Two Readings of *Heart of Darkness*

The following article deals with two different readings of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. It looks at Chinua Achebe’s controversial article "An Image of Africa: Racism in Heart of Darkness" and his claims that Conrad was ‘a bloody racist’. These claims are vehemently rejected by the critic Cedric Watts in his essay "'A Bloody Racist': About Achebe's View of Conrad" which is in *Yearbook of English Studies*, 13 (1983): 196-209. I wish to outline some of the arguments Achebe raises to support his claim and juxtapose them with Watts’s reading of the same passages.

In his essay "An Image of Africa: Racism in Heart of Darkness" Chinua Achebe claims that Joseph Conrad’s treatment of the native Africans in *Heart of Darkness* was racist. He focuses on Conrad’s treatment of Africa as an "other world", an antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization. He has difficulty with Conrad’s sense of kinship (and with that of Europeans) he holds with Africa. This is exemplified by Marlowe’s claim in the opening chapter London: "also... has been one of the dark places of the earth"(5) To Achebe, Conrad "chose the role of purveyor of comforting myths" in his portrayal of the natives.

Watts, who wonders why Achebe can not explain Marlow’s reaction when he returns to the sepulchral city, condemns this resentment to kinship. He ignores London as a Heart of Darkness and brushes it off as a European attempt at kinship. Watts retorts that "not only is there a steady accumulation of widely-ranging instances of brutality and absurdity of imperialism but also various devices from the dominoes as bones to the not naming of the river or the sepulchral city." "Far from being a 'purveyor of comforting myths' Conrad most deliberately and incisively debunks such myths the myth of white superiority, the myth of inevitable progress, the myth of civilizing the natives.

Citing Marlow's observation, "Fine fellows - cannibals - in their place"(41) Achebe contends that "Conrad is a romantic…for Conrad, things being in their place is of utmost importance…" Achebe cites the following quotation to point out "things in their place."

Now and then a boat from the shore gave one a momentary contact with reality. It was paddled by black fellows. You could see from afar the white of the eyeballs glistening. They shouted, sang; their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks — these chaps; but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement, that was as natural and true as the surf along the coast. They wanted no excuse for being there. They were a great comfort to look at. [1966]

For Achebe this nice little vignette is an example of things in their place. Watts on the other hand contends that of all the people described by far the happiest, healthiest and most vital are the group of blacks seen paddling. He points out that the difference in appearance of the blacks and the whites is the difference between vitality and deterioration. The blacks paddling the canoe are seen as muscle and bone whereas the colonialists are flabby devils much like the obese and degenerate anarchists in Conrad’s *The Secret Agent*.

Another bone of contention for Achebe is Conrad's portrayal of the African woman and of Kurtz's "Intended". He suggests that Conrad endows one with language and the other without; one's status is lover the others is mistress. The African woman "fulfils a structural requirement of the story: a savage
counterpart to refined, European woman who will step forth to end the story." This reflects the essence of Conrad's failure to deal with the inequalities between blacks and whites. Achebe claims that the blacks are depicted as cannibals when they speak intimating Conrad has effectively painted the face of a cannibal.

"Catch 'im," he snapped, with a bloodshot widening of his eyes and a flash of sharp white teeth — "catch 'im. Give 'im to us."

"To you, eh?" I asked; "what would you do with them?"

eat 'im!" he said curtly.

But Watts argues that the natives show restraint by not eating human flesh while Marlow is there, a restraint, which Kurtz does not have. This is an instant of the blacks condemning themselves from their own mouths. I would argue that Conrad is between a rock and a hard place when it comes to putting language in the mouths of the natives. He will be blamed either way, whether for making their language too base or too complex. The only alternative is to give them their native language, but he would be accused of attempting to appropriate it if that were the case.

In his conclusion Achebe says:

The point of my observations should be quite clear by now, namely that Joseph Conrad is a thoroughgoing [Bloody] racist…Students of Heart of Darkness will often tell you that Conrad is concerned not so much with Africa as with the deterioration of one European mind caused by solitude and sickness…a Conrad student informed me in Scotland that Africa is merely a setting for the disintegration of the mind of Mr. Kurtz…Which is my point"

However, Achebe seems to me, naïve to use the observations of one student to justify his own problems with the text. Watts counters his claim that Africa is a setting and backdrop that eliminates the African as human. "If Achebe had recalled that Heart of Darkness appeared in 1899 when Victoria was on the throne when imperialism fervor was extreme and the Boer War was soon to begin he might have been more prepared to recognize various unconventional qualities of Conrad's Tale." The main reason for his defense is that "Achebe has taken Conrad out of context when he accuses him of being myopic and patronizing." When he condemns the tale as inhumane and liberal he redefines such liberalism as racist illiberalism, in Watts’ phrase Achebe sees "no distinction between King Leopold and Conrad- both are bloody racists."

However, the importance of the whole debate lies in the binary position that either critic engages in, in the Manichean stance each takes to the others argument. For Achebe the blacks are victims of racism by Conrad and he implies that they themselves are the only legitimate critics of the text. As Watts presumes, "there seems to be an insinuation, as Achebe proceeds, that whites are disqualified on racial grounds from judging the text." In a way he has uncovered, in Achebe's criticism, the very racism Achebe accuses Conrad of. His resentment of the Kinship that Conrad expresses between the Africans and the Londoners is also a resentment of anyone from beyond the pale attempting any kind of portrayal. But Cedric Watts in on the brink of being patronizing when he counters this resentment with the argument that the blacks are depicted as being the happiest in the novel.

Watts claims at the beginning of his essay that "Achebe is black and I am white" which implies that Achebe's essay
follows a particular agenda. He also claims that Achebe's essay is a political statement rather than a literary criticism. According to Watts, Achebe's essay was directed at the White-American Establishment when he delivered it as a lecture to an audience at the University of Massachusetts. Be these claims true or not, what I find more important in them is the establishment of the binary opposite in order to lay the foundations of an argument. Watts is exercising similar Manicheanism that Achebe uses to attack Conrad.

This project was completed under the direction of Dr Leon Litvack as a requirement for the MA degree in Modern Literary Studies in the School of English at the Queen's University of Belfast. The site is evolving and will include contributions from future generations of MA students on other writers and themes.

This page was written by Conor Wyer. E-mail me with your suggestions.

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