, and they have never been separated from each other³. We can see some of this collaboration between imperialism and racism in *Heart of Darkness*, the great power of the white people and how they constantly unite with each other. Through Conrad’s descriptions one can get the impression that it was in fact racism that brought the white people together and made them stronger.

Realism – a form rather than method

Realism was a dominant movement from around 1840 to 1880. The main idea of realism was that it should give an objective, neutral and truthful representation of the real world. This representation would be based on accurate observations of contemporary life. In the beginning realism was seen as a mirror of reality and a style of writing that was “styleless”. One thing that is important to know about the realism writers is that they did not just write whatever they thought of as appropriate, they explored facts all over the world in order to give a correct and realistic representation of the subject concerned. The difference between them and “ordinary” authors was that they explored areas that had not been explored before or at least not explored in detail. This is an essential part of realism, the search for the

² <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/sodertorn/Doc?id=5003125&ppg=20>

³ <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/sodertorn/Doc?id=5003125&ppg=26>

truth, in the case of Achebe we can refer back to the criticism he received, in Kortenaars essay *How the Center Is Made to Hold in Things Fall Apart*, from Abdul JanMohamed:

“Of course, what Achebe has written is fiction and does not have to be faithful to the calendar in the same way as history has to be. But in not being faithful to dates, he suggests his narrative has come loose from history, as in a way it has” (Kortenaar 138). If he had followed the essentials of realism, then, he would not have received such criticism. His story must not be historically correct but when writing about such a sensitive subject and blaming white people for destroying your country, then it would be better to have the facts historically correct.

There are many different characteristics to realism. One of them concerns the characters in a story. In realism novels the focus is on the character and not on the plot or action. It is simply because the author is more important than the plot. In romances and naturalist novels, there are often different dramatic or remarkable elements, such as spectacular heroes and unnatural or supernatural events. Realism has a tendency to avoid these elements. Another thing that is characteristic of realism novels is the objectivity of the different presentations. This point is very interesting in this context since the two main novels in this essay are about descriptions. With objectivity is meant that there should be less authorial comment and more focus on how things really are instead of focusing on the author's thoughts. It is important that the author is objective and not prejudiced about the situation at hand. This point can be discussed in relation to both our novels. Through the essay this subject has been brought up many times and the fact is that both authors seem to have a hard time being objective. Of course the both authors are artists and do not have to be objective but in the case of my essay I need to focus on their objectivity. Achebe's descriptions are more detailed and really show us the inside of Africa, but at times he is letting his emotions take over the narrative. The same thing goes for Conrad, although obviously he cannot be compared to Achebe when it comes to descriptions since he does not have the knowledge about Africa and its culture that Achebe does. He also has problems with being objective, and as I mentioned earlier one cannot know for sure when it is Conrad's ideals that are being presented and when it is Marlow's.

Characterization is very important in this discussion. In both books we have two very deep characters, Okonkwo and Marlow, whom we get to explore. In Okonkwo's case it is easy to see what he feels and what he thinks about. He is an easy character to understand thanks to the narration and the descriptions. In Marlow's case it is much harder because the way Conrad has used the narrator is so confusing, and sometimes it seems as if you do not

know who the narrator is. Sometimes you have no idea who is narrating. Another aspect where the characteristics of realism are important is in the case of objectivity. Once again I want to show that the importance of objectivity is indeed very great since the author's sincerity is based on it. On the one hand, we have Achebe who writes about his Nigerian people and tribe. We must think of how objective Achebe actually is when he describes the white people and their intentions. The only way to know this is of course to go back to the history of Africa and see if it really was as Achebe describes it. On the other hand, we have Conrad who surely bases his story on his own trip to Congo, where he spent six months, but this cannot be known for sure. In many different places in that book you can get the impression that the narrator is racist, and in these cases it is important to know how objective the author is and if it actually is his own idea that we are shown through the narrator.

Laurence Lerner states in his book, *The Frontiers of Literature*, that "Realism is the claim that in the interaction between convention and observation that lies behind every piece of writing, a shift ought to take place, reducing the role of convention, and increasing that of observation. The structuralist who dismisses this does so because he does not really believe in observation." (Lerner 442). In this quote by Lerner we can see the importance of observation and how it should be in focus instead of focusing on the normative examples given in texts. The convention should, according to Lerner, be reduced and authors should focus on observation of facts. He also states that the structuralist writes can not follow the realism of literature since they do not believe in observation. Even though he states so, he believes that their interaction is necessary in the case of writing. A subject that is a part of this essay is stereotypes, and Lerner has also commented on stereotypes in his book. "...the undermining and rejection of stereotypes" (Lerner 441), he focuses on the criticism of realism from George Eliot and Roland Barthes. The critic against realism is that it completely rejects stereotypes.

Mary Francis Slattery writes in her article, *What is Realism?*, about the definition of realism and some of the characteristics of it. In one section she states: "The grace of realism is not in brash reference to bodily functions or to garbage cans and back alleys, nor is it in mere inclusiveness. It is, I repeat, in the sheer aptness of its occurrence in an artistic form." (Slattery 57). With this she wants to show us the essence of realism, stating that realism does not only consist of how true authors are in their descriptions of different situations, instead it is how the realism appears in artistic form. So one can say that the focus is rather on form than method. In order to confirm this she states: "Reality is what the mind seeks when it wants truth. Truth is not meaning or reference." (Slattery 61) and what we can

learn from this is that the truth itself does not work as a reference point in events that we seek answers for.

I would like to end this section with a quote from William Dean Howells who described realism in a few words but very well, “Realism is nothing more and nothing less than the truthful treatment of material”⁴.

Conclusion

So far I have presented the two authors, the criticism that they have received, and some facts about African history and politics. I have also given a realism perspective to the research by writing about realism and relating it to both novels. In the introduction of the essay I had some questions to be answered, and after my research I can present some results. As I mentioned in the introduction, my main aim with the essay is to compare Achebe’s and Conrad’s novels. Throughout I had to be objective and not let my personal feelings make a difference in the result. In the beginning I felt that Achebe was a very good author who described everything very well and really gave the impression that it is Africa he is writing about. Conrad, on the other hand, I felt, was a racist, and that was why I needed to be objective and rely on the facts. Of course, one’s personal thoughts make a difference, but after doing some research I realized that Achebe was not in fact as good as I thought and that Conrad, it seemed, could not possibly have been a racist. The comparison between the books was interesting since one book follows a black man and his journey through life and how his land becomes invaded by white people, while the other book follows a white man and his journey to Africa where he invades a country for business purposes. So here we get to see Africa through the eyes of a white man and a black man. Of course, we cannot get the same picture of Africa since characters in the two books have different life experiences. For *Okonkwo*, it is very hard to face the truth that the white people are more powerful in many ways and that he must submit to them. Marlow, on the other hand, never has to submit to a greater power, he is a part of that greatness himself and he invades *Okonkwo’s* Africa for business purposes.

If we take a look at the criticism these authors have received we can get a better view of the comparison. Achebe’s criticism is of course based on anger among other things. He does not think that a book that dehumanises people should be celebrated as a great book. But it is a matter of fact that people were treated that way in Africa. Conrad’s descriptions seem very hard at times but the African people did suffer a lot. They were taken as slaves and

⁴ <http://www.wsu.edu/~campbell/amlit/realism.htm>

they worked for the white people exactly as Conrad describes it. Of course, one can question Conrad's use of words, and he may have had some anger inside of him towards the black race. What makes me question Conrad's authenticity is how he describes his relation to the black people. In one part of the book he mentions that he feels some kind of kinship to them while in other parts he completely dehumanises them and describes them as animals. This is why I have a hard time accepting his authenticity because he sometimes seems to be going against his own thoughts. In one part of the book he describes a white man that he sees and by the description of that man you instantly know that it is a rich and wealthy man he is describing. Another thing that makes me question Conrad and his authenticity is the following quote from his own biographer, which Achebe have quoted in his essay, "notoriously inaccurate in the rendering of his own story" (Achebe 2006, 346). If his own biographer writes this about him then I am willing to understand why Achebe refuses to see Conrad as truthful in his descriptions of Africa, even if Conrad spent six months in Congo. But spending six months in Congo does not mean that he was objective in his storytelling. Relying upon Hunt Hawkins, I would like to argue that it is important that we are introduced to the African people's side of the story. We are never introduced to what the black person feels or what he thinks of during the story. We get to meet some cannibals, but those men are not relevant to the story. By saying this I am not saying that Achebe gives us a "white" side of the story but that he gives us some perspectives, which I feel are important. Achebe shows us that the white people, whatever intentions they had, also wanted to help the Africans and not only use them. They built schools to educate them and make them stronger and they built churches in the hopes of rescuing the Africans and giving them a chance of salvation. The lack of knowledge may be the reason why religion is a factor in different problematic situations. It is commonly known that people that believe in one religion believe that it is their religion that is the right one, and that is why conflicts can arise. The Africans believe that their belief is the right one while the Christians want to save the Africans from facing death in hell by converting them to Christianity. We are also introduced to Mr. Brown who is the man who makes the only real attempt to communicate and connect with the Africans. This is to me a proof that their intentions were not only bad.

In my discussion of colonialism and imperialism, I pointed to how these books are connected. In that part of the essay I mention how Great Britain supported the rivalry between the two major religions and how that support could be connected to the books. If we look at Achebe's novel, that aspect seems to be relevant. As Achebe describes in his book the white people came and wanted to have everything according to their own will and all the

black people were expected to convert to Christianity. This created a rivalry between the Igbo tribe and the converted Christians who no longer were seen as members of the Igbo tribe. On the other hand, we have *Heart of Darkness* where there is almost not any conflict at all. It seems that the white people who ruled there were not so bothered by the fact that the black people were not Christians. This is suggested in the descriptions of the black people, who behaved like savages. The cannibals are another issue that I think of in this situation, if a person is a cannibal then he cannot be a loving person since he kills people in order to eat them, and that is a not so loving ability. If the blacks had converted to Christianity, one can think that the white people would teach them how to be civilized and how to love everybody, which for Christians is the message of Christianity. That is another point which makes me believe that no real attempts were made to convert the black people. One thing that is important to keep in mind is that Congo was ruled by Belgians and their way of dealing with these situations were perhaps different. As I mentioned in the imperialism part, racism was a strong factor. In *Heart of Darkness* this racism is shown very clearly. They use the black people as slaves and the white people stayed together and used racism as a basis to unite, which I mentioned in the part about colonialism and imperialism. Achebe's novel also has a connection to this theme. In his novel it is not as obvious as it is in Conrad's but the racism is still there. The white people in *Things Fall Apart* are kind to the black people and offer them salvation while they think of themselves as better than them. The racism of the white people does not have to be directed towards the black people, it is the fact that they believe that they are better than other human beings that shows the racism. So both books deal with this part in one way or another.

Based on the research I have been doing about the subject and the facts that I have presented in this essay I have come to the conclusion that Achebe is the one who has presented Africa in the best way according to realism. To answer my main question in this essay, Achebe is the one who manages to present Africa in the most truthful way. Another thing connected to my main question was what effect their writings have had. That is one thing that I feel has been brought up in this essay. Of course, as already mentioned, Achebe's descriptions may be difficult for non-African readers, and that is an effect of his writing while Conrad's writing may have an even bigger effect because of how he discusses the racial issues. What people must know is that his writing may be based on a lack of knowledge, and I am not defending his ideas. In this essay, my understanding for Joseph Conrad has grown deeper. In the beginning I was sceptic and I judged him and thought he was a racist. Now I know that he is an author with many skills, although his lack of knowledge may be crucial for

the judgement of his book. Chinua Achebe is a great author with a special quality to, his descriptions. In this essay, I have written about how his descriptions can be hard to understand for non-Africans but they are still important. I am not an African but I still appreciate his originality, and I find that the reader truly gets a glimpse of the real Africa, which is hidden deep in the jungle.

As I have mentioned the author whom I found more realistic is Achebe. To sum up it is because of his way of describing the environment. The way he writes makes the reader instantly think that one is in Africa and the reader simply want more and more. I hope that this essay has given a better understanding of the two novels, *Things Fall Apart* and *Heart of Darkness*, and that you have made your own decision based on my research.

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