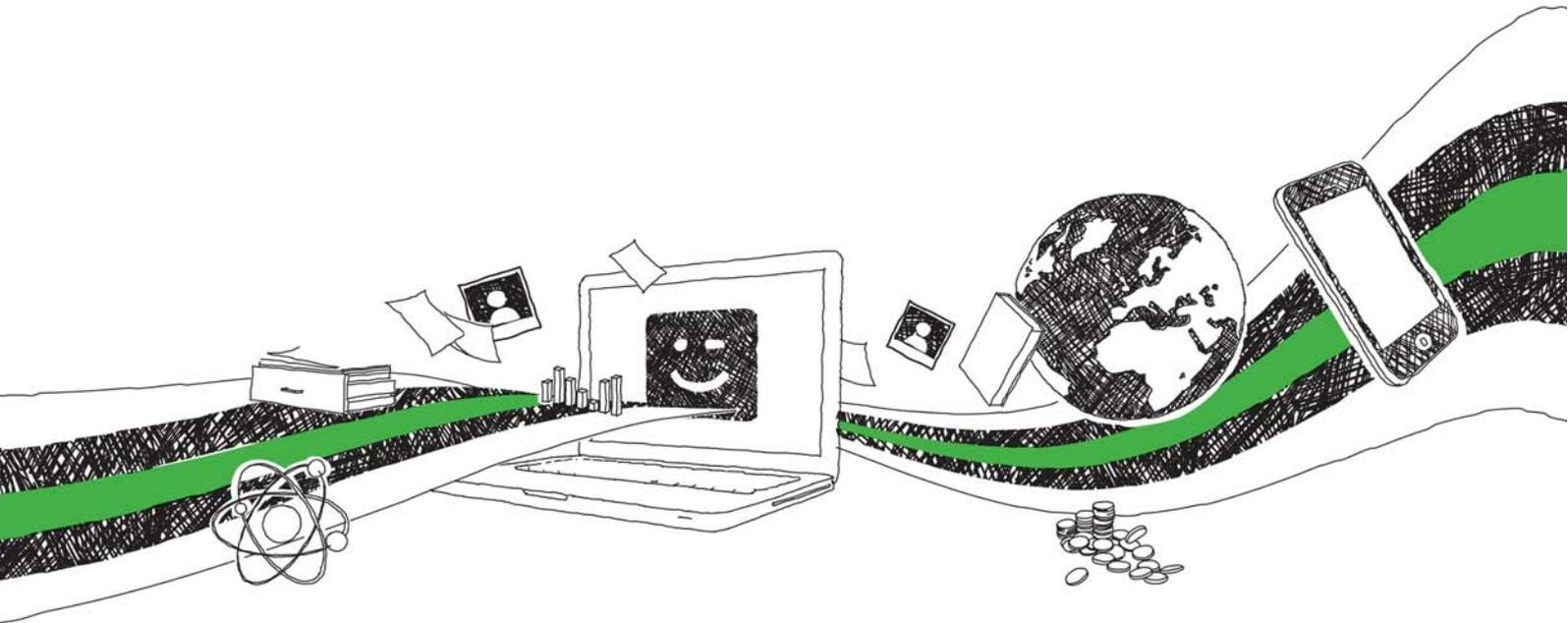


Niklas Manhart

Exploring the Other World: Racism and Imperialism in Joseph Conrad and Henry Rider Haggard

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Exploring *the Other World*: Racism and Imperialism in Conrad and Haggard

Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. An Image of Africa: Achebe's criticism of Conrad	2
3. Critical reactions to Achebe's lecture	3
3.1 Irony, voice and authorship	4
3.2 The historical defence.....	6
3.3 Conrad's anti-European purpose	7
4. Applying Achebe's frame of criticism.....	8
4.1 Treatment of the natives	8
4.2 Treatment of women	13
4.3 The ambiguity of imperialism	14
5. Comparing Conrad and Haggard	15

1. Introduction

Few words are needed to describe the impact that Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* had on the literary and cultural scene of the 20th century. The 1899 novel is in many ways the most important narrative of Africa by an outsider. Its style provides a bridge between the late Victorian period and Modernism. At the latest since Francis Ford Coppola turned it into an award-winning motion picture with *Apocalypse Now*, it has firmly established itself in popular culture.

The picture looks different for the imperial romances of Francis Rider Haggard. It is telling that Padmini Mongia chooses *King Solomon's Mines* as the literary antithesis of the canonical *Heart of Darkness* (160). Despite a recent surge in academic popularity – and also inspiring a popular movie character with *Indiana Jones*–, Haggard is still mainly looked down as a crude imperialist storyteller and promoter of chauvinist expansionist ideals. With some notable exceptions, few critics came to Haggard's defence. By contrast, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* has often been called the anti-imperialist novel par excellence. Chinua Achebe's claim that Conrad was a "bloody racist" was widely repudiated.

In my opinion, the debate has taken an unfortunate turn because it does not do Haggard justice. In this essay, I want to achieve two things. First, I want to give evidence that Achebe was indeed quite right in his attack on *Heart of Darkness*. To this end, I will look at the main theoretical vindications of Conrad before applying Achebe's frame of criticism to the text in detail. This is followed by a comparison with Haggard's novels *King Solomon's Mines*.

My goal is to show that in comparison to *Heart of Darkness*, which indeed projects Africa as a negative foil for Europe, Haggard manages to give Africa and its inhabitants, despite his literary shortcomings, a graceful quality not found in Conrad's work. While both authors depict Africa as 'the other world' in the way their ambitions and prejudices create an image with little historical accuracy, Haggard's embellished social utopia fails to display the deep-seated anxiety towards Africa Achebe finds in Conrad.

In my essay I will purposefully disregard a possible approach to this issue, namely gathering biographical evidence from Conrad's public statements and his private correspondence. While this makes for interesting conclusions, considering that Conrad was sympathetic to the Congo Reform Association of his friend Roger Casement (Brantlinger, 365), it does not shed any further light upon the

text itself and the racist beliefs it may or may not propagate. It is no use knowing Conrad condemned the “ruthless, systematic cruelty towards the blacks” (Watts, 199) in the administration of the Congo when he portrays the very people in a demeaning fashion which has long influenced Western views of Africa as a hopeless, problem-stricken place.

2. **An Image of Africa: Achebe’s criticism of Conrad**

Achebe voiced his criticism as a visiting professor at the University of Massachusetts in February 1975. In a public lecture called “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*”, published for the general public in 1978, he denounced Conrad as a “bloody racist”¹ (788). The importance of Achebe’s polemic for the teaching of *Heart of Darkness* cannot be overstated.

According to Inga Clendinnen’s account of the criticism on the novel (1), early commentators focused on its peculiar language and style, most famously F. R. Leavis’ criticism of Conrad’s ‘adjectival insistence’. In the aftermath of the last colonial uprisings in the 1960s and 70s, the novel was mostly regarded as an attack on imperialist expansion, until Achebe’s intervention disrupted the conversation on *Heart of Darkness*. As Padmini Mongia explains, “Achebe’s argument seems to have offered the most commonly used structure for approaching race in the novel” (159). Since its inclusion in the Norton Critical Edition in 1988, Achebe and Conrad are often taught alongside each other. Today, “post the postmodernists”, *Heart of Darkness* “seems to exist in a chronic contest zone” (Clendinnen, 1), despite a number of attempts by apologues of Conrad to shut down the issue. Johnson cites a 1992 special issue of *Conradiana* on the novel called “Teach the Conflicts” which does not contain a single article on questions of race. Hunt Hawkins in the concluding remarks even states that “unhappily the matter is still open to debate” (Johnson, 127, footnote 2).

What was Achebe’s main contention? He accused Conrad of stripping Africans of their humanity by projecting the image of Africa as “the other world”, an “antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man’s vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality” (783). In its most iconic phrase, the essay claims that Conrad expresses a Western need to set “Africa up as a foil to Europe, a place of negations at once remote and

¹ In a later edition revised to “thoroughgoing racist”.

vaguely familiar in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest" (783). *Heart of Darkness* uses Africa merely as a "setting and backdrop", a "metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril" (788). Its characteristic language, the "bombardment of emotive words" (784), is supposed to induce a "hypnotic stupor" in the reader to convey the racist subtext. For Achebe, this reflects psychological rather than artistic motives, as he detects in Conrad "a residue of antipathy to black people" (789) who are denied speech, personality, and ultimately humanity. As a consequence, he calls into question the popularity of an

offensive and totally deplorable book [which] parades in the most vulgar fashion prejudices and insults from which a section of mankind has suffered untold agonies and atrocities in the past and continues to do so in many ways and many places today (790).

In an interview with Caryl Phillips in 2007, 30 years after the original lecture, Achebe concedes that the novel still exercises "a hold on him" (59), and that he to date denies *Heart of Darkness* any artistic merit: "What is his point in that book? Art is not intended to put people down. If so, then art would ultimately discredit itself" (59). In the interview, Achebe addresses some vindications of Conrad, none of which convince him. Despite the numerous attempts to refute his lecture, he still stands by his original criticism.

But why focus on Conrad in the first place? Some could argue that Achebe should direct his ire at other, more openly racist works. There certainly are numerous examples among Conrad's contemporaries. However, none of them exerted the same influence on the Western perception of Africa. As Inga Clendinnen argues, "*Heart of Darkness* has infiltrated the Western consciousness deeply with the metaphor of an Africa primeval, unchanging, and chronically savage" (3). It established an image of Africa which to date is characterised by "a shorthand linkage of Africa with foreign aid, AIDS, and anarchy" (4).

3. Critical reactions to Achebe's lecture

Few contributions to the postcolonial discourse have sparked as vocal a response as Achebe's attack on Conrad. Having such a distinguished African writer condemn in blunt terms a tremendously popular novel proved an irresistible temptation for literary academia. This is best shown by an episode recently recounted by Achebe in an interview. After giving his lecture on Conrad at

Harvard, a professor emeritus from the University of Massachusetts showed little restraint:

How dare you? How dare you upset everything we have taught, everything we teach? 'Heart of Darkness' is the most widely taught text in the university in this country. So how dare you say it's different?

While most other critics phrase their reaction in more diplomatic terms, Achebe's essay is often dismissed as simplistic and misguided by a majority of commentators. Before going into Achebe's points of criticism in more detail in the next section, let us first look at the three main arguments brought forward in defense of Conrad: That Achebe misinterprets Conrad's methodology of narration, that Conrad simply conveyed views of his time; and that Conrad is in fact on Achebe's side in criticizing racial prejudice (Phillips, 61).

3.1 Irony, voice and authorship

In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad employs various narrative devices – such as multiple narrators, irony and contradiction – in order to disguise his authorial voice. Therefore, the relationship between Marlow and Conrad is not as straightforward, the critics say, as Achebe purports it to be.

By having an anonymous primary narrator pass on Marlow's tale, Conrad includes an additional filter between himself and the narration. For a full seven paragraphs, the narrator can set the scene by “exalting the British naval empire” and displaying “naïve imperial enthusiasm” (Clendinnen, 7) before Marlow sharply enters the picture: “And this also...” (33). This technique leads Cedric Watts, among others, to differentiate between Marlow and the author because when Marlow enters [the paragraph] it is as though, as in life, an author had been interrupted by a character whose experience and intelligence exceed the author's” (198).

A second technique Conrad employs is irony. Cedric Watts counts many “measured, specific, shrewdly ironic passages” (202) which Achebe “ignores [...] as the tale unfolds” (204). Sarvan goes even further by finding a “mocking humour which denotes 'distance' between creator and character” (7), for instance when Marlow is described as a “meditating Buddha” (*Heart of Darkness*, 105).

A third misleading narrative means is contradiction, or as Patrick Brantlinger calls it, “impressionism” (364). The reliability of Marlow's narration is called into question from the very beginning. The primary narrator warns the reader that

[t]he yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted), and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine (33).

Here, Conrad says that the meaning of the story is blurry to say the least. As Marlow says, “It was [...] not very clear either. No, not very clear” (35). Brantlinger calls this a “dislocation of meaning” and a “disorientation of values” (373) which makes it difficult to assess the veracity of the narration. As Sarvan astutely observes, Marlow prevaricates his “pathological aversion” to telling lies repeatedly in the tale (7).

Achebe himself addressed this objection by saying that “Conrad appears to go to considerable pains to set up layers of insulation between himself and the moral universe of his story” (787). However, Achebe dismisses this as a futile attempt to mask his blatant racism because Conrad “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” (787). Marlow, Achebe is sure, “enjoys Conrad’s complete confidence”. Even when Marlow shows compassion by narrating “bleeding-heart sentiments”, he merely “espouses” liberal views appropriate at the time. According to Caryl Phillips, “Achebe is not fooled by this narrative gamesmanship or the claims of those who would argue that the complex polyphony of the storytelling is Conrad’s way of trying to deliberately distance himself from the views of his characters” (61).

So what are we to make of this? While Achebe assumes full identification between narrator and novelist, other critics differentiate between the pragmatic engineer Marlow and the metaphysical poet Conrad (Clendinnen, 5). James Johnson names a number of scholars who attempt to diffuse the issue of racism by maintaining this fundamental distinction (123). However, Johnson rightly criticizes this argument and its ability “to turn an evidently racist text in one stroke into a text that is concerned with racism”. To begin with, Johnson says, it does not follow that Marlow’s unreliability necessarily extends to include his racially charged utterances (123). Also, he continues, Conrad’s entire interrogative project depends on the “evolutionary racial structure” advanced by Marlow (124). Johnson is correct in not allowing the author to hide behind layers of insulation, as sophisticated as they may be. As Inga Clendinnen puts it,

“however elusive authors may choose to be – and Conrad was famously elusive – they are perforce present in the strategies and the movement of their writing” (3). “Marlow”, she goes on, “does not speak for Conrad. Conrad speaks for Conrad through the astonishing choices he makes while having Marlow tell his tale” (17). Ultimately, when it comes to racism, what counts is the impression *Heart of Darkness* makes on the reader, the ‘stupor’ it induces, and not the narrative tricks employed to achieve it. The number of filters and caveats a racist message needs to pass before reaching the audience makes no difference because what counts is the effect of putting down an entire people. Again, Achebe is the best judge: “What interests me is what I learn in Conrad about myself. To use me as a symbol may be bright or clever, but if it reduces my humanity by the smallest fraction, I don't like it” (Phillips, 65).

3.2 The historical defence

The second argument in Conrad's favour is that he simply expressed the views of his time. As Patrick Brantlinger notes, “there are almost no other works of British fiction written before World War I which are critical of imperialism, and hundreds of imperialist ones which are racist through and through” (383). Similarly, Cedric Watts says that the “historical sense [...] appears to have been forgotten” (197). When *Heart of Darkness* was published in 1899, he goes on, “imperialistic fervor was extreme and the Boer War was soon to begin”. Cedric Watts epitomizes the historical defence:

That Conrad should, in 1899, have treated the blacks with considerable humanity strikes me as admirable, but I suspect that the tale's high status does not (or should not) depend on that humanity. [...] Conrad was influenced by the climate of prejudice of his times – what is interesting is that his best work seems to transcend such prejudice (208).

Other critics agree that Conrad was both bound by the prejudices of his contemporaries and manages to overcome them. Recognizing the humanity of the Africans on the part of Conrad was “remarkable for his era”, Hunt Hawkins argues (1982, 168). This is echoed by Charles Sarvan who claims that Conrad, while “not entirely immune to the infection of the beliefs and attitudes of his age”, was “ahead of most in trying to break free” (10).

If Conrad was indeed a humanist at heart who managed to transcend contemporary racist beliefs is the subject of the next section. But for the moment, the validity of the historical defence itself is in doubt. Achebe, in any case, is not

convinced. In his interview with Caryl Phillips, he replies the following to the vindication that Conrad's novel merely reflects the he was living in:

Conrad didn't like black people. Great artists manage to be bigger than their times. In the case of Conrad, you can actually show that there were people at the same time as him, and before him, who were not racists with regard to Africa (63).

This is a sound argument. Justifying racism with peer pressure seems a shabby excuse, particularly in regard to a novelist of Conrad's quality. While nobody would dispute that the literary and cultural environment shape the work of an author, neither of it called for such a negative depiction of the Africans. As I will show in my comparison with Haggard, it was possible to give a humane account of the natives despite catering for a Victorian, if not juvenile readership. As James Johnson shows in his study of the racial assumptions of Victorian anthropology behind *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad "uncritically reproduced the attitudes of this extremely imperialistic discourse" (112). In the representation of Africans, Johnson finds a "racist (sub) text that is consistent with the discourse of evolutionary anthropology" due to "their proximity to nature, their lack of culture and consciousness, and [...] their position as part of the European past" (123). This underpins the impression that if Conrad tried to avoid external influence on his work, he did not try particularly hard.

3.3 Conrad's anti-European purpose

The most important vindication is certainly that Achebe got it all wrong because *Heart of Darkness* was in fact anti-European. Cedric Watts says that "part of its greatness lies in the power of its criticisms of racial prejudice" (196). Some critics even argue that Achebe's seminal *Things Fall Apart* actually complements *Heart of Darkness*. In his rebuttal to Achebe, Cedric Watts calls Achebe's novel "a *Heart of Darkness* from the other side" (196). The two men, Watts goes on to argue, are "on the same side", "friends" (197) and "brothers" (204) in condemning racial intolerance. Similarly, Bruce Fleming regards the two as "brothers under one skin" (90). The strongest defence comes from P. J. M. Robertson:

If Conrad is a racist here, it is surely on account of his treatment of whites rather than of blacks. If anyone should have been howling indignation at this book, it is surely the white man. If nothing more, *Heart of Darkness* is a devastating critique of white progress, white idealism, white materialism, white exploitation (107).

The validity of this claim will be discussed later in the essay by means of close textual scrutiny. But before that, it is necessary to question the theoretical

soundness of this line of reasoning. Does the fact that Conrad criticizes the white man absolve him from the concerns raised by Achebe? Padmini Mongia takes issue with this argument. She denies that casting a “critical eye upon all [Conrad] surveys exonerate[s] him from Achebe's charge, even if we agreed that this eye was impartial in its critique or even in the balance more critical of Europeans” (158). Critics such as Watts, Hawkins and Brantlinger compile lists of anti-European passages in the novel, overlooking the simple truth that the denigratory depiction of natives is in no way affected by other criticisms Conrad may voice. Achebe himself shows little sympathy for such musings:

You see, those who say that Conrad is on my side because he is against colonial rule do not understand that I know who is on my side. And where is the proof that he is on my side? A few statements about it not being a very nice thing to exploit people who have flat noses? This is his defence against imperial control? If so it is not enough. It is simply not enough. If you are going to be on my side what is required is a better argument. Ultimately you have to admit that Africans are people. You cannot diminish a people's humanity and defend them (64).

To sum up this section, none of the three main arguments in Conrad's favour exempt him from Achebe's criticism. His narrative technique, elaborated as it may be, does not impede a thorough assessment of the racial traits of *Heart of Darkness*. The prejudices of his time have certainly influenced his writing, but he does little to overcome them. And lastly, his critique of Europeans takes little away from his negative portrayal of Africans. Achebe is right in observing that Conrad posits Africa as the ‘other world’.

4. Applying Achebe's frame of criticism

After going through the main critical vindications of Conrad, I want to look at the novel in more detail to assess the degree to which *Heart of Darkness* can be deemed racist. In this, I will look at the three main themes of Achebe's frame of criticism: Conrad's treatment of the natives, of women and of the imperial enterprise at large.

4.1 Treatment of the natives

In terms of the treatment of the natives, I focus on four aspects: appellations, physical descriptions and verbal utterances. The foremost expression of Conrad's stance towards the native population is the way he refers to them. Admittedly, it is not entirely fair to measure a text from 1899 against the today's standards. However, Achebe has a point if he sees an “inordinate love” for the word *nigger*. It is Conrad's favourite name for the natives with 10 mentions in the book,

whereas *native* appears 6 times, *negro* 4 times and *savage* twice. But it is not only the amount. Conrad likes to combine the word with debasing adjectives to strengthen its effect, for instance in “dusty niggers” (xxx), “footsore sulky niggers”, “beaten nigger” (53), “mysterious niggers” (47) and “fool-nigger” (73). Adding the variant *negro*, there is also an “overfed young negro” and a “lone negro”. Next to what he says, it is important what he omits, namely any names for individuals or tribes which could help give the natives an identity. Instead, the native population serves as an accessory for Conrad’s menacing landscape. Their appearances are ephemeral to say the least. They are “black figures”, “black shadows” and “black shapes” dwelling in the deepest forest, showing their face only to threaten the European traveller.

This feeling is underpinned by Conrad’s physical descriptions which have two traits in common: collectiveness and raw physicality. Three passages exemplify this:

I made out, deep in the tangled gloom, naked breasts, arms, legs, glaring eyes,—the bush was swarming with human limbs in movement, glistening, of bronze color (73).

And, as if by enchantment, streams of human beings—of naked human beings—[...] were poured into the clearing by the dark-faced and pensive forest (87).

[...] covered the slope with a mass of naked, breathing, quivering, bronze bodies (95).

The natives form a naked *stream*, a *mass*, a *swarm*. They are like “a grain of sand in a black Sahara” (78) and represent man in his most primitive form. As Johnson notices, they “lack the necessary faculties to evolve from the state of nature to the state of culture” (122). Conrad foregrounds the naked body, “unencumbered by the attributes of culture” (Johnson, 122). He highlights their physical prowess over the intellect: “They were big powerful men, with not much capacity to weigh the consequences, with courage, with strength” (69). The descriptions are in the vein of the ‘noble savage’, were it not for the fact that their main native activity is chasing European folk, presumably to eat them.

However, some critics weigh these passages in Conrad’s favour. Robertson sees the blacks “repeatedly associated with energy, vitality, natural dignity”. The cannibals are “dignified”, the helmsman “athletic”, the woman “savage”, “superb” and “gorgeous” (Robertson, 107). Cedric Watts takes this argument to an almost comical extreme. “Of all the people”, he says, “by far the happiest, healthiest, and most vital are the group of blacks seen paddling their canoe through the surf on

the coast” (198). Watts considers them a “point of reference against which we may judge the depredations of the white man” (198). But how Watts comes to this conclusion is beyond me, for the passage exemplifies Conrad’s racism like few others in the novel:

They shouted, sang; their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks--these chaps; but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement, that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast. They wanted no excuse for being there. They were a great comfort to look at (41).

It is all there: The oddly looking but entertaining black, with strong physical traits, feeling at ease in his natural habitat and giving pleasure to the civilized onlooker. The same could be said about any African animal in a zoo. Therefore, Mongia is quite right in saying that “vitality and naturalness are by no means unqualified positive statements” (158). These characteristics are, she argues, “one of the commonest tropes in colonial discourse [which] pits the knowledge/power of the European against the natural, instinctual, purely physical energy of the native”.

The description of the fireman on Marlow’s boat demonstrates Conrad’s racism even better:

He was an improved specimen; he could fire up a vertical boiler. He was there below me, and, upon my word, to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hindlegs. A few months of training had done for that really fine chap. [...] He ought to have been clapping his hands and stamping his feet on the bank, instead of which he was hard at work, a thrall to strange witchcraft, full of improving knowledge (64)

The native is described in animalistic terms and his attempts at learning, at using his intellect, are ridiculed. It is difficult to envisage a less demeaning portrayal. But, amazingly, Watts manages again to use this passage in Conrad’s favour. To him, it merely shows that “whites should stay in their place, which is certainly not Africa” (200). He takes the “fine chap” literally and sees him only corrupted by the white man’s presence.

The most striking way in which Conrad denies the natives humanity is verbal expression. As Achebe says, “it is clearly not part of Conrad’s purpose to confer language on the ‘rudimentary souls’ of Africa” (786). In *Heart of Darkness*, the natives “howl” (64), they exchange several “grunting phrases” which “seemed to settle the matter to their satisfaction” (68). Their words “resemble no sounds of human language” and form a “satanic litany” (95). There are only two instances where we actually hear a native voice. But in both cases it is a crippled language they speak, perfectly in line with Conrad wider purpose of

showing the natives in a primitive light. Achebe calls them his “best assaults” because he makes use of “the sensational advantages of securing their conviction by clear, unambiguous evidence issuing out of their own mouth” (786).

In the first scene the crew of cannibals Marlow engaged is near starvation. He strikes up a conversation with its young headman who replies, in a “dignified and profoundly pensive attitude”, the following: “Catch 'im”, “catch 'im”, “Give 'im to us” and “Eat 'im” (68). These utterances are telling both in content and style. First, they perpetuate the classic stereotype of the African cannibal. It is of little use to point out, as Watts does, that the scene is realistic because “they were indeed cannibals” (201). Neither is the fact that on this journey the savages, miraculously, “actually refrain from eating human flesh” (again Watts, 201). As Patrick Brantlinger explains, cannibalism appeared in the Congo only as a result of colonial exploitation (372). Conrad exaggerates the extent and nature of cannibalism greatly which is “standard in racist accounts of Africa” (372). Similarly, he distorts the style of these exclamations. To Conrad, Achebe says, “Language is too grand for these chaps; let’s give them dialects” (793). The implications of withholding human expression from the natives by having them use a caricature of English are important. According to Fleming, Conrad “condemns them to that state of outsider silence to which not-white, non-male groups have traditionally been relegated in the West, robs them of a discourse of their own and so makes them unable to challenge the hegemony of the insiders” (92). The same can be said about the second scene where a native is allowed to speak. The reader is informed of Kurtz’s passing by a native boy who puts his “insolent black head” in the doorway and says, infamously, “Mistah Kurtz – he dead” (98). By having Kurtz’s dead proclaimed “by the forces he had joined”, as Achebe points out (787), the destructive power the black man is again shown.

What is the effect of Conrad’s treatment of the natives? As I argue, the combination of racist appellations, crude physical descriptions and stunted language makes for a lasting impact on the reader who perceives the native population as a primitive and violent bunch. The prime impression the novel would have had on the original reader is that the Africans had no “occupations besides merging into the evil forest or materializing out of it simply to plague Marlow and his dispirited band” (Achebe, 791). This is a calculated, purpose-driven distortion of reality, and not, as Watts argues, “An entirely plausible

rendering of the response of a British traveller of c. 1890 to the strange and bewildering experiences offered by the Congo” (199). Neither is there a trace of the “basic respect for African life” Hunt Hawkins finds, the only caveat being a certain lack of “detail” in the descriptions due to not spending enough time in the region (1979, 296). If Conrad really lacked empirical knowledge for his novel, as Watts and Hawkins argue, he could still have easily avoided portraying the natives as cruel and dim-witted brutes.

4.2 Treatment of women

The way in which Conrad treats women in *Heart of Darkness* deserves close scrutiny. Not only serves it as an important argument in Achebe’s lecture. Its interpretation is also more complex than the aspects discussed so far. This is demonstrated by the two opposing scenes in which Conrad shows a black and a white woman. In the first, he describes the apparition of an African woman in exhaustive detail. Her steps are “measured”, she walks “proudly” and she carries her head “high” (88). She is “savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent, ominous and stately” (89). This is contrasted with Kurtz’s Intended who Marlow, meeting her at the end of the novel, calls “beautiful” (101), with eyes conveying a “delicate shade of truthfulness”. Conrad praises her “mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering”. In terms of appearance, her hair is “fair”, her visage “pale”, her brow “pure” and her glance “guileless, profound, confident, and trustful” (102).

From this comparison, Achebe draws the conclusion that Conrad describes the Amazon in detail only because she is in her place and because she serves as a “savage counterpart” to the “refined” European woman (786). He certainly has a point in finding the notion of the ‘noble savage’ in the description of the African. She appears as an exotic beauty, a mysterious seductress, an imagery again laden with charged with racist connotations. However, the European woman is far from the positive foil Achebe sees in her. Fleming aptly describes the Intended as a “self-deceiving flower of a European emotional hothouse” (91). Sarvan calls her “pale and rather anaemic” (9). She is fragile, unable to bear the truth, and she induces the upstanding Marlow to openly lie to her.

However, neither of them plays a central role for the issue of racism. While there are marked contrasts between the women, these differences are confined to their appearance. More telling is the characteristic they share, namely

their inability to influence the course of the novel. This similarity is underlined by their behaviour, as they both, Watts notices, stretch out their arms after suffering a tragic loss (201). Kurtz's mistress helplessly sees him part whereas the Intended is desperately trying to cope. Neither does Conrad paint the other female characters in a more positive fashion. Marlow's aunt is deluded when speaks of imperialists as "emissary of light" (40) and "lower sort of apostle". The two women who work for the trade company are scorned for guarding "the door of Darkness" with "indifferent placidity" (38). Overall, Conrad expresses a misogyny typical for imperialist writing which is often demeaning to both natives and women alike. Marlow verbalizes this feeling when he denies them the ability to take any responsibility – twice. He says that "They—the women, I mean—are out of it—should be out of it. We must help them to stay in that beautiful world of their own" (xxx) and that

It's queer how out of touch with truth women are. They live in a world of their own, and there had never been anything like it, and never can be. It is too beautiful altogether, and if they were to set it up it would go to pieces before the first sunset (40).

Again, Conrad is in tune with prejudices of his time. While his treatment of woman is not particularly demeaning to natives, as Achebe had argued, it still resonates with the notions of male, white superiority typical for imperialist writings.

4.3 The ambiguity of imperialism

The theme of imperialism, closely linked to racism and misogyny, is central to *Heart of Darkness*. Caryl Phillips notes that while the novel consists of different journeys, its overarching question is "what happens when one group of people, supposedly more humane and civilized than another group, attempts to impose itself upon its 'inferiors'" (62). Conrad's answer to this is not clear-cut. While some see the novel as an indictment of imperialism, others think that criticism prevails. The relevant passages lend themselves to divergent interpretations.

On the one hand, it appears that Conrad portrays "the moral bankruptcy of imperialism by showing European motives and actions to be no better than African fetishism and savagery" (Brantlinger, 370). At one point, Marlow says that "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” (34). He calls imperialism a “merry dance of death and trade” (42) and tells of its atrocities quite graphically. The slaves who are working on the railway line are “dying slowly”, Marlow observes: “They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now, - nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation” (44). And then there is obviously Kurtz who emblemizes the deterioration of moral standards in the quest for material wealth. Kurtz started out with the best intentions, as his report for the “Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs” shows. Therein, he charges the colonial enterprise with a “power for good practically unbounded” (xxx). Much later, he revises this with a telling annotation: “Exterminate all the brutes” (78). For Brantlinger, the figure of Kurtz “obviously undermines imperialist ideology” (364).

On the other hand, there is palpable praise for imperialism, as long as some conditions are met. Conrad distinguishes different types of imperialism, attaching different value to them. When Marlow looks at a map of the colonies, he prides himself in the British conquests, highlighted by their traditional colour: “There was a vast amount of red—good to see at any time, because one knows that some real work is done in there” (38). He calls the men who set out to promote the glory of the British Empire “the great knights-errant of the sea” (32) and only subtly hints at a possible involvement by the British in the sad spectacles Marlow has to witness. Kurtz was “educated partly in England” and his mother “half-English” (xxx). There is a feeling that Conrad puts the blame not on imperialism itself, but rather on the specific Belgian way of running a colony which, Hawkins explains, entailed a great waste of men and resources (1979, 290). In general, imperialism appears justified when it serves a higher cause: “What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretense but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to” (34). He calls the “Eldorado Exploring Expedition” “sordid buccaneers” (58), a far call from the boastful description of British pirates earlier. They are “reckless without hardihood, greedy without audacity, and cruel without courage”, and most importantly, they lack “moral purpose” (58).

Overall, Conrad fails to condemn imperialism as a whole. He never rejects the notion that there is a right way of dominating another people. Again, this is

excused by a number of critics. Here, the main arguments are the popularity of the imperial ideology at the time as well as Conrad's personal reluctance to campaign for ideas, political or otherwise. According to Hawkins, he had "little faith in agitation for political reform because words were meaningless, human nature unimprovable, and the universe dying" (1979, 293). But be that as it may, Conrad's ambiguous treatment of imperialism does not compensate for the debasement of the natives and women in *Heart of Darkness*.

5. Comparing Conrad and Haggard

From the outset, Henry Rider Haggard is an unlikely redeemer of late 19th century British writing on Africa. The majority of critics see him as a talentless hack who openly propagates chauvinist ideas. Among the critical charges Norman Etherington collects (72), there is the "extracurricular indoctrination of schoolboy imperialists" (G.N. Sanderson), "popular spokesman for poisonous doctrines of race" (Brian Street) and "tiresome success who mechanically manufactured imitations" (Malcolm Ewin). Heidi Kaufman sees an attempt to "legitimize imperial theft by suggesting that white men have a responsibility to take what they have discovered and fought for, thereby perpetuating the line of white rulers in Africa" (xx). Joseph Conrad himself seemed to reject Haggard's simplistic writing. As Linda Dryden argues, Haggard "presents a clear idea of the type of fiction against which he was writing" (173).

The contrast between the two contemporaries² is marked not only in terms of content, but also in terms of style. Conrad was highly conscious of his narrative technique. His prose was fragmented, complex and abstract. Even Achebe concedes that he was "one of the great stylists of modern fiction" (783). By contrast, Haggard was known for churning out marketable adventure tales and borrowing freely from other sources. Probably due to his literary limitations, Haggard's novels are easily dismissed.

However, I think his fiction has qualities many critics fail to recognize. Leaving aside stylistic shortcomings such as the simplistic language, the trite storyline and the constant reliance on 'deus ex machina' moments to move forward the plot, he renders a surprisingly humane account of the natives. Alan Sandison agrees that "in this book, as in every other he wrote on Africa,

² Joseph Conrad lived from 1857 to 1924, Henry Rider Haggard from 1856 to 1925.

[Haggard] repudiates without fuss the whole arrogant notion of the white man's burden" (31). Norman Etherington finds it remarkable, "how little imperialism creeps into the books which made him famous" (73). In this respect, I argue, *King Solomon's Mines* stacks up well against *Heart of Darkness*. While the evidence is only anecdotal, it should help put across my feeling that Haggard has been widely misread. Again, I disregard any statements the author made publicly and focus on the effect the text.

The most apparent difference is the way Haggard addresses the natives. In comparison to Conrad's fascination with *nigger*, Haggard's text fares well even by today's standards of political correctness. Not only does he refer to Africans mainly as *natives* and the name of their tribe, he also disapproves of using the word *nigger*:

What is a gentleman? I don't quite know, and yet I have had to do with niggers—no, I'll scratch that word "niggers" out, for I don't like it. I've known natives who *are*, and so you'll say, Harry, my boy, before you're done with this tale, and I have known mean whites with lots of money and fresh out from home, too, who *ain't* (10).

Clumsy as the passage may sound, having it at the beginning of the novel makes for a quite different reading than *Heart of Darkness*. The natives in the novel are well-rounded characters; they match the white men in a number of respects. Of course, Haggard makes a number of concessions to his Victorian readership. There are similarities in the way he stresses their physical traits. Ignosi is "a magnificent-looking man; [...] Standing about six foot three high he was broad in proportion, and very shapely. [...] Sir Henry walked up to him and looked into his proud, handsome face" (34). A group of warriors resembles "bronze statues" (82). However, unlike in *Heart of Darkness*, the admiration for the physical prowess of the natives is matched by exploits of character and intellect. Khiva, the Zulu boy, gives his life to save Captain John Good from the charge of an elephant. This commands great respect from Quatermain: "myself, though an old hand, I felt a lump in my throat" (43). Even more telling is the description of an elite regiment called the Greys, shortly before their final battle:

I looked down the long lines of waving black plumes and stern faces beneath them, and sighed to think that within one short hour most, if not all, of those magnificent veteran warriors, not a man of whom was under forty years of age, would be laid dead or dying in the dust. [...] And yet they never hesitated, nor could I detect a sign of fear upon the face of a single warrior. [...] I could not even at that moment help contrasting their state of mind with my own, which was far

from comfortable, and breathing a sigh of envy and admiration. Never before had I seen such an absolute devotion to the idea of duty, and such a complete indifference to its bitter fruits (135/136).

Not only are the natives held in high regard, their courage in this case even outweighs Quatermain's. Among them, the rightful king Ignosi is portrayed in a particularly favourable fashion. Matching Sir Henry in stature and courage, he does not want to serve a white man. Like his uncle Infadoos, he speaks in a "magniloquent" voice (83) and with "a certain assumption of dignity" (34). He is a far cry from the stunted black shadows haunting Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*. And also society at large in no way resembles the "madhouse" Conrad describes in the Congo (*Heart of Darkness*, 63). Kukuanaland is orderly, its roads are "magnificent" (78) and the huts arranged in precise geometry (82). As Norman Etherington notices, "daily life in Kukuanaland is healthy, tidy and chaste – soap, civilization and missionaries are not wanted here" (75).

Admittedly, Haggard's humanism has its limitations. When the white adventurers impersonate a trio of deities the Kukuanas come across as gullible fools. The cruel rites staged by Twala recall colonial tales of boiling cauldrons and cannibalism. The difference to *Heart of Darkness* is that negative native characters like the evil king Twala, his son Scragga and Gagool the witch, are not taken to represent an entire people. In one Quatermain sharply reprimands a Zulu who addressed Sir Henry in a familiar way: "It is very well for natives to have a name for one among themselves, but it is not decent that they should call a white man by their heathenish appellations to one's face" (45). However, this is relativized in the next sentence: "I was angry with the man, for I am not accustomed to be talked to in that way by Kafirs, but somehow he impressed me, and besides I was curious to know what he had to say".

The only passages where there is a real sense of racist discrimination are the ones concerning miscegenation (interracial sexual relations). Upon being offered native girls, Quatermain rejects the proposal: "Thanks, O king, but we white men wed only with white women like ourselves. Your maidens are fair, but they are not for us!" (112). Foulata expresses quite openly that such a relationship is unthinkable: "Say to my lord, Bougwan, that—I love him, and that I am glad to die because I know that he cannot cumber his life with such as I am, for the sun may not mate with the darkness, nor the white with the black" (174). My impression, however, is that this is motivated less by the racial politics than by the

issue of gender. Quatermain says that “Women are women, all the world over, whatever their colour” (xxx) and Good, back in England after losing Foulata, “hadn't seen a woman to touch her, either as regards her figure or the sweetness of her expression” (xxx). In general, Haggard debases women repeatedly throughout his novel. Right at the beginning Quatermain chummily announces that he is going to “tell the strangest story that I remember. It may seem a queer thing to say, especially considering that there is no woman in it” (10). Later he says that “Women bring trouble so surely as the night follows the day” (112). So when he finally calls the passing of Foulata a “fortunate occurrence” (189), he expresses, more than anything else, a sense of male comradery.

In terms of imperialism, it is noteworthy that the rule over Kukuanaaland is given to the natives and the possibility of white dominance is discarded. As Ignosi declares,

No other white man shall cross the mountains, even if any may live to come so far. I will see no traders with their guns and rum. My people shall fight with the spear, and drink water, like their forefathers before them. I will have no praying-men to put a fear of death into men's hearts, to stir them up against the king, and make a path for the white men who follow to run on. If a white man comes to my gates I will send him back; if a hundred come I will push them back; if armies come, I will make war on them with all my strength, and they shall not prevail against me (190).

In *King Solomon's Mines*, the detrimental effect of white colonial reign is fully acknowledged. Imperialism is not justified with redeeming factors such as moral purpose or efficiency. While the arrival of the white man is instrumental in restoring the rightful order in Kukuanaaland, the native population seems perfectly capable of taking care of itself.

Of course, the idealised depiction of the natives in an imperial romance like *King Solomon's Mines* does hold no candle to a realistic account of African life like in *Things Fall Apart*. However, I argue that in shunning ‘realism’ in favour of an African utopia, Haggard has managed to preserve the humanity of the natives. In contrast, *Heart of Darkness* is steeped in racist ideology and gives Chinua Achebe every reason to cast doubt on its moral, if not literary value.

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