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Critical responses to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

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Abstract:

This essay will revolve around the critical reception of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The focus will be on three primary sources: firstly, the early critical reception and how the novella was received when it was originally published in 1902, secondly, Chinua's famous critique in 1977 when he called Conrad a racist and condemned both the author and the novella, and thirdly, Said's defence and contextualization of Conrad's novella in 1992. The essay will explore how the critics have been influenced and from what standpoints they have entered into the debate on Conrad and show how the discussion has changed over time. Furthermore, it will show that the early responses ignore the 'race' aspect because 'race-thinking' was seen as something natural. It will also explain why Achebe might feel so strongly against Conrad. He is after all fighting for a strong African identity after the colonies gained their independence. Said defends and contextualizes Conrad as a creature of his time. Finally, the essay will discuss and contrast the critics, concluding that each critique is highly influenced by the time-period in which it was written.

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Introduction:

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is considered one of the great works of English literature. The early responses to the novella praised the novella and called it one of the events of the literary year. However, this changed in 1977 when Chinua Achebe criticized the novella for being racist. As a response to Achebe's critique, Edward Said defended Conrad in 1993. In this essay I will argue that each critique is highly influenced by the time-period in which it was written. I will also explain how they have been influenced and from what standpoints they have entered into the debate on Conrad. Finally, I will also show how the discussion has changed over time.

Before beginning to explore the critical responses to the text, it might be a good idea to start with a short summary. *Heart of Darkness* deals with Marlow's expedition on board a steamboat into the African jungle in search of an ivory-trader named Mr Kurtz. His mission is to find and bring him back to civilisation. However, Mr Kurtz does not want to leave and actually orders an attack on the steamboat when they get close to his station. Mr. Kurtz is worshipped by the Africans and he exploits this. Marlow does however manage to bring Mr. Kurtz aboard the steamboat. On the way back to England, Mr Kurtz dies, his last words are "the horror, the horror" (Conrad 69) and Marlow returns to England without him. In England, Marlow visits Mr. Kurtz' intended and gives her Kurtz old letters. She remembers what a great man Mr. Kurtz was and how much she loved him. She also wants to know what his last words were, to which Marlow replies "your name" (ibid. 77).

A vast number of critics have entered into the debate concerning Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Some of the more notable critics include Albert Guerard, Chinua Achebe, Ian Watt, Hunt Hawkins, Peter Brooks, Patrick Brantlinger, Marianna Torgovnick, Jeremy Hawthorn, Wilson Harris, Edward W. Said and J. Hillier Millis. This essay focuses on the work of a few of these critics, some which are especially notable. Firstly, I will go into more detail about the early reception of the novella (early responses). Secondly, I will look at the critic who spurred life into the Conrad debate again, Chinua Achebe. Finally, I will look at the response to Achebe's criticism in Edward Said's "Two Visions in Heart of Darkness". I find these critics to be the most relevant to my argument.

Critical responses:

Early responses to the novella in 1902:

The early critics commented on how the novella was one of the events of the literary year and a masterpiece (Armstrong 307-308). One critic called the novella a destructive experience and mentions that people must not suppose that Conrad's novella is against colonisation, expansion or Imperialism. It is above all an adventure experience, where the ending featuring the woman who idealises Kurtz's memory acts as a way of signifying just how far the reader has travelled (ibid. 309). Another critic commented on Kurtz's Intended and her belief in the villain's heroism (ibid. 310). In another review the critic commented on the fact that Conrad have moved past the two classes in fiction. *Heart of Darkness* does more than just deal with movement and adventure or offer a characterization of the human mind. Conrad has both motives, adventure and a philosophic presentation, of the human character (ibid. 311). According to one critic the novella cannot be understood with one eye closed and Conrad demands the full attention from his readers (ibid. 312). A number of critics found the prose beautiful and the novella atmospheric but one critic thought the narrative was unconvincing and felt that it too often lost its spontaneity and became too rhetorical (ibid. 313). One critic mentions that there is no prejudice in the novella (ibid. 308).

What is the most striking to a 21st century reader about the early responses to the novella is that the race aspect is almost completely left out. There is however one early critic that does bring up the race aspect. Edward Garnett ends his review by stating that Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* offers an "analysis of the deterioration of the white man's morale, when he is let loose from European restraint, and to make trade profits out of the subject races" (Murfin 99). Conrad responded to this in a letter and wrote "your brave attempt to grapple with the foggishness of *Heart of Darkness*, to explain what I myself tried to shape blindfold, as it were, touched me profoundly" (ibid. 99). What we can make out of this is that the novella is in fact about the immorality of whites in Africa. Also, Conrad had written to Blackwood one month before the first instalment of the novella and said that his idea behind the novella was "the criminality of inefficiency and pure selfishness when tackling the civilizing work in Africa" (ibid. 100). However, it should also be noted that post-structuralism shows us that the intentions of the author are not to be "trusted" or even worthy of consideration. It is, however, interesting historically.

The race aspect is mostly ignored by early critics. A historical background of how race and racism was looked upon in 1902 explains why this might be the case. In his “An Image of Africa”, Achebe assumes that everyone reading his critique will understand what he means when he refers to racism. But the meaning of the word is by no means self-evident, as the concept of racism has changed over time. It is important to understand that the word *racism* did not exist when Conrad wrote his novella. This does of course not mean that racism did not exist but people thought about the subject of race very differently than we do nowadays. When Conrad wrote his novella, race-thinking was considered so normal that a word like *racism* was not needed (Firchow 234).

The first time a word was used with these negative connotations was in 1907. It was the word *racialism* which is defined as the “belief in the superiority of a particular race leading to prejudice and antagonism towards people of other races, esp. those in close proximity who may be felt as a threat to one's cultural and racial integrity or economic well-being” (Firchow 234). The first use of the word *racism* was in 1936, over 10 years after Conrad's death. Also the definition of *racialism* does not seem to fit in with the racist attitudes towards the Africans, since they did not feel that their culture was threatened or that the African rivals could harm their economic status (ibid. 234).

More importantly, *Heart of Darkness* is not the only artistic work where the critics completely missed the racial context. A similar example can be seen in the early responses to the painting J M W Turner's *The Slave Ship*. As Paul Gilroy has shown, the famous art-critic John Ruskin did not acknowledge the 'racial' content of the painting. Gilroy writes:

Thinking about England is being conducted through the 'racial' symbolism that artistic images of black suffering provide. These images were not an alien or unnatural presences that had somehow intruded into English life from the outside. They were an integral means with which England was able to make sense of itself and its destiny (Gilroy 84).

It should be noted that the early responses to the painting are from the 1840s and not exactly the same time-period as when *Heart of Darkness* was written. The responses, nevertheless, exemplify the same logic. Because racialism is seen as something natural,

the critics do not think about it. Instead they read the novella for its aesthetic value, and spend a longer time discussing the literary qualities of the novella.

In the early responses to the novella *Heart of Darkness* no one even comments on the racism and “race” is completely ignored. Rather, the critics focus on the form of the novella. Some have commented on the adventure experience and how it is a philosophic presentation of the human character. It is also interesting to note that one even commented that there is no prejudice in it. This is not surprising considering that racism was not even a word and it shows that ‘race-thinking’ was seen as something so normal that no one even noticed it in the novella.

Chinua Achebe 1977:

In his famous critique, “An Image of Africa”, Chinua Achebe takes a strong stand against Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. He claims that Conrad was a racist and that a novella which so depersonalizes a portion of the human race should not be considered a great work of art (Achebe 176). The following quote from Achebe is a good demonstration of his opinion:

The point of my observations should be quite clear by now, namely that Joseph Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist. That this simple truth is glossed over in criticisms of his work is due to the fact that white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely unremarked (Achebe 176).

According to Achebe, Conrad has an obsession with skin colour: he describes a man as being black, having long black legs and long black arms. Achebe mentions a scene in the novella where after Kurtz’ death, the manager’s boy is described as putting his “insolent black head in the doorway” (Conrad 69). He further rejects the idea that Conrad is not racist because he is merely describing what Marlow thinks and sees; this idea is ridiculous because there is no alternative reference and the readers have to take what the characters say as the truth since no one is disputing them. If Conrad wanted to add another layer to the novella he would have done so, Achebe concludes (Achebe 174-75, 177).

A central point in Achebe’s criticism is that Conrad thinks everything should be in their right place and how tragedy happens when fine Europeans travel into the heart of darkness. Cannibals are fine people when they are in their place. Africans are described as savages with wild eyes using an unrefined language consisting of grunts and short phrases sounding like a violent babble. Africa is shown as the other world with bestiality contrasting the intelligence and refinement of Europe. The Africans are sometimes referred to as specimens, Marlow comments on how one African is an improved specimen because he can fire up a vertical boiler (Achebe 172). The point is further exemplified in the discussion of the meaning of the two rivers in *Heart of Darkness*. How travelling on the Congo river is like going back in time to the “earliest

beginnings of the world” (Conrad 33) and how Thames has also once been a dark place but is now in light and peace. The description of Africa include it being a prehistoric earth with prehistoric men acting in a “black and incomprehensible frenzy” (ibid. 35). The Africans are howling and leaping and are described as not inhuman, meaning he did find them inhuman at one point. It is probably at this point Marlow realizes that the tribesmen are in fact human, even if he still consider them as brute savages. He mentions how they have faces like grotesque masks, strong muscles, energy and a wild vitality. According to Achebe, this is Conrad describing things in their place (Achebe 172-173).

To explain why Achebe feels so strongly against Conrad one must look at what happened in Africa around this time.

In the mid-60s most of the former European colonies in Africa gained their independence, which also marked an end to the European colonial era. The waning of the negritude movement also took place in the 1960s and 70s (Agatucci). The aim of the negritude movement was to “unite peoples living in different nations through their shared ancestry and common ancestry and common origins” (McLeod 77). It was criticized for putting focus on the skin colour and blackness and upholding separatist binary oppositions. It was also criticised for not questioning the negative associations with 'blackness' (ibid. 81-82). More than ever it seemed important to create an African identity. Achebe was also part of the Pan-Africanism movement which aim was to unify native Africans and eliminate colonialism (Appiah 73). Interestingly enough Achebe begins his critique with a story of something he experienced one day as he was on his way home from the University of Massachusetts.

Then he asked me if I was a student too. I said no, I was a teacher. What did I teach? African literature. Now that was funny, he said, because he knew a fellow who taught the same thing, or perhaps it was African history, in a certain Community College not far from here. It always surprised him, he went on to say, because he never had thought of Africa as having that kind of stuff, you know. By this time I was walking much faster (Achebe 169).

This is obviously something Achebe feels very strongly against. Achebe wants to change

the way Western psychology has “set Africa up as a foil to Europe” (Achebe 170). Creating an African identity is important to Achebe and he finds it to be one of his most important roles as a writer. Often in his life he has been asked the question “are you from Africa”, and has found that Africa seems to mean something to people. “Each of these tags has a meaning, and a penalty and a responsibility. All these tags, unfortunately for the black man, are tags of disability” (Appiah 74). Achebe asks the question “When you see an African what does it mean to a white man?” (ibid. 71). The European gaze is what created the African identity (ibid. 71). This might be why Achebe thinks that identity is something we must continue to reshape (ibid. 177). Achebe has claimed that:

I'm an Ibo writer, because this is my basic culture; Nigerian, Africa and writer . . . no, black first, then a writer. (...) I must see what it is to be black – and this means being sufficiently intelligent to know how the world is moving and how the black people fare in the world. This is what it means to be black. Or an African – the same (Appiah 73).

Clearly, identity is an important aspect here. Contemporary African cultural life has been highly influenced by colonialism. Achebe wants to move past this situation and create a strong African identity. What Achebe seems to miss is the fact that he just like Conrad is highly influenced by the political influences, social and cultural norms of his time. This point brings us to the next critic Edward Said.

Edward W. Said 1993:

Said's analysis was published in 1993 and is in many ways a response to Chinua Achebe's "An Image of Africa". Said begins his critique "Two Visions in *Heart of Darkness*" by stating that we must not blame the Europeans for the misfortunes of the present. We should instead look at the events of imperialism "as a network of interdependent histories that would be inaccurate and senseless to repress, useful and interesting to understand." (Said 19). We live in a global environment and racial hatred can lead to destruction (ibid. 19-20).

Said further mentions how the imperial attitude is captured in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. "It is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence – that which makes its truth, its meaning-its subtle and penetrating essence.... We live, as we dream – alone" (Said 23). Said explains how Marlow wants us to understand that Kurt's looting adventure, Marlow's journey and the narrative are linked and how they all work as a demonstration of the Europeans acts of imperial mastery in Africa (ibid. 23).

He further comments on how the narrative gives us a sense that there is no way out of the historical force of imperialism. Conrad wants to demonstrate that Marlow is limited to his situation. At the time Conrad would probably not be able to have presented anything other than an imperialistic world-view. "Independence was for whites and Europeans; the lesser or subject peoples were to be ruled; science, learning, history emanated from the West" (Said 24).

To Said, Conrad's narrative is bound to a certain time and place. Conrad does not see an alternative to imperialism and the natives he wrote about seemed to be incapable of independence. He could not foresee what would happen when imperialism came to an end. Conrad allows readers today to see an Africa that is not made up of dozens of European colonies, even if he himself might have had a very limited idea of what Africa was like (Said 25). This is a particularly important point, Said sees the novella more as an important time-document which displays a vision that was seen as "normal" and correct at the time. Kurt's speech is also full with discrepancies, which gives the reader a sense that everything presented might not be exactly what it appears to be.

Conrad's way of demonstrating this discrepancy between the orthodox and his own views of empire is to keep drawing attention to how ideas and values are constructed (and deconstructed) through dislocations in the narrator's language. Marlow, for example is never straightforward. He alternates between garrulity and stunning eloquence (Said 29).

Conrad also wants to give the reader a sense of disorientation. What appears secure might not be secure at all (Said 29). An example of this is:

the policeman in the corner, for instance – is only slightly more secure than the white men in the jungle, and requires the same continuous (but precarious) triumph over an all-pervading darkness, which by the end of the tale is shown to be the same in London and in Africa (Said 29).

To Said, Conrad realized that “darkness” could be colonized or illuminated. Conrad's limitation is that even though he understood that colonialism in one way was just dominance and land-grabbing. He still could not understand that imperialism had to come to an end, so that the natives could live their lives free from European domination. “As a creature of his time, Conrad could not grant the natives their freedom, despite his severe critique of the imperialism that enslaved them” (Said 30). As Parry demonstrates in this quote:

although Said recognized “the scrupulously ethnocentric nature” of Foucault's undertaking, Hulme argues that he chose to emphasize the inherent *possibilities* of this work in the interests of extending to a global terrain the concept of discourse with the constant implication of textuality within networks of history, power, knowledge, and society (Parry 69).

However, that quote is not about *Heart of Darkness*. It demonstrates how Said historicizes and contextualizes texts. He looks at when the novella was written and problematizes it by stating that Conrad probably could not have presented anything other than an imperialistic world-view. Said does however state that Conrad is highly critical of imperialism but that in the end finds it inevitable and unavoidable. Said touches on the same subjects as Achebe but keeps a more balanced and neutral tone throughout the essay.

Discussion:

Achebe claims that if Conrad wanted to add an alternative reference he would have done so. Instead, readers are forced to take what the characters say in the novella as the truth. However, one should also remember that when a person reads a book, all of the information s/he has gathered during his life is taken into reference, a book might be narrow and short-sighted in its description but a reader does have some obligation not to take everything he hears as the truth. Marlow's knowledge when he enters Africa is limited and therefore he might give a more simplified picture. Also, because most of his travels take place on a river, he can only describe what he sees, this gives limited information and not everything might be accurate.

In Achebe's criticism he also mentions that a novella which so depersonalizes a portion of the human race should not be considered a great work of art. This is wrong and even if *Heart of Darkness* is in fact completely racist there is no denying that it can still be a work of art. One can just look at *Triumph des Willens* one of the most famous propaganda films of the Nazi Party. Now everyone can see that it is thoroughly racist but that does not keep it from being an important time-document, technically groundbreaking and a masterpiece in its genre. One should not completely disregard the early critics who praised the novella's writing and prose. The beautiful language is without question an important reason why it is considered such a masterpiece today and why it was so praised when it was originally published.

I began to sense a certain incomprehension in Achebe's analysis of the pressures of form that engaged Conrad's imagination to transform biases grounded in homogeneous premises. By form I mean the novel form as a medium of consciousness that has its deepest roots in an intuitive and much, much older self than the historical ego or the historical conditions of ego dignity that bind us to a particular decade or generation or century (Harris 86).

Harris also states that it is unfair to expect someone who is living in colonial times to be fully post-colonial. Just like Said pointed out we must not forget to historicize and contextualize texts. It is however important to note that even though Achebe's critique might be erroneous, it is just like *Heart of Darkness* an important text and adds an

important take on the novella. One can just take a look at all the responses Achebe's critique has caused. Even a misreading of a text can lead to discussions because it can create a chain-reaction of responses to responses.

Conrad could be perhaps considered racist by today's standards, but considering the time when he wrote the novella, he probably was no more racist than anyone else. Conrad and his peers would not have seen the novella as being racist. It is difficult to know how much of what is said in the novella was written for dramatic effect, Marlow might have been created to be slightly racist. However, Conrad did go up the Congo river in 1890 so it is hard to think of Marlow as something completely separate from Conrad. To Achebe this effects the value of the novella in question. To Said this point is fairly irrelevant in evaluating the novella's value. This is probably due to the fact that the feelings for Africa and racism are closer to his heart. The African identity is more important to Achebe than to Said..

It also seems possible to read the text as a positive view of Africa, in that Conrad seems to imply that the origins of man are in Africa. Marlow is after all travelling into the heart of darkness and he does suggest that London just like Africa has been "one of the dark places of the earth" (Conrad 5). He does see a connection and the birth of man can be seen as something positive in that we all share a common ancestry.

Marlow considers the Africans a part of the machinery just as much as the boiler is. However Marlow does show some affection for his late helmsmen, Marlow states the reader might find this as rather odd because after all he was just "a savage who was no more account than a grain of sand in a black Sahara" (Conrad 49) but because he had steered for him and been at his back for so long he had formed a kind bond with him "like a claim of distant kinship" (ibid. 50). The key here is the kinship. Conrad does see a connection to Africa and this ties back to the discussion about how Conrad seems to suggest that the origins of man are in Africa. He does not distance himself from them. To Achebe however, this kinship is something that scares Conrad.

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; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a

meaning in it which you -- you so remote from the night of first ages -- could comprehend (Conrad 36).

According to Achebe this is the meaning of the novella. The problem with this is that Achebe categorises Conrad as a racist and sees his racist position as the message of the novella. Achebe does this even though he obviously hates that Conrad (in Achebe's view) is categorising people. It is also important to note that Marlow's perception of the Africans in the novella changes. In the beginning they are indeed described as faceless brutes but as the quote demonstrates he does realise their humanity.

Conrad describes Africa as a very mean rough, underdeveloped and dangerous place. However there are also times where Conrad describes Africa as a beautiful place (though he does not explicitly state that he thinks it is beautiful), how the land is glistening and the sea is glittering. But even in these descriptions there are usually traces of evil or danger lurking such as a creeping mist and the jungle being so dark green it is almost black. However, it should be noted that even the stereotypes of Africa as a paradise belong to the same discourse of exoticism.

Achebe also seems to claim that Africa is the "heart of darkness" but "heart of darkness" could just as well refer to Europeans' greed as they loot and torture the Africans in their search for ivory.

That's what I say; nobody; here, you understand *here*, can endanger your position. And why? You stand the climate – you outlast them all. The danger is in Europe (Conrad 32).

This is referring to how Europeans can do whatever they want in Africa and treat it as their own playground without having to face any consequences for their actions. Here, the Europeans seem to represent the darkness, and not the African.

Conrad also shows a strong disdain for colonialism calling them conquerors and claiming that they just took what they wanted like violent robbers conducting murder on a great scale. "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" (Conrad 10). This quote portrays Conrad in a whole different manner and I find it interesting that Achebe chooses not to discuss this part of the novella.

Conclusion:

The early responses mainly focus on the aesthetic aspects of *Heart of Darkness*. They discuss how atmospheric and beautiful the language is. The 'race' aspect is completely ignored. This is not so surprising considering that racism was not even a word and 'race-thinking' was seen as something so natural, that they were completely blind to it.

In 1977 Achebe condemns Conrad and calls him a racist. He also claims that a novella that depersonalizes a portion of the human race should not be considered a great work of art. There are a number of reasons for this. In the mid-60s most of the former European colonies gained their Independence. After this, it was seen as important to create a strong African identity from an African standpoint. Achebe was also part of the Pan-Africanism movement whose aim was to unify native Africans. He has also claimed that creating an African identity is one of his most important roles as a writer.

In 1993 Said defended Conrad. Said mentions that Conrad is a creature of his time and historicizes and contextualizes him as someone who could see the evils of imperialism but not offer an alternative view.

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* has invited a body of criticism of great complexity. Many of the critics of this have presented valuable and incisive analyses of the novella. As argued in this essay, however, when reading this criticism, we need to approach it just as we approach Conrad's novella, that is, we need to place it in a historical context. Exploring some of the main critics of *Heart of Darkness* from such a historicizing and contextualizing perspective, then, this essay has shown that each critique of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is highly influenced by the time-period in which it was written.

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