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# Mistah Kurtz - he dead': Heart of Darkness and the Collapse of Imperialism

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“Mistah Kurtz—he dead”:  
*Heart of Darkness* and the Collapse of Imperialism

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Since first reading it in high school, I've always—rather uncritically—enjoyed Joseph Conrad's sinister and troubling novel *Heart of Darkness*. Re-reading it for Professor Robert Archambeau's English Literature II course provided me with an opportunity to bring newly-acquired critical skills to bear on the work, as well as allowing me to consider it from viewpoints utterly unknown to me before. It was in the context of the course, for instance, that I first encountered Chinua Achebe's harsh criticisms of the novel, an encounter ultimately leading to the writing of this essay. Having been taught in high school that Conrad's main goal in writing *Heart of Darkness* was to criticize imperialism, I was shocked by Achebe's assertions to the diametric contrary. In this essay, I attempt to show why I believe Achebe's criticisms are, from a formal standpoint, incorrect. But in so doing, I come to conclude that a reading more or less sympathetic to the work itself is also more or less sympathetic to what can only be considered Conrad's racist imperialism. That is, I suggest that such a reading is in itself morally ambiguous at best.

“Mistah Kurtz—he dead”:

*Heart of Darkness* and the Collapse of Imperialism

“Our refined society attaches to human life (and with reason) a value unknown to barbarous communities...if, in view of this desirable spread of civilization, we count upon the means of action which confer upon us dominion and the sanction of right, it is not less true that our ultimate end is a work of peace.”

—King Leopold II, “The Sacred Mission of Civilization”

“[T]here was no shadowy friend to stand by my side in the night of the enormous wilderness, no great haunting memory, but only...the distasteful knowledge of the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience.”

—Joseph Conrad, “Geography and Some Explorers”

“I love the smell of napalm in the morning.”

—Kilgore, *Apocalypse Now*

In 1977, Chinua Achebe published a now-famous essay that denounces Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as little more than an artifact of the European imperialism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and claims that Conrad himself was a “thoroughgoing racist” (par 37). Two years later, Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, a film adaptation of Conrad's novel, was nominated for the Best Picture award of

the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (“Apocalypse Now”). Despite Achebe’s (and numerous other postcolonial theorists’) virulent criticisms, *Heart of Darkness* has assumed and held a central position in Euro-American cultural consciousness, and has moreover held this position practically unscathed. The novel almost unfailingly appears in the curricula of high school and college literature courses and has spawned thousands of pages of laudatory criticism. However, very little of this criticism has considered the troubling issues raised by Achebe, issues that, canonicity aside, should be taken seriously given the widespread popularity of the work. It is at best morally questionable to present *Heart of Darkness* as a respectable work of art if, as Achebe claims, it reinforces and validates racist ways of knowing.

Far from engaging with them meaningfully, much of the criticism that takes Achebe’s views into account does so only to supposedly refute them. For example, David Denby’s New Criticism-tinged *Great Books*, a long personal essay that was a *New York Times* bestseller, claims that Achebe’s essay “is an act of rhetorical violence” that misses the point of Conrad’s work (419-20). Even when negative reactions to postcolonial critiques of Conrad’s novel are not so overt, they are no less pointed. Achebe’s essay is not included in either Harold Bloom’s collection of essays on *Heart of Darkness* or his collection on Joseph Conrad, both of which were published nearly ten years after Achebe’s views first appeared in print. It is perhaps hard in the wake of postmodernist critique to accept such conservative criticism in general, but this criticism’s apparent unwillingness to even entertain postcolonial arguments seems especially detrimental to its integrity in light of *Heart of Darkness*’s enormous cultural influence. Simply put,

Conrad's novel constitutes an epicenter of cultural meaning, and any analysis of it that does not take the implications of this into account is incomplete.

Achebe's essay is, however, also incomplete. It presents a somewhat biased reading of *Heart of Darkness*, and its central claim—that the work “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”—seems to ignore the apparently anti-imperialist impulse of the novel (par. 7). In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said presents a more nuanced—and positive—reading of Conrad's work, but similarly posits that “*Heart of Darkness* works so effectively because its politics and aesthetics are... imperialist.” Though Said quickly makes apologies for what he sees as Conrad's imperialism, saying that Conrad “could probably never have used Marlow to present anything other than an imperialist world-view, given what was available to either Conrad or Marlow to see of the non-European at the time,” his interpretation, no less than Achebe's, is almost as difficult to accept as are Denby's and Bloom's views in light of what seems to be Conrad's negative take on imperialism (24). Some middle course between the approaches of either side of the argument seems called for. Indeed, a reading that fully considers both *Heart of Darkness* and postcolonial views reveals that, while Marlow attempts to maintain a fundamentally imperialist epistemological framework in interpreting his journey into the Congo, this framework visibly begins to buckle under the pressure of the generally anti-imperialist stance of the novel. Far from celebrating the mode of knowing that was used in the novel's time to elevate imperialism to a sacred status, then, *Heart of Darkness* portrays the first cracks in the edifice of this mode.

## II

A first step in fully understanding *Heart of Darkness*'s relation to racism and imperialism is to consider Conrad's and Marlow's relation to these forces. At first, their views of imperialism seem to be unequivocally negative. In several of his essays, Conrad expresses absolute contempt for the imperial activities of (at least) Belgium, the nation in service of which he journeyed to the Congo in 1890 (Bradbrook 99). Marlow seems to share Conrad's opinion. At the beginning of his narration, he suggests that European imperialists simply "grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale" (1961). Marlow's opinion here is more or less a rewording of that expressed by Conrad in "Geography and Some Explorers." What Conrad calls "the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience" Marlow more succinctly dubs "robbery with violence" (117).

Marlow's and Conrad's relation to imperialism is, however, more complex than these isolated statements would make it seem. In Marlow's case, this is immediately obvious. A few sentences after apparently disparaging imperialism, he says, "The conquest of the earth...is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only" (1961). Marlow thus seems to have few qualms with "the conquest of the earth" in concept; it is only the perversion of this concept by those who "grabbed what they could get" that leads him to criticize the effects of imperialism. Conrad's view on the issue is similar, but subtly so. In the same essay in which he decries imperialism as a vile "scramble for loot," he suggests that "the voyages of the early

explorers were prompted by an acquisitive spirit, the idea of lucre in some form, the desire of trade or the desire of loot, disguised in more or less fine words. But Cook's three voyages are free from any taint of that sort. His aims needed no disguise. They were scientific" ("Geography" 99). Just as Marlow and Conrad are in agreement as to the violent manifestation of imperialism as practiced by Belgium, they are thus also in agreement in regard to the commendable nature of conquest in its supposedly unselfish, "scientific" form.

This view is of course naïve from a twenty-first century standpoint. The charting of territory, the naming of lands and peoples, the filling in of the "blank spaces on the earth"—a "passion" shared by Conrad and Marlow—are endeavors no less imperialist than the plundering of land and the murdering of "natives" (*Darkness* 1961). Such activities erase native authority, invalidate native borders and efface native politics—conquer by cartography. Even if local names, customs, and politics are respected, the impulse *to know* is in itself inextricably bound up with the exercise of power, as Foucault has noted (252). When it involves one or several nations' efforts to "know" an entire continent, such an exercise of power cannot be labeled anything but imperialist.

Conrad's and Marlow's racism is more openly apparent than is their imperialism. Conrad's is clear from several of the entries in his Congo diary, in which he recorded his voyage into Africa. One entry in particular, that for July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1890, especially reveals it: "In the evening three women, of whom one albino, passed our camp; horrid chalky white with pink blotches; red eyes; red hair; features very negroid and ugly" (113). That Conrad uses the phrase "very negroid" as an intensifier for "ugly" and links the two with "and" (instead of, perhaps, "but" or "and also") suggests that he conceptually connects

Africanness to ugliness, to detestability. Marlow also expresses distinctly racist impressions of the Africans he encountered in the Congo. One of these may be taken as representative of all: “The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but here—there you could look at a thing monstrous and free” (1984). Marlow’s obvious racism in this description of Africans as “monstrous,” as “things” that must be “shackled” for any kind of order to exist—for the earth to be earthly—hardly needs comment. Even more overtly racist than these examples is a propensity for using the word “nigger” that Conrad and Marlow share. Perhaps Conrad’s most shocking use of the word occurs in his author’s note to the novel *Victory*: “a certain enormous buck nigger...[has] fixed my conception of blind, furious, unreasoning rage, as manifested in the human animal, to the end of my days” (par. 9). For his part, Marlow uses the word, apparently uncritically, every few pages throughout his narration (1962, 1970, 1971, 1974 ff.). Conrad’s and Marlow’s usage cannot be justified as more or less neutral due to time period. Randall Kennedy has demonstrated that, “by the end of the first third of the nineteenth century, *nigger* had already become a familiar and influential insult” (4). When Conrad first published *Heart of Darkness* in 1898 and *Victory* in 1915, the word “nigger” was already charged with racist meaning—had, in fact, been so charged since before Conrad’s birth in 1857.

Conrad and Marlow thus seem to be pulled in two directions. On the one hand, each thoroughly loathes the exploitative nature of imperialism as he has seen it first hand in the Congo. On the other, each seems to have felt racist disgust with the Africans he encountered on his voyage to the interior of the continent, and to feel no compunction about using the word “nigger”—a word that, by this time, had taken on an

unambiguously racist connotation—to classify these Africans when discussing them. In addition, Conrad and Marlow both express their approbation of the “scientific” aims of European explorers, an approbation no less thorough than their hatred of Belgian activities in the Congo, and no less imperialist than the sentiments of King Leopold II’s explication of “the sacred mission of civilization.” It seems, then, that it was merely the violent and venal form that European racism and imperialism took during their time that Conrad and Marlow criticize, not racism and imperialism themselves.<sup>†</sup>

### III

It will at this point be profitable to consider in itself the relationship between Conrad and Marlow and the implications this relationship has for the reader. Achebe conflates the two men in a passage worth quoting at length:

It might be contended, of course, that the attitude to the African in *Heart of Darkness* is not Conrad’s but that of his fictional narrator, Marlow, and that far from endorsing it Conrad might indeed be holding it up to irony and criticism. Certainly Conrad appears to go to considerable pains to set up layers of insulation between himself and the moral universe of his history...But if Conrad’s intention is to draw a *cordon sanitaire* between himself and the moral and psychological malaise of his narrator his care seems to me totally wasted because he neglects to hint however subtly or tentatively at an alternative frame of reference by which we may judge the actions and opinions of his characters...Marlow seems to me to

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<sup>†</sup> For the sake of simplicity, I will from this point forward use *imperialism* by itself to denote both racism and imperialism, as the two seem to be intimately bound together for both Marlow and Conrad, though this is not meant to suggest that racism and imperialism are identical.

enjoy Conrad's complete confidence—a feeling reinforced by the close similarities between their two careers. (Par. 29)

This argument is notable because it both suggests the ambiguous nature of the relationship between Conrad and Marlow and demonstrates the biased quality of Achebe's reading. Certainly Achebe is, as suggested above, correct in observing the "close similarities" between Marlow and Conrad, but he is, in fact, quite incorrect in claiming that Conrad "neglects to hint...at an alternative frame of reference by which we may judge...his characters." Just such a critical distance is implied very early in *Heart of Darkness*, before Marlow even begins to speak. In the fourth paragraph of the novel, the narrator comments on the relationship of the men on the *Nellie*: "Between us there was, as I have already said somewhere, the bond of the sea. Besides holding our hearts together through long periods of separation, it had the effect of making us tolerant of each other's yarns—and even convictions" (1958). The narrator clearly regards Marlow as unreliable in his "convictions" here, but the phrasing in which he expresses this is ambiguous. As Conrad seems to share many of these convictions, this phrasing cannot without complications be considered a tactic employed by the author to dissociate himself from the most objectionable of Marlow's views. And though for his part the reader is invited to tolerate but not necessarily accept these views, exactly which aspects of them should be rejected by him is not clear. Achebe perhaps makes too much of the similarities between Conrad and Marlow, but they are indeed real and seem to include a shared imperialism. It is likely, then, that it is not on these grounds that Conrad wishes to distance either himself or the reader from Marlow, though the need for *some* kind of such distancing is implied.

Whether the reader should feel constrained to accept Conrad's wishes is another matter. Conrad's ambiguity on the point seems to invite the reader to apply his own judgment in selecting which elements of Marlow's worldview to accept and which to reject. Indeed, if Daniel Melnick is correct, the entire moral impulse of Conrad's fiction rests on the reader's ability to do so. Melnick suggests that, in Conrad's work, the effect of ambiguity like that in which the issue of Marlow's reliability is surrounded "is to give the reader a profound responsibility, the obligation to bring to the narrative the imaginative insight and judgment approached but strategically not achieved by the narration.... Meaning in Conrad is dependent on the survival and, as important, the courage and depth of the reader's creative response" (119). Importantly, this does not give the reader carte blanche to reject all of Marlow's, and thus many of Conrad's, views. To do so would be to reject entirely the artistic integrity of Conrad's work (which is just the tack Achebe takes, to the detriment of his argument). Conrad's ambiguity in regard to Marlow does, however, allow the reader the freedom to decide for himself what of Marlow's worldview is worth accepting and what worth rejecting, regardless of the similarities between Conrad and Marlow that Achebe points out. The reader need not accept Marlow's imperialism simply because Conrad seems to have shared it. He can, rather, formulate his own meaning of *Heart of Darkness* without needing to tally this meaning with what Marlow might say or Conrad might intend. The responsibility of generating the "alternative frame of reference" that Achebe feels is lacking in the novel is thus the reader's, not Conrad's or Marlow's.

It should thus be granted to Achebe that Conrad and Marlow are at base imperialist, but it need not be assumed that *Heart of Darkness* can therefore only yield an imperialist meaning to a reader willing to detect other types of meaning in the work. Such a reader might, in fact, safely expect the novel's moral stance to be more complex than simply pro- or anti-imperialist, as both Conrad and Marlow openly detest the form imperialism had taken in the Congo even while seeming to be basically pro-imperialist themselves. The tension one would expect this to engender has indeed been observed by several scholars, and is perhaps most clearly articulated by Lionel Trilling, who takes imperialism as a trope for civilization in general:

*Heart of Darkness*...is a story that strangely moves in two quite opposite directions—on the one hand, to the view that civilization is of its nature so inauthentic that personal integrity can be wrested from it only by the inversion of all its avowed principles; on the other hand, to the categorical assertion that civilization can and does fulfill its announced purposes, not universally, indeed, but at least in the significant instance of one particular nation[, England]. (109-10)

For Trilling, Conrad and Marlow alleviate the tension between their pro- and anti-imperialist views by asserting that English imperialism is not perverted, as Belgian imperialism is, and that the former is therefore proof that “good” imperialism can exist (109). Trilling's interpretation is probably correct, and would explain the approving tone used by Conrad and Marlow when they are discussing English explorers. The reader, however, need not accept Marlow's and Conrad's resolution to accept *Heart of Darkness* as a coherent work of art, assuming that another resolution can be inferred within the bounds of the novel. A close reading of the seeming oppositional pairs used in the work

hints at just such another resolution. It moreover does so even while exposing Marlow's attempts to epistemologically organize his experiences in the Congo via the mechanism of projection that Achebe claims represents the novel's generally pro-imperialist stance.

Achebe adduces two oppositional pairs that he asserts give *Heart of Darkness* its imperialist structure. The first of these is the River Thames versus the River Congo. Achebe asserts that "the book opens on the River Thames, tranquil, resting, peacefully 'at the decline of day after ages of good service done to the race that peopled its banks.' But the actual story will take place on the River Congo, the very antithesis of the Thames" (par. 7). Certainly the Thames and the Congo appear to be presented as antitheses of good and evil in the novel. The former inspires a long rhapsody in the narrator which dreamily concludes with: "What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth!...The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires..." (1959). The Congo, in contrast, is described a few pages later by Marlow in strongly negative terms. While recalling his boyhood interest in maps, Marlow notes that, by the time he had reached adulthood, "[Africa] had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery...It had become a place of darkness. But there was in it one river especially, a mighty big river, that you could see on the map, resembling an immense snake uncoiled...And as I looked at the map of it in a shop-window, it fascinated me as a snake would fascinate a bird—a silly little bird" (1962). Where the Thames is described as an almost mothering, certainly a nurturing, force, the Congo is thus depicted as a profoundly dangerous mystery.

The judicious reader will, however, note that, from an anti-imperialist perspective, this description of the Thames is not free from undermining complications. When

considered from this viewpoint, the narrator's assertion that the Thames has served as the launching point for "germs of empires" assumes a decidedly negative tone. This tone is strengthened by the ambiguity of the word "germs;" the narrator seems to intend it in the sense of generative seed, but it could take on the connotation of destructive infection—a connotation that dates from around 1871, well before *Heart of Darkness* was written (Harper). This reading is further supported by what at first appears to be the narrator's almost ecstatically positive outburst of "What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth!" While the narrator seems to mean this as an example of the Thames's fostering the "greatest" activities of European civilization, it can be interpreted in a significantly more negative light: it can be seen as the river's sending the agents of imperialism into exactly the profound danger that Marlow ascribes to the Congo. Thus, while the descriptions of the River Thames and the River Congo at first seem to embody a simple good-versus-evil dichotomy, the former can be read as depicting the Thames as the origin of, in Conrad's words, "the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience"—as a site of extreme moral and physical danger both for Europeans and for those they attempted to conquer through imperialism.

The other oppositional pair Achebe isolates is that of Kurtz's African mistress versus his European Intended. "Towards the end of the story," Achebe notes, "Conrad lavishes a whole page quite unexpectedly on an African woman who has obviously been some kind of mistress to Mr. Kurtz... This Amazon... fulfills a structural requirement of the story: a savage counterpart to the refined, European woman who will step forth to end the story" (par. 21-3). Achebe's argument here is less superficially accurate than is his

analysis of the Thames and the Congo. Conrad's long description of Kurtz's mistress seems, indeed, almost completely positive:

She walked with measured steps, draped in striped and fringed cloths, treading the earth proudly, with a slight jingle and flash of barbarous ornaments. She carried her head high; her hair was done in the shape of a helmet; she had brass leggings to the knee, brass wire gauntlets to the elbow, a crimson spot on her tawny cheek, innumerable necklaces of glass beads on her neck...she must have had the value of several elephant tusks on her. She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent. (2003)

Though they are described as "savage" and "barbarous," Kurtz's mistress's immensely valuable garb and assured air seem to give to *her* the refinement that Achebe attributes to the Intended. In fact, this description of Kurtz's mistress combines several traits that one would expect Conrad to treat as antitheses, traits condensed in her "wild-eyed *and* magnificent" countenance. This figure is a stark contrast to the "very negroid *and* ugly" woman Conrad himself encountered in the Congo, though she does not simply invert the familiar dichotomy whereby Africanness equals detestability and Europeanness equals desirability. Instead, she represents a combination of both poles of this dichotomy, Africanness as both frightening and desirable, "savagery" as *in its nature* "magnificent."

Perhaps Conrad's clearest clue to the reader that Kurtz's mistress is not simply the inverse of the Intended is his description of this mistress as "tawny" and, when Marlow later explicitly compares the two women, "brown." Whereas nearly all of Marlow's depictions of Africans use "black" to characterize their skin and his depiction of the Intended uses "white" in the same capacity several times, his depiction of Kurtz's

mistress rests somewhere between the two, classifying her as neither completely black nor completely white (2104 ff.). This could, of course, simply be the result of a racist continuum of skin color valuation with “black” and “white” skin at its extreme negative and positive ends. In this model, Kurtz’s mistress’s relative magnificence would “naturally” correspond to her lighter skin, but would simultaneously be incapable of equaling that of the “white” Intended. However, even if Marlow’s descriptions of the Intended supported this continuum—which they don’t; her whiteness is explicitly and negatively characterized as sepulchral (2015)—the continuum model would in itself undermine the conception of the mistress and the Intended as oppositional pairs, a conception that Achebe (thus erroneously) claims Conrad upholds. Kurtz’s mistress thus seems a site of implied collapse in the imperialist epistemology that Marlow attempts to uphold, a figure of destabilization rather than reinforcement. She simply will not fit cleanly into Marlow’s worldview, and she thus serves the reader as an intimation of this worldview’s failure.

## V

The foregoing is promising to an anti-imperialist view, but by itself can amount to little more than a creative misreading of Conrad’s work. Though, by Melnick’s reasoning, this may be more allowable in the case of *Heart of Darkness* than it is in that of other works, it nevertheless denies the author’s integrity. As is clear from at least the opposition of the Thames and the Congo, Conrad and Marlow do attempt to present Europe as fundamentally good and Africa as fundamentally evil, as Achebe says they do. In disregarding this, the above argument has been deconstructive in its methods, has

made use of an analytical technique that elides several elements of the novel that are clearly *intended* to have an imperialist meaning and reduces *Heart of Darkness* to a mere text. This does little to contribute to a valuation of the novel as a work of literary art, placing it instead on the level of such overtly imperialist texts as, for instance, Rudyard Kipling's "The White Man's Burden" or the written statements of Leopold II.

Fortunately, Conrad seems not to have been ignorant of the complexities and stresses of his and Marlow's shared worldview, and in fact depicts the first stages of the collapse of this worldview in (at least) two specific places in his work. One of these occurs in the middle of Marlow's narrative. Marlow is describing how his attention to minutiae in the piloting of his riverboat distracted him from the pervading sense of evil he felt was emitted by the jungle around him, when his philosophizing runs away with him:

"When you have to attend to things of that sort, to the mere incidents of the surface, the reality—the reality, I tell you—fades. The inner truth is hidden—luckily, luckily. But I felt it all the same; I felt often its mysterious stillness watching me at my monkey tricks, just as it watches you fellows performing on your respective tight-ropes for—what is it? half a crown a tumble—"

"Try to be civil, Marlow," growled a voice, and I knew there was at least one listener awake besides myself. (1982-3)

While Marlow at first calls only his piloting of his riverboat "the mere incidents of the surface," he in short order expands this phrase to refer to the activities of the other men on the *Nellie*. As these men—the Lawyer, the Accountant, and the Director—are referred to only by their titles, they seem to symbolize all the various areas affected by imperialism. Marlow's mockery of them, then, is in fact a mockery of imperialism itself,

even in its English form. Moreover, Marlow's dubbing his own activities as an imperial agent as "monkey tricks" echoes (albeit weakly) his frequent depictions of Africans as bestial. Marlow's pro-imperialist worldview thus seems to be on the verge of collapse, but his reverie is interrupted by another of the men on the *Nellie* and he manages to avoid the dark "reality" he so adamantly insists upon—a reality in which the fundamental deplorability of imperialism comes to figure prominently.

The other incipient fissures in Marlow's worldview occur in the same early paragraphs in which Marlow reveals his underlying pro-imperialism:

"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. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to..."

He broke off. (1961)

The conflict between Marlow's pro- and anti-imperialist views is at a high point here, as Marlow is specifically considering the relationship between these views. His faith in "the idea" of imperialism thus comes under significant stress, and, indeed, begins to break when he explicitly links imperialism to the "savagery" he imputes to the Africans during the course of his narrative. What had before been a long stream of uninterrupted, basically pro-imperialist sentiments moreover falters at exactly this point of conflict. Marlow can only avert the collapse of his imperialist worldview by breaking off, by not "look[ing] into it too much." He seems instinctively to understand the implications of the

line of thought he at first has no difficulty putting into words. These implications would assert, of course, that imperialism is *at root*, and not just in its Belgian version, “not a very pretty thing”—is, in fact, evil.

## VI

Near the end of *Apocalypse Now*, Colonel Kurtz declaims T. S. Eliot’s “The Hollow Men,” a poem that takes a line from *Heart of Darkness* as an epigraph. The moment is a crystallization of the widespread cultural impact of Conrad’s novel. Eliot’s piece, an example of the literary influence of *Heart of Darkness*, is framed by a film which itself exemplifies the work’s popular influence. This nexus of meanings illustrates just how high the stakes are in judgments of Conrad’s work. The novel is so well-known, so admired, that charges of racism and imperialism made against it should—must—be taken seriously.

Achebe realized this; the conclusion of his essay calls for *Heart of Darkness*’s removal from the canon (par. 62). Fortunately for admirers of the work, Achebe’s condemnation is premature. Though he is correct in charging Conrad with an underlying racism, his extension of this charge onto the novel is unjustified. In fact, the novel depicts, perhaps despite its author’s intentions, the first whinings of collapse in the imperialist worldview by which nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europeans and Americans justified what Marlow calls “aggravated murder on a great scale.” Both Marlow and Conrad admittedly try to prevent this collapse; imperialist epistemology is in evidence in their attempts at organizing the latter’s experiences in the Congo. These experiences, however, do not cooperate. They instead fracture Marlow’s and Conrad’s

shared philosophy, thereby showing the reader—and, at certain points, Marlow—that this philosophy is not only incorrect but also morally wrong.

The consequences of this fracture are, however, almost more troubling than the novel itself would be if it were simply pro-imperialist. If *Heart of Darkness* were nothing more than what Achebe says it is, “an offensive and deplorable book,” it could be grouped with “The White Man’s Burden” as an example of Eurocentric propaganda interesting only for its historical value (par. 48). As it is, the novel is significantly more complex than this, but from this complexity emerges something terribly grim. The work is indeed finally anti-imperialist, but this is only because, within the terms set by the Eurocentric moral compass in which it is enmeshed, it is anti-humanist. Marlow’s failure to assign “savagery” only to the Africans he encountered in the Congo implies that, from his point of view, this savagery is at the core of all human existence, that European civilization merely glosses it over to speciously “justify” its own appalling actions. A reading of *Heart of Darkness* that is sensitive to the stresses in Conrad’s and Marlow’s self-contradictory imperialism may thus be able to redeem the work, but, by becoming at least to some degree sympathetic with this imperialism, can only do so at the expense of human dignity.

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