# Heart of Darkness – Supplemental Reading Packet

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PROLOGUE

"THE TRADERS ARE KIDNAPPING OUR PEOPLE"

When Europeans began imagining Africa beyond the Sahara, the continent they pictured was a dreamscape, a site for fantasies of the fearsome and the supernatural. Ranulf Higden, a Benedictine monk who mapped the world about 1350, claimed that Africa contained one-eyed people who used their feet to cover their heads. A geographer in the next century announced that the continent held people with one leg, three faces, and the heads of lions. In 1459, an Italian monk, Fra Mauro, declared Africa the home of the roc, a bird so large that it could carry an elephant through the air.

In the Middle Ages, almost no one in Europe was in a position to know whether Africa contained giant birds, one-eyed people, or anything else. Hostile Moors lived on Africa's Mediterranean coast, and few Europeans dared set foot there, much less head south across the Sahara. And as for trying to sail down the west African coast, everyone knew that as soon as you passed the Canaries you would be in the Mare Tenebroso, the Sea of Darkness.

In the medieval imagination [writes Peter Forbach], this was a region of uttermost dread... where the heavens fling down liquid sheets of flame and the waters boil... where serpentine rocks and ogre islands lie in wait for the mariner, where the giant hand of Satan reaches up from the fathomless depths to seize him, where he will turn black in face and body as a mark of God's vengeance for the insolence of his prying into this forbidden mystery. And even if he should be able to survive all these ghastly perils and sail on through, he would then arrive in the Sea of Obscurity and be lost forever in the vapors and slime at the edge of the world.

It was not until the fifteenth century, the dawn of the age of ocean navigation, that Europeans systematically began to venture south, the Portuguese in the lead. In the 1440s, Lisbon's shipbuilders developed the caravel, a compact vessel particularly good at sailing into the wind. Although rarely more than a hundred feet long, this sturdy ship carried explorers far down the west coast of Africa, where no one knew what gold, spices, and precious stones might lie. But it was not only lust for riches that drove the explorers. Somewhere in Africa, they knew, was the source of the Nile, a mystery that had fascinated Europeans since antiquity. They were also driven by one of the most enduring of medieval myths, the legend of Prester John, a Christian king who was said to rule a vast empire in the interior of Africa, where, from a palace of translucent crystal and precious stones, he reigned over forty-two lesser kings, in addition to assorted courtiers and giant. No traveler was ever turned away from his dinner table of solid emerald, which seated thousands. Surely Prester John would be eager to share his riches with his fellow Christians and to help them find their way onward, to the fabled wealth of India.

Successive Portuguese expeditions probed ever farther southward. In 1482, an experienced naval captain named Diogo Cão set off on the most ambitious voyage yet. As he sailed close to the west African coast, he saw the North Star disappear from the sky once his caravel crossed the equator, and he found himself much farther south than anyone from Europe had ever been.

One day Cão came upon something that astounded him. Around his ship, the sea turned a dark, slate-tinged yellow, and brownish-yellow waves were breaking on the nearby beaches. Sailing toward the mouth of an inlet many miles wide, his caravel had to fight a current of eight to nine knots. Furthermore, a taste of the water surrounding the ship revealed that it was fresh, not salt: Cão had stumbled on the mouth of an enormous silt-filled river, larger than any a European had ever seen. The impression its vastness made on him and his men is reflected in a contemporary account:
For the space of 20 leagues [the river] preserves its fresh water unbroken by the briny billows which encompass it on every side; as if this noble river had determined to try its strength in pitched battle with the ocean itself, and alone deny it the tribute which all other rivers in the world pay without resistance.

Modern oceanographers have discovered more evidence of the great river's strength in its "pitched battle with the ocean": a hundred-mile-long canyon, in places four thousand feet deep, that the river has carved out of the sea floor.

Cão went ashore at the river's mouth and erected a limestone pillar topped with an iron cross and inscribed with the royal coat of arms and the words: "In the year 6681 of the World and in that of 1482 since the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, the most serene, the most excellent and potent prince, King João II of Portugal did order this land to be discovered and this pillar of stone to be erected by Diogo Cão, an esquire in his household."

The river where he had landed would be known by Europeans for most of the next five hundred years as the Congo. It flowed into the sea at the northern end of a thriving African kingdom, an imperial federation of two to three million people. Ever since then, geographers have usually spelled the name of the river and the eventual European colony on its banks one way, and that of the people living around its mouth and their indigenous kingdom another.

The Kingdom of the Kongo was roughly three hundred miles square, comprising territory that today lies in several countries. Its capital was the town of Mbanza Kongo — *mbanza* means "court" — on a commanding hilltop some ten days' walk inland from the coast and today just on the Angolan side of the Angola-Congo border. In 1491, nine years and several voyages after Diogo Cão's landfall, an expedition of armed Portuguese priests and emissaries made this ten-day trek and set up housekeeping as permanent representatives of their country in the court of the Kongo king. Their arrival marked the beginning of the first sustained encounter between Europeans and a black African nation.

The Kingdom of the Kongo had been in place for at least a hundred years before the Portuguese arrived. Its monarch, the ManiKongo, was chosen by an assembly of clan leaders. Like his European counterparts, he sat on a throne, in his case made of wood inlaid with ivory. As symbols of royal authority, the ManiKongo carried a zebra-tail whip, had the skins and heads of baby animals suspended from his belt, and wore a small cap.

In the capital, the king dispensed justice, received homage, and reviewed his troops under a fig tree in a large public square. Whoever approached him had to do so on all fours. On pain of death, no one was allowed to watch him eat or drink. Before he did either, an attendant struck two iron poles together, and anyone in sight had to lie face down on the ground.

The ManiKongo who was then on the throne greeted the Portuguese warmly. His enthusiasm was probably due less to the Savior his unexpected guest told him about than to the help their magical fire-spouting weapons promised in suppressing a troublesome provincial rebellion. The Portuguese were glad to oblige.

The newcomers built churches and mission schools. Like many white evangelists who followed them, they were horrified by polygamy; they thought it was the spices in the African food that provoked the dreadful practice. But despite their contempt for Kongo culture, the Portuguese grudgingly recognized the kingdom a sophisticated and well-developed state — the leading one on the west coast of central Africa. The ManiKongo appointed governors for each of some half-dozen provinces, and his rule was carried out by an elaborate civil service that included such specialized positions as *mani vangu vangu*, or first judge in cases of adultery. Although they were without writing or the wheel, the inhabitants forged copper into jewelry and iron into weapons, and wove clothing out of fibers stripped from the leaves of the raffia palm tree. According to myth, the founder of the Kongo state was a blacksmith king, so ironwork was an occupation of the nobility. People cultivated yams, bananas, and other fruits and vegetables, and raised pigs, cattle, and goats. They measured distance by marching days, and marked time by the lunar month and by a four-day week, the first day of which was a holiday. The king collected taxes from his subjects and, like many a ruler, controlled the currency supply: cowrie shells found on a coastal island under royal authority.

As in much of Africa, the kingdom had slavery. The nature of African slavery varied from one area to another and changed over time, but most slaves were people captured in warfare. Others had been criminals or debtors, or were given away by their families as part of a dowry settle-
thousand slaves a year were being shipped across the Atlantic by the 1520s. By the next century, fifteen thousand slaves a year were exported from the Kingdom of the Congo as a whole. Traders kept careful records of their booty. One surviving inventory from this region lists “68 head” of slaves by name, physical defects, and cash value, starting with the men, who were worth the most money, and ending with: “Child, name unknown as she is dying and cannot speak, male without value, and a small girl Callenbo, no value because she is dying; one small girl Cantunbe, no value because she is dying.”

Many of the slaves shipped to the Americas from the great river’s mouth came from the Kingdom of the Congo itself. Many others were captured by African slave-dealers who ranged more than seven hundred miles into the interior, buying slaves from local chiefs and headmen. Forced-marched to the coast, their necks locked into wooden yokes, the slaves were rarely given enough food, and because canoons usually traveled in the dry season, they often drank stagnant water. The trails to the slave ports were soon strewn with bleaching bones.

Once they were properly baptized, clothed in leftover burlap cargo wrappings, and chained together in ships’ holds, most slaves from this region were sent to Brazil, the nearest part of the New World. Starting in the 1600s, however, a growing demand tempted many ship captains to make the longer voyage to the British colonies in North America. Roughly one of every four slaves imported to work the cotton and tobacco plantations of the American South began his or her journey across the Atlantic from equatorial Africa, including the Kongo kingdom. The KiiKongo language, spoken around the Congo River’s mouth, is one of the African tongues whose traces linguists have found in the Gullah dialect spoken by black Americans today on the coastal islands of South Carolina and Georgia.

When the Atlantic slave trade began decimating the Kongo, that nation was under the reign of a Manikongo named Nzinga Mbande Affonso, who had gained the throne in 1506 and ruled as Affonso I for nearly forty years. Affonso’s life spanned a crucial period. When he was born, no one in the kingdom knew that Europeans existed. When he died, his entire realm was threatened by the slave-selling fever they had caused. He was a man of tragic self-awareness, and he left his mark. Some three hundred
years later, a missionary said, "A native of the Kongo knows the name of three kings: that of the present one, that of his predecessor, and that of Afonso."

He was a provincial chief in his early thirties when the Portuguese first arrived at Mbanza Kongo, in 1491. A convert to Christianity, he took on the name Afonso and some Portuguese advisers, and studied for ten years with the priests at Mbanza Kongo. One wrote to the king of Portugal that Afonso "knows better than us the prophets, the Gospel of our Savior Jesus Christ, all the lives of the saints and all that has to do with our holy mother Church. If Your Highness saw him, You would be astonished. He speaks so well and with such assurance that it always seems to me that the Holy Spirit speaks through his mouth. My Lord, he does nothing but study; many times he falls asleep over his books and many times he forgets to eat or drink because he is speaking of our Savior." It is hard to tell how much of this glowing portrait was inspired by the priest's attempt to impress the Portuguese king and how much by Afonso's attempt to impress the priest.

In the language of a later age, King Afonso I was a modernizer. He urgently tried to acquire European learning, weapons, and goods in order to strengthen his rule and fortify it against the destabilizing force of the white arrival. Having noticed the Portuguese appetite for copper, for example, he traded it for European products that would help him buy the submission of outlying provinces. Clearly a man of unusual intelligence, Afonso tried to do something as difficult in his time as in ours: to be a selective modernizer. He was an enthusiast for the church, for the written word, for European medicine, and for woodworking, masonry, and other skills to be learned from Portuguese craftsmen. But when his fellow king in Lisbon sent an envoy to urge the adoption of Portugal's legal code and court protocol, Afonso wasn't interested. And he tried hard to keep out prospectors, fearing total takeover of his land if Europeans found the gold and silver they coveted.

Because virtually everything we know about this part of Africa for the next several hundred years comes to us from its white conquerors, King Afonso I provides something rare and valuable: an African voice. Indeed, his is one of the very few central African voices that we can hear at all before the twentieth century. He used his fluency in Portuguese to dictate a remarkable series of letters to two successive Portuguese kings, the first known documents composed by a black African in any European language. Several dozen of the letters survive, above his signature, with its regal flourish of double underlinings. Their tone is the formal one of monarch to monarch, usually beginning "Most high and powerful prince and king my brother...". But we can hear not just a king speaking; we hear a human being, one who is aghast to see his people taken away in ever greater numbers on slave ships.

Afonso was no abolitionist. Like most African rulers of his time and later, he owned slaves, and at least once he sent some as a present to his "brother" king in Lisbon, along with leopard skins, parrots, and copper anklets. But this traditional exchange of gifts among kings seemed greatly different to Afonso from having tens of thousands of his previously free subjects taken across the sea in chains. Listen to him as he writes King João III of Portugal in 1526:

Each day the traders are kidnapping our people — children of this country, sons of our nobles and vassals, even people of our own family... This corruption and depravity are so widespread that our land is entirely depopulated... We need in this kingdom only priests and schoolteachers, and no merchandise, unless it is wine and flour for Mass... It is our wish that this kingdom not be a place for the trade or transport of slaves.

Later the same year:

Many of our subjects eagerly lust after Portuguese merchandise that your subjects have brought into our domains. To satisfy this inordinate appetite, they seize many of our black free subjects... They sell them... after having taken these prisoners to the coast secretly or at night... As soon as the captives are in the hands of white men they are branded with a red-hot iron.

Again and again Afonso speaks about the twin themes of the slave trade and the alluring array of cloth, tools, jewelry, and other knickknacks that the Portuguese traders used to buy their human cargoes:

These goods exert such a great attraction over simple and ignorant people that they believe in them and forget their belief in God... My Lord, a monstrous greed pushes our subjects, even Christians, to seize members of their own families, and of ours, to do business by selling them as captives.
PROLOGUE

While begging the Portuguese king to send him teachers, pharmacists, and doctors instead of traders, Affonso admits that the flood of material goods threatened his authority. His people “can now procure, in much greater quantity than we can, the things we formerly used to keep them obedient to us and content.” Affonso’s lament was prescient; this was not the last time that lust for Europe’s great cornucopia of goods undermined traditional ways of life elsewhere.

The Portuguese kings showed no sympathy. King João III replied: “You . . . tell me that you want no slave-trading in your domains, because this trade is depopulating your country . . . The Portuguese there, on the contrary, tell me how vast the Congo is, and how it is so thickly populated that it seems as if no slave has ever left.”

Affonso pleaded with his fellow sovereigns as one Christian with another, complete with the prejudices of the day. Of the priests turned slave-traders, he wrote:

In this kingdom, faith is as fragile as glass because of the bad examples of the men who come to teach here, because the lusts of the world and lure of wealth have turned them away from the truth. Just as the Jews crucified the Son of God because of covetousness, my brother, so today He is again crucified.

Several times Affonso sent his appeals for an end to the slave trade directly to the Pope in Rome, but the Portuguese detained his emissaries to the Vatican as they stepped off the boat in Lisbon.

Affonso’s despair reached its depth in 1539, near the end of his life, when he heard that ten of his young nephews, grandsons, and other relatives who had been sent to Portugal for a religious education had disappeared on route. “We don’t know whether they are dead or alive,” he wrote in desperation, “nor how they might have died, nor what news we can give of them to their fathers and mothers.” We can imagine the king’s horror at being unable to guarantee the safety even of his own family. Portuguese traders and sea captains along the long route back to Europe sidetracked many a cargo between the Kongo kingdom and Lisbon; these young men, it turned out, ended up in Brazil as slaves.

His hatred for the overseas slave trade and his vigilance against its erosion of his authority won Affonso the enmity of some of the Portuguese merchants living in his capital. A group of eight made an attempt on his life as he was attending Mass on Easter Sunday in 1540. He escaped

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with only a bullet hole in the fringe of his royal robe, but one of his nobles was killed and two others wounded.

After Affonso’s death, the power of the Kongo state gradually diminished as provincial and village chiefs, themselves growing rich on slave sales, no longer gave much allegiance to the court at Mbanza Kongo. By the end of the 1500s, other European countries had joined in the slave trade; British, French, and Dutch vessels roamed the African coast, looking for human cargo. In 1665, the army of the weakened Kingdom of the Kongo fought a battle with the Portuguese. It was defeated, and the ManiKongo was beheaded. Internal strife further depleted the kingdom, whose territory was all taken over by European colonies by the late 1800s.

Except for Affonso’s letters, the written record of these times still shows them entirely through white men’s eyes. How did the Europeans, beginning with Diogo Cão and his three ships with faded red crosses on their sails, appear to the people living at the great river’s mouth? To see with their eyes, we must turn to the myths and legends that have filtered down over the centuries. At first, Africans apparently saw the white sailors not as men but as vumbi — ancestral ghosts — since the Kongo people believed that a person’s skin changed to the color of chalk when he passed into the land of the dead. And it was obvious that this was where menacing white vumbi had come from, for people on the shore saw first the tips of an approaching ship’s masts, then its superstructure, then its hull. Clearly the ship had carried its passengers up from their homes beneath the surface of the earth. Here is how the Portuguese arrival was recounted by Mukumzo Kioko, a twentieth-century oral historian of the Pende people:

Our fathers were living comfortably . . . They had cattle and crops; they had salt marshes and banana trees.

Suddenly they saw a big boat rising out of the great ocean.

This boat had wings all of white, sparkling like knives.

White men came out of the water and spoke words which no one understood.

Our ancestors took fright; they said that these were vumbi, spirits returned from the dead.

They pushed them back into the ocean with volleys of arrows.
FROLOGUE

But the vumi spat fire with a noise of thunder. Many men were killed. Our ancestors died.
The chiefs and wise men said that these vumi were the former possessors of the land...
From that time to our days now, the whites have brought us nothing but wars and miseries.

The trans-Atlantic slave trade seemed further confirmation that Europeans had come from the land of the dead, as after they took their shiploads of slaves out to sea, the captives never returned. Just as Europeans would be long obsessed with African cannibalism, so Africans imagined Europeans practicing the same thing. The whites were thought to turn their captives’ flesh into salt meat, their brains into cheese, and their blood into the red wine Europeans drank. African bones were burned, and the gray ash became gunpowder. The huge, smoking copper cooking kettles that could be seen on sailing vessels were, it was believed, where all these deadly transformations began. The death tolls on the packed slave ships that sailed west from the Congo coast rose higher still when some slaves refused to eat the food they were given, believing that they would be eating those who had sailed before them.

As the years passed, new myths arose to explain the mysterious objects the strangers brought from the land of the dead. A nineteenth-century missionary recorded, for example, an African explanation of what happened when captains descended into the holds of their ships to fetch trading goods like cloth. The Africans believed that these goods came not from the ship itself but from a hole that led into the ocean. Sea sprites weaved this cloth in an “oceanic factory, and, whenever we need cloth, the captain . . . goes to this hole and rings a bell.” Sea sprites hand him up their cloth, and the captain “then throws in, as payment, a few dead bodies of black people he has bought from those bad native traders who have bewitched their people and sold them to the white men.” The myth was not so far from reality. For what was slavery in the American South, after all, but a system for transforming the labor of black bodies, via cotton plantations, into cloth?

Because African middlemen brought captives directly to their ships, Portuguese traders seldom ventured far from the coast. For nearly four centuries, in fact, after Diogo Cão came upon the Congo River, Europeans

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did not know where the river came from. It pours some 1.4 million cubic feet of water per second into the ocean; only the Amazon carries more water. Besides its enormous size and unknown course, the Congo posed another puzzle. Seamen noticed that its flow, compared with that of other tropical rivers, fluctuated relatively little during the year. Rivers such as the Amazon and the Ganges had phases of extremely high water and low water, depending on whether the land they drained was experiencing the rainy or the dry season. What made the Congo different?
The reason several centuries’ worth of visitors failed to explore the Congo’s source was that they couldn’t sail upstream. Anyone who tried found that the river turned into a gorge, at the head of which were impassable rapids.

Much of the Congo River basin, we now know, lies on a plateau in the African interior. From the western rim of this plateau, nearly a thousand feet high, the river descends to sea level in a mere 220 miles. During this tumultuous descent, the river squeezes through narrow canyons, boils up in waves 40 feet high, and tumbles over 32 separate cataracts. So great is the drop and the volume of water that these 220 miles have as much hydroelectric potential as all the lakes and rivers of the United States combined.

For any sailor bold enough to get out of his ship and walk, the land route around the rapids wound uphill through rough, rocky country feared for its treacherous cliffs and ravines and for malaria and the other diseases to which Europeans had no immunity. Only with enormous difficulty did some Capuchin missionaries twice manage to get briefly inland as far as the top of the great rapids. A Portuguese expedition that tried to repeat this trek never returned. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, Europeans still knew nothing about the interior of central Africa or about where the river began.

In 1816, a British expedition, led by Captain James K. Tuckey of the Royal Navy, set out to find the Congo’s origins. His two ships carried a wonderfully odd assortment of people: Royal Marines; carpenters, blacksmiths, a surgeon, a gardener from the royal gardens at Kew, a botanist, and an anatomist. The anatomist was directed, among other things, to make a careful study of the hippopotamus and to “preserve in spirits and if possible in triplicate, the organ of hearing of this animal.” A Mr. Cranch was entered on the ship’s log as Collector of Objects of Natural History; another expedition member was simply listed as Volunteer and Observant Gentleman.
When he arrived at the Congo's mouth, Tuckey counted eight slave ships from various nations at anchor, awaiting their cargoes. He sailed his own ships as far up the river as he could and then set off to skirt the thunderous rapids overland. But he and his exhausted men grew discouraged by endless "scrambling up the sides of almost perpendicular hills, and over great masses of quartz." These came to be called the Crystal Mountains. The river was a mass of foaming rapids and enormous whirlpools. At a rare calm stretch Tuckey observed, rather provincially, that "the scenery was beautiful and not inferior to any on the banks of the Thames." One by one, the Englishmen began to suffer from an unknown illness, most likely yellow fever, and after about 150 miles, Tuckey lost heart. His party turned around, and he died shortly after getting back to his ship. By the time the shaken survivors of the expedition made their way back to England, twenty-one of the fifty-four men who had set out were dead. The source of the Congo River and the secret of its steady flow was still a mystery. For Europeans, Africa remained the supplier of valuable raw materials—human bodies and elephant tusks. But otherwise they saw the continent as faceless, blank, empty, a place on the map waiting to be explored, one ever more frequently described by the phrase that says more about the seer than the seen: the Dark Continent.
Cultural Documents and Illustrations

Kayla Walker Edin

INTRODUCTION

There are two ways to place *Heart of Darkness* within its cultural contexts. The first involves an examination of the cultural milieu in which Conrad wrote. Maps, pictures, letters, and book reviews contemporaneous with its publication are provided here in order to guide readers toward a more nuanced understanding of the novella as it appeared in its initial form. They are also meant to facilitate a deeper understanding of two important historical events that seem to underlie the action of the text: King Léopold of Belgium’s monopoly of the ivory and rubber trade in the “Congo Free State” and the growing controversy and opposition in England to the harsh colonial techniques he employed in the process.

Documents reproduced here include an 1834 European map (p. 102 in this volume) of the kind that Conrad recalls seeing as a child, full of “blank spaces” where the heart of Africa — the Congo — lies. The map invites us to join the young Conrad in poring over incomplete maps like this one, and to hypothesize about their appeal. Did Conrad’s own multiethnic heritage increase his fascination with places in the world that appeared to defy description or identification? Did his twenty-year career at sea represent an attempt to color in the “blank spaces” on a map, or rather an attempt to grapple with the gaps and occlusions —
Reactions to Conrad's iconic work are hardly limited to critical reviews, critiques, and responses. For that reason, in the following pages, political cartoons and even a movie poster offer a sample of the many adaptations, critiques, and uses to which the novella has been put as its circulation has grown to encompass a global audience. This collection, however, is far from exhaustive. A simple Google search locates the presence of the title and/or memorable lines from the text in the titles of national Geographic articles and museum exhibits, video games and works of fiction, in feature films like Apocalypse Now (1979), and even in an episode of HBO's Sex and the City. As Charlotte York plans a traditional Jewish wedding to Harry Goldenblatt, she declares her intention to dance the hora, to which her wedding planner Anthony exclaims, "The hora! The hora!" riffing on Kurtz's final words to Marlow. From its inception to the present day, Heart of Darkness has inspired such wordplay in explorations of culture and gender, even as it continues to probe timeless questions about morality and bigotry, forcing readers to wrestle with this provocative text on their own terms.

The second way that we encounter the cultural contexts of Heart of Darkness is on our own, that is to say, by examining the cultural vantage point from which we assemble and view century-old materials. Readers today necessarily view the text through a twenty-first-century lens. It would be impossible (and counterproductive, anyway) to extract the text from the web of controversy and lively critical conversation that it has engendered over the past century. Indeed, its reception history now forms an important part of the novel. Anthropologists or postcolonial critics might encourage us to view the text as an artifact, an object that takes on a life of its own. To "see" it accurately, however, we must first gain awareness of how we as readers are situated in relation to the text and its contemporary context.

In the following pages, you will find excerpts of critical reviews from 1902 to the present. To contextualize these viewpoints, several documents are provided that offer clues about the cultural conditions surrounding the initial publication of Heart of Darkness in 1899 in Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine (p. 122), a conservative monthly magazine that catered to a politically and socially conservative audience. Of course, the dissemination of Heart of Darkness did not end with Blackwood's. Its subsequent publication as a novella in 1902 made it available to a much wider audience. Critical reviews reproduced here exemplify the lively debate sparked by the text from its inception.
Maps of Africa

Blank Map (1834)

Conrad was fascinated with maps throughout his life. In his late, autobiographical retrospective entitled Some Reminiscences, he recalls a formative incident in his childhood:

It was in 1868, when I was nine years old or thereabouts, that while looking at a map of Africa of the time and putting my finger on the blank space then representing the unsolved mystery of the continent, I said to myself with absolute assurance and an amazing audacity which are no longer in my character now: “When I grow up I shall go there.”

Twenty years later, Conrad traveled to Stanley Falls, the area on the map he had once imagined as “the blankest of blank spaces on the earth’s figured surface” (Reminiscences 41). The “blank space” that Conrad put his finger on may be seen in the following map, made in 1834 by Carey, Lea, and Blanchard. A Chinese map of South Africa, believed to be the earliest map of Africa, dates back to 1389, more than a century before Western explorers and mapmakers reached the continent. Five centuries later, the European map of Africa inched toward its completion. By the time Conrad traveled there in 1890, the mapping was nearly complete.

In some important ways, the “blank” map seems an apt metaphor for the ignorance that Europeans brought to the region, as well as the audacity
inherent in the mapping process (the designations of various landmarks with English names instead of their native counterparts is notable in this regard). They assumed, after all, that Africa was full of blank spaces, of voids that the paternal Europeans could fill with commerce and religious conversion. Heart of Darkness was written as the catastrophic consequences of these assumptions were finally beginning to come to light.

Map of Conrad’s Congo Journey (1890)

Within thirty years after the young Joseph Conrad first dreamed of going to the unmapped, and therefore “blank,” heart of Africa, European countries had aggressively colonized the continent. One American map of Africa copyrighted by Rand McNally in 1890 labels a tiny sliver of land northwest of the “Congo Free State” as “unexplored.” By 1890 — the year of Conrad’s arrival in the Congo — the so-called Free State was in fact the private domain of King Léopold II of Belgium. The following map offers a visual representation of Conrad’s journey. After sailing to the Congo Free State, Conrad spent nearly a month in Matadi (where he met Roger...
Casement, the British consul who would become one of Léopold’s harshest critics (before beginning the overland journey to Stanley Pool on foot. Thirty-six days later, he arrived in Kinshasa, only to learn that instead of commanding the Florida as planned, he was to ship upriver not as a captain but as an ordinary sailor on the Roi des Belges. The four-week trip seems to have cured Conrad’s zest for life at sea. He got out of his contract with the Société Anonyme Belge pour le Commerce du Haut-Congo and returned to Europe haunted by his experiences in the Congo.

Years before his fellow traveler Casement penned an impassioned indictment against Léopold’s policies in the Congo (the forty-plus pages became known as the “Casement Report”: see pp. 113–15), Conrad felt compelled to write about what he’d seen. What resulted, however, was a very different kind of text, one that became a literary masterpiece as well as a valuable historical document. He drew heavily on his experiences when writing about Marlow’s overland trek from the “Company Station” to the “Central Station” and subsequent career as a steamboat commander. Although Conrad never explicitly identifies the setting for Heart of Darkness, the parallels between his own African experiences and Marlow’s leave little room for doubt that it was the Congo.

From its earliest publication, Heart of Darkness has provoked questions about the role and representation of women. From the 1903 unsigned review in the Glasgow Evening News (p. 125) in which the author argues that Conrad’s oeuvre “has either ignored women, or at best made use of them as figures to fill a space in the background of his painting,” to Gabrielle McIntyre’s 2002 article insisting that, despite their “near invisibility,” women are nonetheless “an always-palpable presence in the background of the text” (pp. 330–44), the female characters in Heart of Darkness continue to fascinate readers. Such interest naturally leads to speculation about the “real” women in Africa who may have inspired Conrad’s writing and to an examination of late-nineteenth-century photographs. Post-colonial critics rightly caution against attempting to discern the “truth” about citizens of colonized countries or continents by gazing through the lenses of their European occupiers. However, photographers contemporary with Conrad, like the German plantation owner and avid photographer Robert Visser (1860–1937), offer at least a glimpse of the native Congolese population that may inform our reading of gender in Heart of Darkness. Visser, by his own account one of the first Europeans to establish coffee and cocoa plantations in this region, managed several in the Congo from 1882 to 1904. It was during this period that the following photographs were taken (Adler and Stelsig 41).
Postcard from the Africa album of the Visser family; women in photo are portrayed as “untouched” by the influence of Europeans.

Dr. Christine Stelzig, Frankfurt am Main.

Scholars like Katrin Adler and Christine Stelzig, who study and write about Visser’s photographs, acknowledge “the extent to which white photographers created a picture of ‘exotic peoples’ that was far more representative of a European clichéd point of view than of reality” (38). The same could be (and has been) said of Conrad’s depiction of native Africans. Yet in several of Visser’s photographs, like the ones reproduced here, he provides portraits of native women that differ dramatically from Conrad’s sensational depiction of Kurtz’s African mistress. While Adler and Stelzig classify some of his work as “anthropological,” other photographs seem “respectful, personal, even tender” (46). In the postcard picture above, Visser attempts to depict “natives” as untouched by European influence. In the picture on page 107, he photographs his long-time partner (with whom he had a son) and her family. Both photos provide a point of reference and a point of contrast with Conrad’s own, often conflicted portrayal of women in Heart of Darkness.
Hochschild's King Leopold's Ghost (1998), a book written in the genre of "popular history" that characterizes the king as a tyrant, was a surprise best-seller that inspired a 2006 documentary by the same name. Translated into a dozen languages, its astonishing success suggests that Leopold's specter still haunts the imagination of an international audience. To that end, human rights organizations assert that Leopold's name belongs next to Hitler, Stalin, and other men whose names live on in infamy. The following document offers a rare glimpse into the rationale that may have inspired his notorious deeds, even as it seals his reputation.

Sir,

2. [If my Government, when formulating the new Decrees relating to the Congo, has been especially mindful of the welfare of the natives, it has also had to be careful not to compromise the maintenance of order and internal security. This is at once a national and international calamity. . . .]

3. There have been revolts in the Congo, but I believe these have been less numerous than in the British possessions, as, for example, Natal and Nigeria. The repressive methods to which we resort do not as a rule imply the use of artillery or cavalry. . . .

10. Native laziness must not be perpetuated; the negro must be made to shake off his idleness. If the native does not work, he will never rise above his present standard, but will continue to stain Central Africa with blood. Work is the only remedy for his woes, and in work lies the secret of his regeneration. . . .

15. The Sovereign does not possess a single share of the concessionary Companies nor of any other undertaking in the Congo; he does not derive any direct or indirect personal profit from them. The Congo is not exploited by its founder like a private enterprise. Not only does he not derive any personal profit whatsoever from the Congo, but he is the only Ruler of a State who has no civil list. . . .

19. Far from being a Royal robbery, as insinuated by the "Times," this "Domaine de la Couronne" is the employment by the Sovereign of certain property for purposes which are from the public benefit. This creation is in harmony with the views which I have always endeavored to put into practice during the whole of my reign. . . .
28. If my views and dealings are not well known in England, the real state of things in the Congo is still less well known. Certain persons seem only to be occupied in finding or inventing faults and crimes. The natives' well-known propensity for lying greatly facilitates their task.

31. Before writing to you, I awaited the return from the Congo of Lieutenant-General Baron Wahis, Commander of the Army Division of Brussels. . . . He assures me that the natives are not unhappy in the Congo, and that their condition is improving, especially in that part of the territory which is exploited by the Government.

33. General Wahis is of opinion that the Congo natives are not longing for a change of rulers. We have brought them into contact with civilization; we are beginning to educate them, we have preserved them from the abuse of alcohol, we have vaccinated them, we are making superhuman efforts to overcome the sleeping sickness, and we are creating numerous and rapid ways of communication.

36. You may, perhaps, find my letter too long and too outspoken. I belong to an independent country, the institutions of which are the most liberal in existence. I have served this country in public office for fifty-five years without interruption. I have devoted my attention to Central Africa for twenty-six years, also uninterruptedly, animated with that Belgian sentiment which is neither bloodthirsty, despotic, nor unenlightened.

I am, &c,

(Signed) Léopold

Etched portrait of King Léopold.
"My yearly income from the Congo is millions of guineas." Cartoon from Mark Twain's satirical *King Léopold's Soliloquy: A Defense of His Congo Rule*. Twain produced this pamphlet in 1905 in condemnation of Léopold's tyrannical rule over the Congo Free State. In it, Twain skewers the king, who wildly defends his own actions, claiming that the English are impossible to please.

Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

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**DOCUMENTING ABUSE IN THE CONGO FREE STATE**

**ROGER CASEMENT**

Report of the British Consul, Roger Casement, on the Administration of the Congo Free State (1904)

As eyewitness reports and photographs of atrocities occurring in King Léopold's Congo Free State proliferated, governments and citizens of other countries began to take notice. In 1885, several nations signed the Berlin Act, which charged the Congo government "to bind themselves to watch over the preservation of the native tribes and to care for their moral and material welfare." England was one of the signatories. Thus, the government sent British consul Roger Casement to the Congo Free State to investigate the accumulating reports of abuses against the native population. Casement's report was published in 1904. The full report runs forty pages long, with an additional twenty pages of individual statements gathered from victims and witnesses alike who report killings, mutilations, kidnappings, and beatings of men, women, and children by soldiers of Bula Mubadi — the name used by the natives for the Congo administration of King Léopold. Copies of the report were sent to the Belgian government as

British Parliamentary Papers, 1904, LXII, Cd. 1933.
well as to the governments of countries that were signatories to the 1885 Berlin Act, including Germany, France, and Russia. As a result, international pressure to reform began to mount. The Congo administration was forced to investigate the atrocities documented by Casement, leading to the arrest and punishment of some white officials responsible for these acts.

In the selection that follows, Casement compares the sad state of the native population as he found it with the relative well-being he encountered only sixteen years prior. He concludes that the effects of European influence have been extremely detrimental on the indigenous people. Their systems of trade have been completely disrupted. Men and women alike are "summoned on the instant" to perform services for the Congo administration or "government" under threat of imprisonment or beating. He reports that even children are not immune from torture. In particular, he reports the case of a "young lad" whose "right hand was cut off at the wrist," a common practice among soldiers who were required to send proof that their bullets were used to kill natives. Often, they would simply main their victims in order to provide an all-too-visible reminder that they were doing their job "well."

Casement's report was instrumental in bringing the troubling nature of European activity in the Congo Free State to light. With his endorsement and support, British journalist and shipping agent E. D. Morel founded the Congo Reform Association, which burgeoned into the first major human rights initiative in modern history. Other early voices of dissent included African American politician, historian, and Civil War veteran George Washington Williams, who was the first to publicize the plight of the Congolese. After meeting Léopold in 1889, he traveled to the Congo in 1890. His missive entitled "An Open Letter to His Serene Majesty Léopold II, King of the Belgians and Sovereign of the Independent State of Congo" is the earliest public indictment of Léopold's actions there. African American Presbyterian missionary William Henry Sheppard, who spent nearly twenty years living in the Congo, vigorously endeavored to publicize the atrocities he witnessed. Popular British author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and American author Mark Twain lent their fame and literary talents to the cause as well.

I have the honor to submit my Report on my recent journey on the Upper Congo.

1. [T]he region visited was one of the most central in the Congo State. . . . Moreover, I was enabled by visiting this district, to contrast its present state with the condition in which I had known it some sixteen years ago . . . and I was thus able to institute a comparison between a state [sic] of affairs I had myself seen when the natives loved their own savage lives in anarchic and disorderly communities, uncontrolled by Europeans, and that created by more than a decade of very energetic European intervention . . . by Belgian officials in introducing their methods of rule over one of the most savage regions of Africa . . .

6. The people have not easily accommodated themselves to the altered condition of life brought about by European government in their midst. Where formerly they were accustomed to take long voyages down to Stanley Pool to sell slaves, ivory, dried fish, or other local products . . . they find themselves today barred from all such activity . . . The open selling of slaves and the canoe convoys, which navigated the Upper Congo (River), have everywhere disappeared . . .

7. [But] much that was not reprehensible in native life has disappeared along with it. The trade in ivory has today entirely passed from the hands of the natives of the Upper Congo . . . Complaints as to the manner of exacting service are . . . frequent . . . If the local official has to go on a sudden journey men are summoned on the instant to paddle his canoe, and a refusal entails imprisonment or a beating. If the Government plantation or the kitchen garden require weeding, a soldier will be sent to call in the women from some of the neighboring towns . . . to the women suddenly forced to leave their household tasks and to tramp off, hoe in hand, baby on back, with possibly a hungry and angry husband at home, the task is not a welcome one. During the course of these operations there had been much loss of life, accompanied, I fear, by a somewhat general mutilation of the dead, as proof that the soldiers had done their duty . . .

12. Two cases (of mutilation) came to my actual notice while I was in the lake district. One, a young man, both of whose hands had been beaten off with the butt ends of rifles against a tree; the other a young lad of 11 or 12 years of age, whose right hand was cut off at the wrist . . . I [sic] both these cases the Government soldiers had been accompanied by white officers whose names were given to me. Of six natives (one girl, three little boys, one youth, and one old woman) who had been mutilated in this way during the rubber regime, all except one were dead at the date of my visit.
Photographs of Mutilated Africans (1909)

In order to regulate and economize on bullets, King Léopold's Congo Free State required its soldiers to send hands of their native victims to the Congo administration as "proof" of death. The administration endeavored to prevent bullets from being wasted on hunting or sport; undaunted, the intrepid soldiers found a way around this rule. They cut off the hands of living adults and children, sent the hands to their superiors, and continued to use the bullets as they pleased. In his report to the British government in 1904 (see the preceding document, pp. 113-15), Roger Casement describes two young men, one "whose hands had been beaten off with the butt ends of rifles against a tree" and another "whose right hand was cut off at the wrist." According to Casement, this mutilation was widely practiced on girls, boys, elderly women, and men as well. Numerous photographs from this time period document this sordid practice. Citizen advocates and established authors joined Casement in documenting these

Congolesse natives and rubber plantation workers whose hands have been cut off for failing to deliver enough caoutchouc (rubber).

The Granger Collection, New York.

Collage of photos depicting victims, some of them children, of soldiers of King Léopold's Congo Free State.

From The Crime of the Congo by Arthur Conan Doyle.
horrific crimes, including Mark Twain, who wrote the satiric King Léopold's Soliloquy: A Defense of His Congo Rule in 1905, and Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of Sherlock Holmes, who wrote an impassioned critique of colonialism entitled The Crime of the Congo in an astonishing eight days in 1909. The book provides graphic descriptions of violence against natives, as well as some photographs of the mutilations. Doyle later based one of his characters in The Lost World on Casement.

Heart of Darkness from a Multi-Media Perspective

Punch Cartoons (1906 and 1980)

Punch, a British weekly magazine that operated from 1841 to 1992 and from 1996 to 2002, was noted for its humor, satire, and pointed political commentary. Two political cartoons, published nearly a century apart, make particularly explicit statements about the issues central to Heart of Darkness.

The first, published in 1906, depicts a strong African man being strangled by a snake. The coils of the snake dominate the picture; in lieu of fangs, the head of the snake sports a crown and the bearded face of King Léopold. The image is entitled "In the Rubber Coils." The caption reads, "Scene — The Congo 'Free' State." The juxtaposition of the word free with the image of entrapment calls the audience's attention to the irony of the situation that Conrad had written about just a few years earlier. Heart of Darkness focuses on the ivory trade that flourished in the Congo, but rubber was an equally precious resource that European "settlers" and their intrepid leader King Léopold were intent on exploiting and importing. Both enterprises wreaked devastating effects on the African people who were "employed" in the process.

In 1980, close to a century later, Punch magazine published a second cartoon of interest to Conrad's readers. This time, a white man's body
"In the Rubber Coils."
Mary Evans Picture Library/The Image Works.

dominates the scene. Instead of a snake coiled around him, helicopters hover over his head. His white skull protrudes from the page, perhaps meant to indicate his asphyxiation. In his hand, he clutches a book with "Conrad" printed on the cover. Behind him, a man clutches the bars of a cage and stares straight ahead in horror at something invisible to the reader.

A cartoon depicts a scene evocative of 1979's Apocalypse Now.
Reproduced with permission of Punch Ltd., www.punch.co.uk

Although no caption is provided, the allusion to Francis Ford Coppola's film Apocalypse Now (released the previous year in 1979) is clear. Like its earlier counterpart, the cartoon depicts the inadequacy of human judgment when pitted against imperial greed. Yet another interpretation suggests itself: Is the Kurza figure, played by Marlon Brando (as depicted in the cartoon) using Heart of Darkness as a guidebook? Is Conrad's text complicit or even directive in imperial pursuits? If so, are the cartoons themselves involved in the imperialistic greed they endeavor to critique? Like the allusive yet elusive Heart of Darkness, the genre of the political cartoon entrusts its final interpretation to the judgment of its reader.
Blackwood's Magazine: First Installment of Heart of Darkness (February 1899)

The copy of Heart of Darkness that you hold in your hands today looks quite different than the text as it appeared to its original audience in 1899. In the nineteenth century, it became a common publishing practice to serialize texts in magazines or journals. In February 1899, the first installment of Heart of Darkness appeared in Blackwood's Magazine, and the rest of Conrad's text in two subsequent monthly issues. In 1902, Heart of Darkness was published in a single volume alongside two other short stories by Conrad: Youth and The End of the Tether. Edward Garnett's unsigned review in Academy and Literature on December 6, 1902, predicts that "These two will be more popular than the third" which he nonetheless calls a "most amazing" story.

The publication history of Heart of Darkness may have surprising implications for contemporary critical discussions of the novel. In the ongoing debate about whether Heart of Darkness sanctions or censures racism, critic William Atkinson suggests that the novella's original context may hold the answer. In his 2004 article "Bound in Blackwood's: The Imperialism of Heart of Darkness in Its Immediate Context," Atkinson notes that Conrad wrote a letter to William Blackwood stating that the subject of his African story was very much "of our time" (Conrad, quoted by Atkinson 368) and declaring his intention to write about "imperialism, specifically with King Leopold's colonial project in central Africa" (Atkinson 368). Atkinson classifies Blackwood's as a rather conservative magazine that catered to a conservative audience. The magazine "projected itself as weighty, considered, and above all realistic" (390). Thus, its audience would not have been conditioned to read against the text like contemporary critics tend to do. Atkinson concludes that Heart of Darkness "acknowledges the complexities of the imperial project, or human imperfections, and of the consequent dangers of being beyond the reins of civilized life. In doing so, it is fully a part of the moral and political discourse of Blackwood's, whose basic rule is that good imperialists are British and bad imperialists are not" (390).

The image here shows the cover of the February 1899 edition of Blackwood's Magazine in which the first installment of Heart of Darkness appeared. The document serves as a powerful reminder that we approach a very different text from the one that Conrad wrote over a century ago.

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white man’s system and the black man’s comprehension of its results, is conveyed in a rapidly rushing narrative which calls for close attention on the reader’s part. But the attention once surrendered, the pages of the narrative are as enthralling as the pages of Dostoevsky’s Crime and Punishment. The stillness of the somber African forests, the glare of sunshine, the feeling of dawn, of noon, of night on the tropical rivers, the isolation of the unnerved, degenerating whites staring all day and every day at the Heart of Darkness which is alike meaningless and threatening to their own creed and conceptions of life, the helpless bewilderment of the unhappy savages in the grasp of their flabby and rapacious conquerors—all this is a page torn from the life of the Dark Continent—a page which has been hitherto carefully blurred and kept away from European eyes. There is no “intention” in the story, no parti pris, no prejudice one way or the other; it is simply a piece of art, fascinating and remorseless, and the artist is but intent on presenting his sensations in that sequence and arrangement whereby the meaning or the meaninglessness of the white man in uncivilized Africa can be felt in its really significant aspects.

**ANONYMOUS**

“Mr. Conrad’s Philosophy,” Unsigned Review in the Glasgow Evening News (April 30, 1903)

An anonymous review entitled “Mr. Conrad’s Philosophy,” published in the Glasgow Evening News on April 30, 1903, attempts to address criticisms leveled at Conrad by disappointed readers who bemoan the lack of romance in his writings. Perhaps “seduced by hearsay praise into taking up one of Mr. Conrad’s books,” the reviewer tells us, readers “have laid it down with the disappointed remark that there is no love in it.” The writer acknowledges that, throughout Conrad’s oeuvre, he “has either ignored women, or at best made use of them as figures to fill a space in the background of his painting.” However, the author argues that Conrad deals profoundly with “the relations of the sexes” precisely through this avoidance of the conventional love story. By rejecting the use of romantic tropes, Conrad comments profoundly on fundamental issues pertaining to both sexes by exploring the human condition more generally. In the excerpt that follows, the author maintains that Heart of Darkness reflects Conrad’s
personal philosophy about human individualism and “the essential loneliness of the human soul” that men and women alike confront when they come “face to face with the universe,” a universe that ultimately eludes meaningful comprehension.

Feminist critics often analyse the places in Heart of Darkness where Conrad occludes the feminine presence. This view anticipates the kinds of feminist readings that critics like Bette Lenton, Jolanta Smith, and Gabrielle McIntire will make many decades later. Like this early critic, they suggest ways in which these omissions shadow the text and further its artistic or political aims.

A writer of art so masterly, of understanding so sympathetically profound, is not to be held as limited in his outlook on life to a few odd bits of abnormal experience gathered in out-of-the-way corners. And it seems, to the present writer at least, that one must look for the explanation to something deeper in Mr. Conrad’s philosophy of life. That something which seems to lie at the bottom of all his writing is his intensely individualistic regard. He has felt — possibly felt more than perceived — the essential loneliness of the human soul, face to face with the universe.

In all his writing one feels that his problem has been the revelation of the soul wrestling with or sinking beneath its own weakness, the elemental forces of Nature, or the mysterious force of circumstances — struggling, yielding, suffering, but always solitary, isolated. It is not, indeed, that he bungles the relationship of his figures to each other — he is too sure in his grip of character for that. It is that character is for him an essentially individual creation, separate from, comparatively untouched by ordinary human relationship.

For this reason it is, surely, that he avoids so constantly alike the sexual factor and that social aspect of man which has so deeply modified the thought of the past century. While Zola, for example, always tended to make his characters mere social types, representative of great streams of tendency, Mr. Conrad, following rather the old mystics, pushes towards the other extreme of regarding his types as self-pivoted units, though, it is true, always with an aim less directly ethical and more artistic than that of Zola.

It is here, one conjectures, that one is able to detect the underlying tendency which directs his choice of subject to those simple sailor-folk, those crude and primitive souls who are by circumstance and nature cut off from all the complex interaction of organised society, and therefore nearer the purely individual problems of existence. Unhampered by the superficial intricacy of social life, or the disturbing and fluctuating influences of sexual relations, he plunges into the inmost hearts of these beings, whose springs of action are so few and simple.

**Apocalypse Now (1979)**

Since the advent of television and film decades after its publication, Heart of Darkness has permeated small and big screens alike. From off-hand allusions to Kurtz’s final words in the HBO hit series of the 1990s Sex and the City to the full-scale adaptation by Nicholas Roeg broadcast by Turner Network Television in 1994 starring John Malkovich as Kurtz, Heart of Darkness provides filmmakers with an irresistible wealth of inspiration, as well as material for artistic expression of any number of contemporary concerns. Francis Ford Coppola’s 1979 film Apocalypse Now is perhaps the most famous representation. Set in the context of the Vietnam War, it features a “Colonel Kurtz” (Marlon Brando) whom “Captain Willard” (Martin Sheen as a Marlow figure) must assassinate. The film pairs arresting visual imagery and a haunting soundtrack with music by the Doors and the Rolling Stones in an intertextual montage that captures the Zeitgeist of the 1970s.

Such on-screen adaptations provide critics with fresh insights into the content and technique of Conrad’s writings. In “The Hollow Heart of Hollywood: Apocalypse Now and the New Sound Space,” Thomas Elsaesser and Michael Welle draw comparisons between the narrative “space” of the novella and the “sound space” and “figurative space” at work in Apocalypse Now. For instance, they compare Conrad’s narrative frame — a first-person testimonial told to a captive audience within the text — with the “complex audiovisual texture of the opening of Apocalypse Now [that] serves as an apt prelude to the highly subjective mode of narration that will lead both Willard and the immediately disoriented viewer on a journey through psychological torment and violent horror” (162). Elsaesser and Welle’s work, which appears in Conrad on Film (1997) alongside a collection of essays analysing Conrad’s cinematic presence, testifies to the ongoing critical interest elicited by Conrad’s currency in popular culture. The aesthetically arresting Apocalypse Now, in particular, demonstrates the applicability of Conrad’s deeper themes to twentieth-century preoccupations and conflicts and suggests their relevance to present-day issues.

In the movie poster, the disembodied face of a white man looms above the outlines of a Vietnamese landscape. The face is superimposed on a blackened sky, crowned with a setting sun that creates a kind of crooked halo. Helicopters fly across the sun away from the face, as if they are emerging from the man’s forehead. Isolated in the upper-right-hand corner, the partially obscured face of a Vietnamese-looking Martin Sheen emerges from the shadows. The resulting palimpsest seems to evoke the same questions as the novella that inspired it: whose story is being told, and by whom? Does humankind dominate nature, or does nature eventually force humanity to succumb to its darkness? When two civilizations collide, can any human being transcend, much less control, the chaos that ensues?

Caryl Phillips

“Was Joseph Conrad Really a Racist?” (2007):
An Interview with Chinua Achebe

After the publication of his 1958 novel Things Fall Apart, African poet and scholar Chinua Achebe rose to international fame. Since that time, Achebe’s first (and most critically acclaimed) novel has been translated into more than fifty languages and is widely taught in schools and universities around the world. Born in Nigeria, Achebe was educated in English-speaking schools. He wrote Things Fall Apart out of a growing sense of frustration with the depiction of the nations and people of Africa by European writers, among them Joseph Conrad. Between 1971 and 1976, Achebe lectured at several universities in the United States. On February 18, 1975, he delivered a Chancellor’s Lecture at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, entitled “An Image of Africa” that attacked Joseph Conrad as a “bloody racist” and argued that Heart of Darkness is a deeply racist text.

Achebe began this landmark critique by recounting his experience as a young visiting professor at a North American university. When he mentioned the topic of his class—African literature—to a student, the student remarked how “funny” it is that he had never heard of Africa as having that kind of stuff, you know. Struck by the casual racism that surfaced in this chance conversation, Achebe began to ruminate on the invisible structures of oppression that continue to taint “Africa” in the

minds of even the most liberal Westerners, particularly those in the acad-
emy. Achebe argued that truly great artists must rise above contemporary
prejudices of their day in order to merit the label of genius so often ascribed
to Conrad. He challenged his audience to expose Heart of Darkness as
racist propaganda and to cast it out of the literary canon forever. In
subsequent published versions of his speech, Achebe made minor revisions.
Most notably, in his 1987 revision, he amended his description of Conrad
as a “bloody racist” to read “thoroughgoing racist” instead. Yet his message
remained consistent: no good can come from elevating Heart of Darkness
to a place of honor in the academy.

In 2007, Yale University English professor Caryl Phillips sat down with Achebe to discuss his views. Phillips, an author and playwright born in
St. Kitts and raised in England, does not initially consider Heart of
Darkness to be a racist text. In the excerpt below, he gives Achebe a chance
to change his mind. The interview and article, which originally appeared
in Philosophia Africana in 2007, make reference to the revised 1987 ver-

tion of “An Image of Africa.”

Chinua Achebe leans forward to make his point. He raises a gentle
finger in the manner of a benevolent schoolmaster. “But you have to
understand. Art is more than just good sentences; this is what makes
this situation tragic. The man is a capable artist and as such I expect
better from him. I mean, what is his point in that book? Art is not
intended to put people down. If so, then art would ultimately discredit
itself.”

“The man would appear to be obsessed with ‘that’ word.”
“Nigger.”
Achebe nods.
Achebe has taught term-long university courses dedicated to this
one slim volume first published in 1902.

As long ago as February 1975, while a visiting professor at the Uni-
versity of Massachusetts in Amherst, Achebe delivered a public lecture
entitled “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness.”
The lecture has since come to be recognized as one of the most im-
portant and influential treatises in post-colonial literary discourse. How-
ever, the problem is, I disagree with Achebe’s response to the novel, and have never viewed Conrad — as Achebe states in his lecture — as simply “a thoroughgoing racist.” Yet at the same time, I hold Achebe in the highest possible esteem.

Those critics who have defended *Heart of Darkness* against charges of racism have often pointed to both the methodology of narration and Conrad’s anti-colonial purpose. The narrator of the novel is Marlow, who is simply retelling a story that was told to him by a shadowy second figure. However, in his lecture Achebe makes it clear he 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.

Achebe has no problem with a novel that seeks to question both European ambivalence toward the colonizing mission and her own “system” of civilization. What he has a huge problem with is a novelist — in fact, an artist — who attempts to resolve these important questions by denying Africa and Africans their full and complex humanity.

I thought again of my own response to the novel. There are three remarkable journeys in *Heart of Darkness*. First, Marlow’s actual journey up-river to Kurtz’s inner station. Second, the larger journey that Marlow takes us on from civilized Europe, back to the beginning of creation when nature reigned, and then back to civilized Europe. And finally, the journey that Kurtz undergoes as he sinks down through the many levels of the self to a place where he discovers unlawful and repressed ambiguities of civilization.

In all three journeys, Conrad’s restless narrative circles back on itself as though trapped in the complexity of the situation. The 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”? In such circumstances will there always be an individual who, removed from the shackles of “civilized” behavior, feels compelled to push at the margins of conventional “morality”? What happens to this one individual who imagines himself to be released from the moral order of society and therefore free to behave as “savage” or as “decently” as he deems fit? How does this man respond to chaos?

Conrad uses colonization, and the trading intercourse that flourished in its wake, to explore these universal questions about man’s capacity for evil. The end of European colonization has not rendered *Heart of Darkness* any less relevant, for Conrad was interested in the making of a modern world in which colonization was simply one facet.
not to be debated, nor is it to be used simply to illustrate European problems."

The realization hits me with force. I am not an African. Were I an African, I suspect I would feel the same way as my host. But I was raised in Europe, and although I have learned to reject the stereotypically reductive images of Africa and Africans, I am undeniably interested in the break-up of a European mind and the health of European civilization. I feel momentarily ashamed that I might have become caught up with this theme and subsequently overlooked how offensive this novel might be to a man such as Chinua Achebe and to millions of other Africans. Achebe is right; to the African reader, the price of Conrad's eloquent denunciation of colonization is the recycling of racist notions of the "dark" continent and her people. Those of us who are not from Africa may be prepared to pay this price, but this price is far too high for Achebe. However lofty Conrad's mission, he has, in keeping with times past and present, compromised African humanity in order to examine the European psyche.

PART THREE

Heart of Darkness:
A Case Study in
Contemporary Criticism
2. Self-Portrait on the Borderline between Mexico and the United States: Kahlo creates a painting on tin, a traditional Mexican art process that produced works called retablos—devotional paintings that commemorate thank saints and deities. Kahlo uses the form, but her thematic purpose is different. Study the iconography (the objects in the painting) to determine if her purpose is still devotional. If not, what is the purpose of the various images in the painting? What is the effect of the juxtaposition of the traditional form and the images of modern life? What might it mean that Kahlo has substituted a self-portrait for the image of the saint or deity that would be in the center of a traditional retablo?

3. What story does Self-Portrait on the Borderline between Mexico and the United States tell? Consider Kahlo's placement of herself, as well as the painting's symmetry. Look carefully at the shapes she uses to represent Mexico and the United States. How does this use of space beckon or repel the viewer? What does Kahlo say about herself and the borderline between Mexico and the United States?

4. The paper Kahlo is holding in Self-Portrait Dedicated to Leon Trotsky says, "To Leon Trotsky with all my love, I dedicate this painting on 7th November, 1937. Frida Kahlo in Saint Angel, Mexico." In what other ways is this painting a dedication of love?

5. What is the purpose Kahlo creates for herself in Self-Portrait Dedicated to Leon Trotsky? How is it different from and similar to the character she creates in Self-Portrait on the Borderline between Mexico and the United States?

6. The surrealist painter André Breton called Kahlo that she was a surrealist and championed her work for a time, once describing it as "a ribbon around a bomb." Study the two paintings to see the effects of the female adornment. Do you consider Breton's comment sexist and condescending, or was he responding to what art critic Peter Schjeldahl called the "rhetorically explosive" quality of feminine adornment in Kahlo's work?

The Legacy of Colonialism

In the early 1800s, European countries controlled 35 percent of the world, but by 1914, that number had risen to nearly 85 percent and included parts of Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Not surprisingly, the legacy of colonialism has extended beyond the political independence that many countries gained in the 1960s and 1970s. The following texts comment in various ways on the assumptions and motivations of European colonial powers in Africa and the short- and longer-term consequences for both the colonized and the colonizer.

Texts
- The Colonization of Africa (map)
- Rudyard Kipling, "The White Man's Burden" (poetry)
- H. T. Johnson, "The Black Man's Burden" (poetry)
- Doris Lessing, "The Old Chief Mshlanga" (fiction)
- Felix Mathali, "The Stranglehold of English Lit" (poetry)
- Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa" (nonfiction)
- Binyavanga Wainaina, "How to Write about Africa" (nonfiction)

The Colonization of Africa

The map on the following page depicts the colonization of Africa, indicating the colonizing country and the date of independence.

Questions
1. Which two European countries controlled most of the continent?
2. Which African countries were independent before World War II?
Kipling was born in Bombay, was educated in England, and lived for many years in India as a reporter for Anglo-Indian newspapers. Although Kipling demonstrates both understanding and appreciation of Indian culture in many of his works, "The White Man's Burden" famously summarizes the Eurocentric expansionist ideology of the time. Kipling originally wrote the poem for Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897, ultimately publishing it two years later in the popular magazine McClure's.

Take up the White Man's burden—
Send forth the best ye breed—
Go, bind your sons to exile,
To serve your captives' need;
To wait, in heavy harness,
On fluttered folk and wild—
Your new-caught sullen peoples,
Half devil and half child.

Take up the White Man's burden—
In patience to abide,
To veil the threat of terror
And check the show of pride;
By open speech and simple,
An hundred times made plain,
To seek another's profit
And work another's gain.

Take up the White Man's burden—
The savage wars of peace—
Fill full the mouth of Famine,
And bid the sickness cease;
And when your goal is nearest
(The end for others sought)
Watch sloth and heathen folly
Bring all your hope to nought.

Take up the White Man's burden—
No iron rule of kings,
But toil of serf and swearer—
The tale of common things.
The ports ye shall not enter,
The roads ye shall not tread,
Go, make them with your living
And mark them with your dead.

Take up the White Man's burden,
And reap his old reward—
The blame of those ye better
The hate of those ye guard—
The cry of hosts ye humour
(Ah, slowly?) toward the light—
"Why brought ye us from bondage,
Our loved Egyptian night?"

Take up the White Man's burden—
Ye dare not stoop to less—
Nor call too loud on Freedom
To cloak your weariness.
By all ye will or whisper,
By all ye leave or do,
The silent sullen peoples
Shall weigh your God and you.

Take up the White Man's burden!
Have done with childish days—
The lightly-proffered laurel,
The easy ungrudged praise:
Comes now, to search your manhood
Through all the thankless years,
Cold, edged with dear-bought wisdom,
The judgment of your peers.

[1899]

Questions
1. The poem is written as a series of imperatives addressed to "you"; to whom is the speaker addressing his exhortations?
2. How are "others"—that is, nonwhites—depicted in this poem? Cite specific descriptions and images.
3. What exactly is the "burden" alluded to in the title?

The Black Man's Burden
H. T. Johnson

Among the many replies to Kipling's poem was "The Black Man's Burden," a poem written by African American clergyman and editor H. T. Johnson. The poem was published in the Christian Recorder in 1899.

Pile on the Black Man's burden,
'Tis nearest at your door;
Why heed long-bleeding Cuba,
Or dark Hawaii's shore?
Halt ye your fearless armies
Which menace feeble folks,
Who fight with clubs and arrows
And brook your rifle's smokes.

Pile on the Black Man's burden,
His soul is vexed with heavy snows;
You've sealed the Red Man's problem
And now take up the Brown.
In vain ye seek to end it
With bullets, blood or death—
Better by far defend it
With honor's holy breath.

Pile on the Black Man's burden,
His back is broad though sore;
What though the weight oppress him,
He's borne the like before.
Your Jim-Crow laws and customs,
And fiendish midnight deed,
Though winked at by the nation,
Will some day trouble breed.

Pile on the Black Man's burden,
At length 'will Heaven pierce;
Then on you or your children
Will reign God's judgments fierce.
Your battleships and armies
May weaker ones appall,
But God Almighty's justice
They'll not disturb at all.

[1899]

Questions
1. What direct links, apart from the titles, with Kipling's poem do you see? Some have read Johnson's poem as a parody of Kipling's. Explain why you would agree or disagree with this assessment.
2. Both poems use second person ("you" and "your"), but who is the "you" in Kipling's poem and who is the "you" in Johnson's?
3. What is the "it" referred to in lines 13 and 15 of this poem? Why does Johnson call for "defend[ing] it / With honor's holy breath" (ll. 15–16)?

The Old Chief Mshlanga

Doris Lessing

Winner of the 2007 Nobel Prize in Literature, Doris Lessing was born in 1919 in Persia (now Iran) to British parents. In 1925, the family moved to Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), from which many of the stories in her prolific career emerge. Lessing moved to London in 1949 and began publishing her work, including The Grass Is Singing (1949) and her breakout work A Golden Notebook (1962), which became a feminist manifesto. Lessing continues to write fiction, autobiography, drama (including on opera), and graphic novels; her latest work is the novel Alfred and Emily, published in 2008. "The Old Chief Mshlanga" was originally published in 1951 in Lessing's second book, This Was the Old Chief's Country, a collection of short stories set in Zimbabwe.

They were good, the years of ranging the bush over her father's farm which, like every white farm, was largely unused, broken only occasionally by small patches of cultivation. In between, nothing but trees, the long sparse grass, thorn and cactus and gully, grass and outcrop and thorn. And a jutting piece of rock which had been thrust up from the warm soil of Africa unimaginable eras of time ago, washed into hollows and wolds by sun and wind that had traveled so many thousands of miles of space and bush, would hold the weight of a small girl whose eyes were sightless for anything but a pale willow tree, a pale gleaming castle—a small girl singing: "Out flew the web and floated wide, the mirror cracked from side to side . . ."

Pulling her way through the green aisles of the melia stalks, the leaves arching like cathedrals veined with sunlight far overhead, with the packed red earth underfoot, a face of red starred witchweed would summon up a black bent figure crowing premonitions: the Northern witch, bred of cold Northern forests, would stand before her among the melia fields, and it was the melia fields that faded and fled, leaving her among the gnarled roots of an oak, snow falling thick and soft and white, the woodcutter's fire glowing red welcome through crowing tree trunks.

A white child, opening its eyes curiously on a sun-suffused landscape, a gant and violent landscape, might be supposed to accept it as its own, to take the melia trees and the thorn trees as familiars, to feel her blood running free and responsive to the swing of the seasons.

This child could not see a melia tree, or the thorn, for what they were. Her books held tales of alien fairies, her rivers ran slow and peaceful, and she knew the shape of the leaves of an ash or an oak, the names of the little creatures that lived in English streams, when the words "the veld" meant strangeness, though she could remember nothing else.

Because of this, for many years, it was the veld that seemed unreal; the sun was a foreign sun, and the wind spoke a strange language.

The black people on the farm were as remote as the trees and the rocks. They were an amorphous black mass, mingling and thinning and massing like tadpoles, faceless, who existed merely to serve, to say "Yes, Baas," take their money, and go. They changed season by season, moving from one farm to the next, according to their outlandish needs, which one did not have to understand, coming from perhaps hundreds of miles north or east, passing on after a few months—where? Perhaps even as far away as the fabled gold mines of Johannesburg, where the pay was so much better than the few shillings a month and the double handful of mealie meal twice a day which they earned in that part of Africa.

The child was taught to take them for granted: the servants in the house would come running a hundred yards to pick up a book if she dropped it. She was called "Nkosikazi"—Chiefness, even by the black children her own age.

Later, when the farm grew too small to hold her curiosity, she carried a gun in the crook of her arm and wandered miles a day, from vlei to vlei, from kopje to kopje, accompanied by two dogs: the dogs and the gun were an armor against fear. Because of them she never felt fear.

If a native came into sight along the kaffir paths half a mile away, the dogs would flush him up a tree as if he were a bird. If he expropriated (in his uncouth language which was by itself ridiculous) that was cheek. If one was in a good mood, it could be a matter for laughter. Otherwise one passed on, hardly glancing at the angry man in the tree.

On the rare occasions when white children met together they could amuse themselves by hailing a passing native in order to make a buffoon of him; they could set the dogs on him and watch him run; they could tease a small black child as if he were a puppy—save that they would not throw stones and sticks at a dog without a sense of guilt.

Later still, certain questions presented themselves in the child's mind; and because the answers were not easy to accept, they were silenced by an even greater arrogance of manner.

It was even impossible to think of the black people who worked about the house as friends, for if she talked to one of them, her mother would come running anxiously: "Come away; you mustn't talk to natives."

It was this instilled consciousness of danger, of something unpleasant, that made it easy to laugh out loud, crudely, if a servant made a mistake in his English or if he failed to understand an order—there is a certain kind of laughter that is fear, afraid of itself.

One evening, when I was about fourteen, I was walking down the side of a melia field that had been newly plowed, so that the great red clods showed fresh and tumbling to the vlei beyond, like a choppy red sea; it was that hushed and listening

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1 Corn.—Eos.
2 Rocky mounds exposed by erosion.—Eos.
3 Former generic term for South African blacks, now derogatory.—Eos.
of the river; and it was our desire to ask his permission to prospect for gold in his territory.

The phrase "ask his permission" was so extraordinary to a white child, brought up to consider all natives as things to use, that it revived those questions, which could not be suppressed: they fermented slowly in my mind.

On another occasion one of those old prospectors who still move over Africa looking for neglected reefs, with their hammer and tents, and pans for sifting gold from crushed rock, came to the farm and, in talking of the old days, used that phrase again: "This was the Old Chief's country," he said. "It stretched from those mountains over there way back to the river, hundreds of miles of country." That was his name for our district: "The Old Chief's Country"; he did not use our name for it—a new phrase which held no implication of usurped ownership.

As I read more books about the time when this part of Africa was opened up, not much more than fifty years before, I found Old Chief Mshlanga had been a famous man, known to all the explorers and prospectors. But then he had been young, or maybe it was his father or uncle they spoke of—I never found out.

During that year I met him several times in the part of the farm that was traversed by natives moving over the country. I learned that the path up the side of the big red field where the birds sang was the recognized highway for migrants. Perhaps I even haunted it in the hope of meeting him: being greeted by him, the exchange of courtesies, seemed to answer the questions that troubled me.

Soon I carried a gun in a different spirit; I used it for shooting food and not to give me confidence. And now the dogs learned better manners. When I saw a native approaching, we offered and took greetings; and slowly that other landscape in my mind faded, and my feet struck directly on the African soil, and I saw the shapes of tree and hill clearly, and the black people moved back, as it were, out of my life; it was as if I stood aside to watch a slow intimate dance of landscape and men, a very old dance, whose steps I could not learn.

But I thought: this is my heritage, too; I was bred here; it is my country as well as the black man's country; and there is plenty of room for all of us, without elbowing each other off the pavements and roads.

It seemed it was only necessary to let free that respect I felt when I was talking with Old Chief Mshlanga, to let both black and white people meet gently, with tolerance for each other's differences: it seemed quite easy.

Then, one day, something new happened. Working in our house as servants were always three natives: cook, houseboy, garden boy. They used to change as the farm natives changed: staying for a few months, then moving on to a new job, or back home to their kraals. They were thought of as "good" or "bad" natives which meant: how did they behave as servants? Were they lazy, efficient, obedient, or disrespectful? If the family felt good-humored, the phrase was: "What can you expect from raw black savages?" If we were angry, we said: "These damned niggers, we would be much better off without them."

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Corral.—Ena.
One day, a white policeman was on his rounds of the district, and he said laughingly: "Did you know you have an important man in your kitchen?"

"What!" exclaimed my mother sharply. "What do you mean?"

"A Chief's son." The policeman seemed amused. "He'll boss the tribe when the old man dies."

"He'd better not put on a Chief's son act with me," said my mother.

When the policeman left, we looked with different eyes at our cook: he was a good worker, but he drank too much at weekends—that was how we knew him.

He was a tall youth, with very black skin, like black polished metal, his tightly growing black hair parted white man's fashion at one side, with a metal comb from the store stuck into it; very polite, very distant, very quick to obey an order. Now that it had been pointed out, we said: "Of course, you can see. Blood always tells."

My mother became strict with him now she knew about his birth and prospects. Sometimes, when she lost her temper, she would say: "You aren't the Chief yet, you know." And he would answer her very quietly, his eyes on the ground: "Yes, Nkosikaas."

One afternoon, he asked for a whole day off, instead of the customary half-day, to go home next Sunday.

"How can you go home in one day?"

"It will take me half an hour on my bicycle," he explained.

I watched the direction he took; and the next day I went off to look for this kraal; I understood he must be Chief Mhlanga's successor: there was no other kraal near enough our farm.

Beyond our boundaries on that side the country was new to me. I followed unfamiliar paths past kopjes that till now had been part of the jagged horizon, hazed with distance. This was Government land, which had never been cultivated by white men; at first I could not understand why it was that it appeared, in merely crossing the boundary, I had entered a completely fresh type of landscape. It was a wide green valley, where a small river sparkled, and vivid water-birds darted over the rushes. The grass was thick and soft to my calves, the trees stood tall and shapely.

I was used to our farm, whose hundred of acres of harsh eroded soil bore trees that had been cut for the mine furnaces and had grown thin and twisted, where the cattle had dragged the grass flat, leaving innumerable crisscrossing trails that deepened each season into gullies, under the force of the rains.

This country had been left untouched, save for prospectors whose picks had struck a few sparks from the surface of the rocks as they wandered by; and for migrant natives whose passing had left, perhaps, a charred patch on the trunk of a tree where their evening fire had nestled.

It was very silent: a hot morning with pigeons cooing throatily, the midday shadows lying dense and thick with clear yellow spaces of sunlight between and in all that wide green parklike valley, not a human soul but myself.

I was listening to the quick regular tapping of a woodpecker when slowly a chill feeling seemed to grow up from the small of my back to my shoulders, in a constricting spasm like a shudder, and at the roots of my hair a tingling sensation began and ran down over the surface of my flesh, leaving me gooselike and cold, though I was damp with sweat. Fever! I thought; then uneasily, turned to look over my shoulder; and realized suddenly that this was fear. It was extraordinary, even humiliating. It was a new fear. For all the years I had walked by myself over this country I had never known a moment's uneasiness; in the beginning because I had been supported by a gun and the dogs, then because I had learned an easy friendliness for the Africans I might encounter.

I had read of this feeling, how the bigness and silence of Africa, under the ancient sun, grows dense and takes shape in the mind, till even the birds seem to call menacingly, and a deadly spirit comes out of the trees and the rocks. You move warily, as if your very passing disturbs something old and evil, something dark and big and angry that might suddenly rear and strike from behind. You look at groves of entwined trees; and picture the animals that might be lurking there; you look at the river running slowly, dropping from level to level through the vlei, spreading into pools where at night the buck come to drink, and the crocodiles rise and drag them by their soft noses into underwater caves. Fear possessed me. I found I was turning round and round, because of that shapeless menace behind me that might reach out and take me; I kept glancing at the files of kopjes which, seen from a different angle, seemed to change with every step so that even known landmarks, like a big mountain that had sentinelized my world since I first became conscious of it, showed an unfamiliar sunlit valley among its foothills. I did not know where I was. I was lost. Panic seized me. I found I was spinning round and round, staring anxiously at this tree and that, peering up at the sun which appeared to have moved into an eastern slant, shedding the sad yellow light of sunset. Hours must have passed! I looked at my watch and found that this state of meaningless terror had lasted perhaps ten minutes.

The point was that it was meaningless. I was not ten miles from home: I had only to take my way back along the valley to find myself at the fences away among the foothills of the kopjes gleamed the roof of a neighbor's house, and a couple of hours' walking would reach it. This was the sort of fear that contracts the flesh of a dog at night and sets him howling at the full moon. It had nothing to do with what I thought or felt; and I was more disturbed by the fact that I could become its victim than of the physical sensation itself. I walked steadily on, quieted, in a divided mind, watching my own pricking nerves and apprehensive glances from side to side with a disgusted amusement. Deliberately I set myself to think of this village I was seeking, and what I should do when I entered it—if I could find it, which was doubtful, since I was walking aimlessly and it might be anywhere in the hundreds of thousands of acres of bush that stretched about me. With my mind on that village, I realized that a new sensation was added to the fear: loneliness. Now such a terror of isolation invaded me that I could hardly walk; and if I were not that I came over the crest of a small rise and saw a village below me, I should have turned and gone home. It was a cluster of thatched huts in a clearing among trees. There were neat patches of mealies and pumpkins and millet, and cattle grazed under some trees at a distance. Fowls scratched among the huts, dogs lay sleeping on the grass, and goats friezed a kopje that jutted up beyond a tributary of the river lying like an enclosing arm round the village.
As I came close I saw the huts were lovingly decorated with patterns of yellow and red ochre mud on the walls; and the thatch was tied in place with plaits of straw. This was not at all like our farm compound, a dirty and neglected place, a temporary home for migrants who had no roots in it.

And now I did not know what to do next. I called a small black boy, who was sitting on a log playing a stringed gourd, quite naked except for the strings of blue beads round his neck, and said: "Tell the Chief I am here." The child stuck his thumb in his mouth and stared shyly back at me.

For minutes I shifted my feet on the edge of what seemed a deserted village, till at last the child scuttled off, and then some women came. They were draped in bright cloths, with brass-glinting in their ears and on their arms. They also stared, silently; then turned to chatter among themselves.

I said again: "Can I see Chief Mshlanga?" I saw they caught the name; they did not understand what I wanted. I did not understand myself.

At last I walked through them and came past the huts and saw a clearing under a big shady tree, where a dozen old men sat cross-legged on the ground, talking. Chief Mshlanga was leaning back against the tree, holding a gourd in his hand, from which he had been drinking. When he saw me, not a muscle of his face moved, and I could see he was not pleased; perhaps he was afflicted with my own shyness, due to being unable to find the right forms of courtesy for the occasion. To meet me, on our own farm, was one thing; but I should not have come here. What had I expected? I could not join them socially; the thing was unheard of. Bad enough that I, a white girl, should be walking the veld alone as a white man might: and in this part of the bush where only Government officials had the right to move.

Again I stood, smiling foolishly, while behind me stood the groups of brightly clad, gathering women, their faces alert with curiosity and interest, and in front of me sat the old men, with old lined faces, their eyes guarded, aloof. It was a village of ancient and children and women. Even the two young men who kneaded beside the Chief were not those I had seen with him previously: the young men were all away working on the white men's farms and mines, and the Chief must depend on relatives who were temporarily on holiday for his attendants.

"The small white Nkosikaas is far from home," remarked the old man at last.

"Yes," I agreed, "it is far." I wanted to say: "I have come to pay you a friendly visit, Chief Mshlanga." I could not say it. I might now be feeling an urgent helpless desire to get to know these men and women as people, to be accepted by them as a friend, but the truth was I had set out in a spirit of curiosity: I had wanted to see the village that one day our cook, the reserved and obedient young man who got drunk on Sundays, would one day rule over.

"The child of Nkosi Jordan is welcome," said Chief Mshlanga.

"Thank you," I said, and could think of nothing more to say. There was a silence, while the flies rose and began to buzz around my head; and the wind shook a little in the thick green tree that spread its branches over the old men.

"Good morning," I said at last. "I have to return now to my home."

"Morning, little Nkosikaas," said Chief Mshlanga.
The old man sat silent, his head bent, his hands dangling helplessly over his withered knees. Then he rose, the young men helping him, and he stood facing my father. He spoke once again, very stiffly; and turned away and went home to his village.

"What did he say?" asked my father of the young man, who laughed uncomfortably and would not meet his eyes.

"What did he say?" insisted my father.

Our cook stood straight and silent, his brows knotted together. Then he spoke. "My father says: All this land, this land you call yours, is his land; and belongs to our people."

Having made this statement, he walked off into the bush after his father, and we did not see him again.

Our next cook was a migrant from Nyasaland, with no expectations of greatness.

Next time the policeman came on his rounds he was told this story. He remarked: "That kraal has no right to be there; it should have been moved long ago. I don't know why no one has done anything about it. I'll have a chat with the Native Commissioner next week. I'm going over for tennis on Sunday, anyway."

Sometime later we heard that Chief Mshilanga and his people had been moved two hundred miles east, to a proper Native Reserve; the Government land was going to be opened up for white settlement soon.

I went to see the village again, about a year afterwards. There was nothing there. Mounds of red mud, where the huts had been, had long swaths of rotting thatch over them, veined with the red galleries of the white ants. The pumpkin vines riot everywhere, over the bushes, up the lower branches of trees so that the great golden balls rolled underfoot and dangled overhead: it was a festival of pumpkins. The bushes were crowding up, the new grass sprang vivid green.

The settler lucky enough to be allotted the lush warm valley (if he chose to cultivate this particular section) would find, suddenly, in the middle of a mealie field, the plants were growing fifteen feet tall, the weight of the cobs dragging at the stalks, and wonder what unsuspected vein of richness he had struck.

[1951]

Questions

1. We see this story through the eyes of a young white girl. To what extent does she represent the whites' view of Africa?

2. Why does Lessing emphasize the role of language in this story? For instance, the ease the narrator felt in laughing out loud "if a servant made a mistake in his English" (para. 13); her father's inability to "speak dialect, but only kitchen kaffir" (para. 80); and Chief Mshilanga's angry retort to her father near the end, a retort "flashed back in [the Chief's] own language" (para. 86)?

3. What passages can you find that indicate the young narrator's recognition of the complexity of her position? Why, for example, does she describe Chief Mshilanga as "wearing dignity like an inherited garment" (para. 22)?

4. What evidence is there of the narrator's appreciation for the physical beauty of the African landscape? What does Lessing suggest when the narrator characterizes the landscape with a mixture of images of Africa and Europe, such as "the green aisles of the mealie stalks, the leaves arching like cathedrals" (para. 2)?

5. How do you respond to the narrator's thought: "this is my heritage, too; I was bred here; it is my country as well as the black man's country; and there is plenty of room for all of us" (para. 40)? Do you think Lessing agrees with her?

6. What does the ending of this story suggest about the likely future of the colonists?

The Stranglehold of English Lit

FELIX MNTHALI

A Malawian poet, novelist, and playwright, Felix Mntahli (b. 1933) was educated in Africa and Canada, and has taught at the University of Ibadan, Malawi University, and the University of Botswana. Among his best known works are When Sunset Comes to Saptiwa (1980)—a collection of poems—and the novels My Dear Anniversary (1992) and Yorainiyoto (1998). The following poem is from Echoes from Obodon (privately printed in 1961).

(For Molara Ogundipe-Leslie)

Those questions, sister, those questions
stand stab jab and gore
too close to the centre!

For if we had asked why Jane Austen's people carouse all day and do no work would Europe in Africa have stood the test of time? and would she still maul the flower of our youth in the south? Would she?
Your elegance of deceit,
Jane Austen,
 lulled the sons and daughters
of the dispossessed
into a calf-love
with irony and satire
around imaginary people.

While history went on mocking
the victims of branding irons
and sugar plantations
that made Jane Austen’s people
wealthy beyond compare!

Eng. Lit., my sister,
was more than a cruel joke—
it was the heart
of alien conquest.

How could questions be asked
at Makerere and Ibadan,
Dakar and Ford Hare—
with Jane Austen
at the centre?
How could they be answered?  

[1961]  

Questions:
1. Why do you think Mnthali chose Jane Austen as the author cited in this poem?
2. Who is the “sister” (l. 1) the speaker addresses?
3. Why does the speaker assert that “Eng. Lit. . . . was the heart of alien conquest” (l. 31–34)?
4. What is the nature of the power that Mnthali believes literature holds?

An Image of Africa

CHINUA ACHEBE

Chinua Achebe (b. 1930) is the most widely read African writer of his generation, primarily for his debut novel, Things Fall Apart (1958). His novels, poetry, and criticism examine the clash of culture during the colonial era, especially the conflict between traditional tribal values and Christianity. He also addresses the politics and alienation of the postcolonial period in Nigeria in his later works, such as No Longer at Ease (1960) and A Man of the People (1966). Achebe is currently the Charles P. Stevenson Professor of Languages and Literature at Bard College in New York. In “An Image of Africa,” originally delivered as a lecture at the University of Massachusetts in 1975, Achebe criticized Joseph Conrad for being “a bloody racist” in his portrayal of Africa and Africans in Heart of Darkness.

It was a fine autumn morning at the beginning of this academic year such as encouraged friendliness to passing strangers. Brisk youngsters were hurrying in all directions, many of them obviously freshmen in their first flush of enthusiasm. An older man, going the same way as I, turned and remarked to me how very young they came these days. I agreed. 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 never had thought of Africa as having that kind of stuff, you know. By this time I was walking much faster. “Oh well,” I heard him say finally, behind me, “I guess I have to take your course to find out.”

A few weeks later I received two very touching letters from high school children in Yonkers, New York, who—bless their teacher—had just read Things Fall Apart. One of them was particularly happy to learn about the customs and superstitions of an African tribe.

I propose to draw from these rather trivial encounters rather heavy conclusions which at first sight might seem somewhat out of proportion to them: But only at first sight.

The young fellow from Yonkers, perhaps partly on account of his age but I believe also for much deeper and more serious reasons, is obviously unaware that the life of his own tribesmen in Yonkers, New York, is full of odd customs and superstitions and, like everybody else in his culture, imagines that he needs a trip to Africa to encounter those things.

The other person beingfully my own age could not be excused on the grounds of his years. Ignorance might be a more likely reason; but here again I believe that something more willful than a mere lack of information was at work. For did not that erudite British historian and Regius Professor at Oxford, Hugh Trevor-Roper, pronounce a few years ago that African history did not exist?

If there is something in these utterances more than youthful experience, more than a lack of factual knowledge, what is it? Quite simply it is the desire—one might indeed say the need—in Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil in Europe, a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar in comparison with which Europe’s own state of spiritual grace will be manifest.

This need is not new: which should relieve us of considerable responsibility and perhaps make us even willing to look at this phenomenon dispassionately. I have neither the desire nor, indeed, the competence to do so with the tools of the social and biological sciences. But, I can respond, as a novelist, to one famous book of European fiction, Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, which better than any other work I know
not to put him in conflict with the psychological predisposition of his readers or raise the need for him to contend with their resistance. He chose the role of purveyor of comforting myths.

The most interesting and revealing passages in *Heart of Darkness* are, however, about people. I must quote a long passage from the middle of the story in which representatives of Europe in a steamer going down the Congo encounter the denizens of Africa:

- We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet. We could have fancied ourselves the first of men taking possession of an accursed inheritance, to be subdued at the cost of profound anguish and of excessive toil. But suddenly, as we struggled round a bend, there would be a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass-roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage. The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy. The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us—who could tell? We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings; we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse. We could not understand because we were too far and could not remember because we were travelling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign—and no memories.

The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there—there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly, and the men were—No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. 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.

Herein lies the meaning of *Heart of Darkness* and the fascination it holds over the Western mind: "What thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours... Ugly."

Having shown us Africa in the mass, Conrad then zeroes in on a specific example, giving us one of his rare descriptions of an African who is not just limbs or rolling eyes:

- And between whiles I had to look after the savage who was fireman. He was an improved specimen; he could fired 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 brevities and a feather hat, walking on his hind-legs. A few months of training had done for that really fine chap. He squinted at the steam-gauge and at the water-gauge with an evident effort of astigmatism—and he had filed his teeth, too, the poor devil, and the wool of his pate shaved into
queer patterns, and three ornamental scars on each of his cheeks. He ought to have been clapping his hands and stamping his feet on the bank, instead of which he was hard at work, a thrill to strange witchcraft, full of improving knowledge.

As everybody knows, Conrad is a romantic on the side. He might not exactly admire savages clapping their hands and stamping their feet but they have at least the merit of being in their place, unlike this dog in a parody of breeches. For Conrad, things (and persons) being in their place is of the utmost importance.

Towards the end of the story, Conrad lavishes great attention quite unexpectedly on an African woman who has obviously been some kind of mistress to Mr. Kurtz and now presides (if I may be permitted a little imitation of Conrad) like a formidable mystery over the inexorable imminence of his departure:

She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent... She stood looking at us without a stir, and like the wilderness itself, with an air of brooding over an incalculable purpose.

This Amazon is drawn in considerable detail, albeit of a predictable nature, for two reasons. First, she is in her place and so can win Conrad’s special brand of approval; and second, she fulfills a structural requirement of the story; she is a savage counterpart to the refined, European woman with whom the story will end:

She came forward, all in black, with a pale head, floating towards me in the dusk. She was in mourning... She took both my hands in hers and murmured, “I had heard you were coming.”... She had a mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering.

The difference in the attitude of the novelist to these two women is conveyed in too many direct and subtle ways to need elaboration. But perhaps the most significant difference is the one implied in the author’s bestowal of human expression to the one and the withholding of it from the other. It is clearly not part of Conrad’s purpose to confer language on the “rudimentary souls” of Africa. They only “exchanged short grunting phrases” even among themselves but mostly they were too busy with their frenzy. There are two occasions in the book, however, when Conrad departs somewhat from his practice and confers speech, even English speech, on the savages. The first occurs when cannibalism gets the better of them:

“Catch ‘im,” he snapped, with a bloodshot widening of his eyes and a flash of sharp teeth—“catch ‘im. Give ‘im to us!” “To you, eh?” I asked; “what would you do with them?”

“Eat ‘im” he said, curtly. . .

The other occasion is the famous announcement:

“Mistah Kurtz—he dead.”

At first sight, these instances might be mistaken for unexpected acts of generosity from Conrad. In reality, they constitute some of his best assaults. In the case of the cannibals, the incomprehensible grants that had thus far served them for speech suddenly proved inadequate for Conrad’s purpose of letting the European glimpse the unspeakable craving in their hearts. Weighing the necessity for consistency in the portrayal of the dumb brutes against the sensational advantages of securing their conviction by clear, unambiguous evidence issuing out of their own mouth, Conrad chose the latter. As for the announcement of Mr. Kurtz’s death by the “insolent black head in the doorway,” what better or more appropriate finish could be written to the horror story of that wayward child of civilization who willfully had given his soul to the powers of darkness and “taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land” than the proclamation of his physical death by the forces he had joined?

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 story. He has, for example, a narrator behind a narrator. The primary narrator is Marlow but his account is given to us through the filter of a second, shadowy person. 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. It would not have been beyond Conrad’s power to make that provision if he had thought it necessary. Marlow seems to me to enjoy Conrad’s complete confidence—a feeling reinforced by the close similarities between their careers.

Marlow comes through to us not only as a witness of truth, but one holding those advanced and humane views appropriate to the English liberal tradition which required all Englishmen of decency to be deeply shocked by atrocities in Bulgaria or the Congo of King Leopold of the Belgians or wherever. Thus Marlow is able to toss out such bleeding-heart sentiments as these:

They were dying slowly—it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now,—nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. Brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, but in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest.

The kind of liberalism espoused here by Marlow/Conrad touched all the best minds of the age in England, Europe, and America. It took different forms in the minds of different people but almost always managed to sidestep the ultimate question of equality between white people and black people. That extraordinary missionary, Albert Schweitzer, who sacrificed brilliant careers in music and theology in Europe for a life of service to Africans in much the same area as Conrad writes about, epitomizes the ambivalence. In a comment which I have often quoted but must quote one last time, Schweitzer says: “The African is indeed my brother but my junior brother.” And so he proceeded to build a hospital appropriate to the needs of junior brothers with standards of hygiene reminiscent of medical practice in the days before the germ theory.

1Quarantine line.—End.
of disease came into being. Naturally, he became a sensation in Europe and America. Pilgrims flocked, and I believe still flock even after he has passed on, to witness the prodigious miracle in Lamberene, on the edge of the primeval forest.

Conrad’s liberalism would not take him quite as far as Schweitzer’s, though. He would not use the word “brother” however qualified; the farthest he would go was “kinship.” When Marlow’s African helmsman falls down with a spear in his heart he gives his white master one final disquieting look.

And the intimate profundity of that look he gave me when he received his hurt remains to this day in my memory—like a claim of distant kinship affirmed in a supreme moment.

It is important to note that Conrad, careful as ever with his words, is not talking so much about distant kinship as about someone laying a claim on it. The black man lays a claim on the white man which is well-nigh intolerable. It is the laying of this claim which frightens and at the same time fascinates Conrad, “. . . the thought of their humanity—like yours . . . Ugly.”

The point of my observations should be quite clear by now, namely, that Conrad was a bloody racist. That this simple truth is glossed over in criticism 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 undetected. 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. They will point out to you that Conrad is, if anything, less charitable to the Europeans in the story than he is to the natives. A Conrad student told me in Scotland last year that Africa is merely a setting for the disintegration of the mind of Mr. Kurtz.

Which is partly the point: Africa as setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor. Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril. Of course, there is a preposterous and perverse kind of arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the breakup of one petty European mind. But that is not even the point. The real question is the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world. And the question is whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art. My answer is: No, it cannot. I would not call that man an artist, for example, who composes an eloquent instigation to one people to fall upon another and destroy them. No matter how striking his imagery or how beautiful his cadences fall, such a man is no more a great artist than another may be called a priest who reads the mass backwards or a physician who poisons his patients. All those men in Nazi Germany who lent their talent to the service of virulent racism whether in science, philosophy, or the arts have generally and rightly been condemned for their perversions. The time is long overdue for taking a hard look at the work of creative artists who apply their talents, alas often considerable as in the case of Conrad, to set people against people. This, I take it, is what Vertshenko is after when he tells us that a poet cannot be a slave trader at the same time, and gives the striking example of Arthur Rimbaud, who was fortunately honest enough to give up any pretenses to poetry when he opted for slave trading. For poetry surely can only be on the side of man’s deliverance and not his enslavement; for the brotherhood and unity of all mankind and against the doctrines of Hitler’s master race or Conrad’s “rudimentary souls.”

Last year was the fiftieth anniversary of Conrad’s death. He was born in 1857, the very year in which the first Anglican missionaries were arriving among my own people in Nigeria. It was certainly not his fault that he lived his life at a time when the reputation of the black man was at a particularly low level. But even after due allowances have been made for all the influences of contemporary prejudice on his sensibility, there remains still in Conrad’s attitude a residue of antipathy to black people which his peculiar psychology alone can explain. His own account of his first encounter with a black man is very revealing:

“A certain enormous buck nigger encountered in Haiti fixed my conception of blinding, furious, unreasoning rage, as manifested in the human animal to the end of my days. Of the nigger I used to dream for years afterwards.

Certainly, Conrad had a problem with niggers. His inordinate love of that word itself should be of interest to psychoanalysts. Sometimes his fixation on blackness is equally interesting, as when he gives us this brief description:

A black figure stood up, strode on long black legs, waving long black arms.

as though we might expect a black figure striding along on black legs to have white arms! But so unrelenting is Conrad’s obsession.

As a matter of interest, Conrad gives us in A Personal Record what amounts to a companion piece to the buck nigger of Haiti. At the age of sixteen Conrad encountered his first Englishman in Europe. He calls him “my unforgettable Englishman” and describes him in the following manner:

[his] calves exposed to the public gaze . . . dazzled the beholder by the splendor of their marble-like condition and their rich tone of young ivory . . . The light of a headlong, exalted satisfaction with the world of men . . . illumined his face . . . and triumphant eyes. In passing he cast a glance of kindly curiosity and a friendly gleam of big, sound, shiny teeth . . . his white calves twinkled stubby.

Irrational love and irrational hate jostling together in the heart of that tormented man. But whereas irrational love may at worst engender foolish acts of indiscretion, irrational hate can endanger the life of the community. Naturally, Conrad is a dream for psychoanalytic critics. Perhaps the most detailed study of him in this direction is by Bernard C. Meyer, M.D. In this lengthy book, Dr. Meyer follows every conceivable lead (and sometimes inconceivable ones) to explain Conrad. As an example, he gives us long disquisitions on the significance of hair and hair-cutting in Conrad. And yet not even one word is spared for his attitude to black people. Not even the discussion of Conrad’s anti-Semitism was enough to spark off in Dr. Meyer’s mind those other dark and explosive thoughts. Which only leads one to surmise that Western psychoanalysts must regard the kind of racism displayed by Conrad as absolutely normal.
The mask in question was made by other savages living just north of Conrad's River Congo. They have a name, the Fang people, and are without a doubt among the world's greatest masters of the sculptured form. As you might have guessed, the event to which Frank Willett refers marked the beginning of cubism and the infusion of new life into European art that had run completely out of strength.

The point of all this is to suggest that Conrad's picture of the people of the Congo seems grossly inadequate even at the height of their subjection to the ravages of King Leopold's International Association for the Civilization of Central Africa. Travellers with closed minds can tell us little except about themselves. But even those not blinkered, like Conrad, with xenophobia can be astonishingly blind.

Let me digress a little here. One of the greatest and most intrepid travellers of all time, Marco Polo, journeyed to the Far East from the Mediterranean in the thirteenth century and spent twenty years in the court of Kublai Khan in China. On his return to Venice he set down in his book entitled Description of the World his impressions of the peoples and places and customs he had seen. There are at least two extraordinary omissions in his account. He says nothing about the art of printing unknown as yet in Europe but in full flower in China. He either did not notice it at all or if he did, failed to see what use Europe could possibly have for it. Whatever reason, Europe had to wait another hundred years for Gutenberg. But even more spectacular was Marco Polo's omission of any reference to the Great Wall of China nearly four thousand miles long and already more than one thousand years old at the time of his visit. Again, he may not have seen it; but the Great Wall of China is the only structure built by man which is visible from the moon! Indeed, travellers can be blind.

As I said earlier, Conrad did not originate the image of Africa which we find in his book. It was and is the dominant image of Africa in the Western imagination and Conrad merely brought the peculiar gifts of his own mind to bear on it. For reasons which can certainly use close psychological inquiry, the West seems to suffer deep anxiety about the precariousness of its civilization and to have a need for constant reassurance by comparing it with Africa. If Europe, advancing in civilization, could cast a backward glance periodically at Africa trapped in primordial barbarity, it could say with faith and feeling: There go I but for the grace of God. Africa is to Europe as the picture is to Dorian Gray—a carrier onto whom the master unloads his physical and moral deformities so that he may go forward, erect and immaculate. Consequently, Africa is something to be avoided just as the picture has to be hidden away to safeguard the man's jeopardous integrity. Keep away from Africa, or else! Mr. Kurtz of Heart of Darkness should have heeded that warning and the prowling horror in his heart would have kept its place, chained to its hair. But he foolishly exposed himself to the wild irresistible allure of the jungle and lost the darkness found him out.

In my original conception of this talk I had thought to conclude it nicely on an appropriately positive note in which I would suggest from my privileged position in African and Western culture some advantages the West might derive from Africa once it rid its mind of old prejudices and began to look at Africa not through a haze of distortions and cheap mystification but quite simply as a continent of people—not angels, but not rudimentary souls either—just people, often highly gifted people and

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Gauguin had gone to Tahiti, the most extravagant individual act of turning to a non-European culture in the decades immediately before and after 1900, when European artists were avid for new artistic experiences, but it was only about 1904-5 that African art began to make its distinctive impact. One piece is still identifiable; it is a mask that had been given to Maurice Vlaminck in 1905. He records that Derain was "speechless" and "stunned" when he saw it. Bought it from Vlaminck and in turn showed it to Picasso and Matisse, who were also greatly affected by it. Ambrose Vollard then borrowed it and had it cast in bronze. . . . The revolution of twentieth century art was under way!

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3Eugène Henri Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), French Post-Impressionist painter, moved to Tahiti toward the end of his life.—Eds.
often strikingly successful in their enterprise with life and society. But as I thought more about the stereotype image, about its grip and pervasiveness, about the willful tenacity with which the West holds it to its heart; when I thought of your television and the cinema and newspapers, about books read in schools and out of school, of churches preaching to empty pews about the need to send help to the heathen in Africa, I realized that no easy optimism was possible. And there is something totally wrong in offering bribes to the West in return for its good opinion of Africa. Ultimately, the abandonment of unwholesome thoughts must be its own and only reward. Although I have used the word willful a few times in this talk to characterize the West's view of Africa, it may well be that what is happening at this stage is more akin to reflex action than calculated malice. Which does not make the situation more, but less, hopeful. Let me give you one last and really minor example of what I mean.

Last November the Christian Science Monitor carried an interesting article written by its Education Editor on the serious psychological and learning problems faced by little children who speak one language at home and then go to school where something else is spoken. It was a wide-ranging article taking in Spanish-speaking children in this country, the children of migrant Italian workers in Germany, the quadirlingual phenomenon in Malaysia, and so on. And all this while the article speaks unequivocally about language. But then out of the blue sky comes this:

In London there is an enormous immigration of children who speak Indian or Nigerian dialects, or some other native language.

I believe that the introduction of dialects, which is technically erroneous in the context, is almost a reflex action caused by an instinctive desire of the writer to downgrade the discussion to the level of Africa and India. And this is quite comparable to Conrad's witholding of language from his rudimentary souls. Language is too grand for these chaps; let's give them dialects. In all this business a lot of violence is inevitably done to words and their meaning. Look at the phase "native language" in the above excerpt. Surely the only native language possible in London is Cockney English. But our writer obviously means something else—something Indians and Africans speak.

Perhaps a change will come. Perhaps this is the time when it can begin, when the high optimism engendered by the breathtaking achievements of Western science and industry is giving way to doubt and even confusion. There is just the possibility that Western man may begin to look seriously at the achievements of other people. I read in the papers the other day a suggestion that what America needs at this time is somehow to bring back the extended family. And I saw in my mind's eye future African Peace Corps Volunteers coming to help you set up the system.

Seriously, although the work which needs to be done may appear too daunting, I believe that it is not one day too soon to begin. And where better than at a university?

[1975]

Questions

1. What is the purpose of the anecdotes that open this essay?

2. Achebe acknowledges that Conrad's literary talents and Heart of Darkness have some merit. What are the positive qualities he conceded?

3. What is Achebe's basic interpretation of Heart of Darkness? What are his objections to traditional interpretations?

4. What does Achebe mean when he asserts that although Conrad is dead, "his heart of darkness plagues us still" (para. 23)?

5. What is the purpose of Achebe bringing Albert Schweitzer and Marco Polo into this analysis?

6. What textual evidence, including tone, can you cite to illustrate that Achebe felt that his university audience would not be entirely hostile or even unresponsive to his argument? What does Achebe mean when he refers to his "privileged position in African and Western culture" (para. 30)?

7. Find points in Achebe's argument that you agree with as well as those with which you disagree. Pay particular attention to whether Achebe believes that Conrad's condemnation of the colonizers is as clear as his devaluation of the natives.

How to Write about Africa

Binyavanga Wainaina

Binyavanga Wainaina (b. 1971) lives in Nairobi, Kenya. He is the founding editor of the literary and political magazine Kwanza and won the Caine Prize for African Writing in 2002 for his short story "Discovering Home." In 2008, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution named him a person worth watching in politics, entertainment, and the arts. A sought-after speaker, he was writer-in-residence at Union College in Schenectady, New York, for the years 2005–2008, and at Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts, in fall 2008. This article appeared in a 2005 issue of Granta magazine, before spreading rapidly over the Internet and through e-mail.

Always use the word 'Africa' or 'Darkness' or 'Safari' in your title. Subtitles may include the words 'Zanzibar,' 'Masai,' 'Zulu,' 'Zambezi,' 'Congo,' 'Nile,' 'Big,' 'Sky,' 'Shadow,' 'Drum,' 'Sun' or 'Bygone.' Also useful are words such as 'Guerillas,' 'Timeless,' 'Primordial' and 'Tribal.' Note that 'People' means Africans who are not black, while 'The People' means black Africans.

Never have a picture of a well-adjusted African on the cover of your book, or in it, unless that African has won the Nobel Prize. An AK-47, prominent ribs, naked breasts: use these. If you must include an African, make sure you get one in Masai or Zulu or Dogon dress.

In your text, treat Africa as if it were one country. It is hot and dusty with rolling grasslands and huge herds of animals and tall, thin people who are starving. Or it is

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hot and steamy with very short people who eat primates. Don't get bogged down with precise descriptions. Africa is big: fifty-four countries, nine hundred million people who are too busy starving and dying and warring and emigrating to read your book. The continent is full of deserts, jungles, highlands, savannas and many other things, but your reader doesn't care about all that, so keep your descriptions romantic and evocative and unparticular.

Make sure you show how Africans have music and rhythm deep in their souls, and eat things no other humans eat. Do not mention rice and beef and wheat; monkey-brain is an African's cuisine of choice, along with goat, snake, worms and grubs and all manner of game meat. Make sure you show that you are able to eat such food without flinching, and describe how you learn to enjoy it—because you care.

Taboo subjects: ordinary domestic scenes, love between Africans (unless it is involved), references to African writers or intellectuals, mention of school-going children who are not suffering from yaws or Ebola fever or female genital mutilation.

Throughout the book, adopt a sotto voice, in conspiracy with the reader, and a sad I-expect-so-much tone. Establish early on that your liberalism is impeccable, and mention near the beginning what much you love Africa, how you fell in love with the place and can't live without her. Africa is the only continent you can love—take advantage of this. If you are a man, thrust yourself into her warm virgin forests. If you are a woman, treat Africa as a man who wears a bush jacket and disappears off into the sunset. Africa is to be pitied, worshiped or dominated. Whichever angle you take, be sure to leave the strong impression that without your intervention and your important book, Africa is doomed.

Your African characters may include naked warriors, loyal servants, diviners and seers, ancient wise men living in hermetic splendour. Or corrupt politicians, inept polygamist travel-guides, and prostitutes you have slept with. The Loyal Servant always behaves like a seven-year-old and needs a firm hand; he is scared of snakes, good with children, and always involving you in his complex domestic dramas. The Ancient Wise Man always comes from a noble tribe (not the money-grubbing tribes like the Gikuyu, the Igbo or the Shona). He has honey eyes and is close to the Earth. The Modern African is a fat man who steals and works in the visa office, refusing to give work permits to qualified Westerners who really care about Africa. He is an enemy of development, always using his government job to make it difficult for pragmatic and good-hearted expats to set up NGOs or Legal Conservation Areas. Or he is an Oxford-educated intellectual turned serial-killing politician in a Savile Row suit. He is a cannibal who likes Cristal champagne, and his mother is a rich witch-doctor who really runs the country.

Among your characters you must always include The Starving African, who wanders the refugee camp nearly naked, and waits for the benevolence of the West. Her children have flies on their eyelids and pot bellies, and her breasts are flat and empty. She must look utterly helpless. She can have no past, no history; such diversions ruin the dramatic moment. Moans are good. She must never say anything about herself in the dialogue except to speak of her (unspeakable) suffering. Also be sure to include a warm and motherly woman who has a rolling laugh and who is concerned for your well-being. Just call her Mama. Her children are all delinquent. These characters should buzz around your main hero, making him look good. Your hero can teach them, bathe them, feed them; he carries lots of babies and has seen Death. Your hero is you (if reportage), or a beautiful, tragic international celebrity/aristocrat who now cares for animals (if fiction).

Bad Western characters may include children of Tory cabinet ministers, African kings, employees of the World Bank. When talking about exploitation by foreigners, mention the Chinese and Indian traders. Blame the West for Africa's situation. But do not be too specific.

Broad brushstrokes throughout are good. Avoid having the African characters laugh, or struggle to educate their kids, or just make do in mundane circumstances. Have them illuminate something about Europe or America in Africa. African characters should be colourful, exotic, larger than life—but empty inside, with no dialogue, no conflicts or resolutions in their stories, no depth or quirks to confuse the cause.

Describe, in detail, naked breasts (young, old, conservative, recently raped, big, small) or mutilated genitals, or enhanced genitals. Or any kind of genitals. And dead bodies. Or, better, naked dead bodies. And especially rotting naked dead bodies. Remember, any work you submit in which people look filthy and miserable will be referred to as the 'real Africa', and you want that on your dust jacket. Do not feel queasy about this: you are trying to help them to get aid from the West. The biggest taboo in writing about Africa is to describe or show dead or suffering white people.

Animals, on the other hand, must be treated as well rounded, complex characters. They speak (or grunt while tossing their manes proudly) and have names, ambitions and desires. They also have family values: see how lions teach their children? Elephants are caring, and are good feminists or dignified patriarchs. So are gorillas. Never, ever say anything negative about an elephant or a gorilla. Elephants may attack people's property, destroy their crops, and even kill them. Always take the side of the elephant.

Big cats have public-school accents. Hyenas are fair game and have vaguely Middle Eastern accents. Any short Africans who live in the jungle or desert may be portrayed with good humour (unless they are in conflict with an elephant or chimpanzee or gorilla, in which case they are pure evil).

After celebrity activists and aid workers, conservationists are Africa's most important people. Do not offend them. You need them to invite you to their thirty thousand-acre game ranch or 'conservation area', and this is the only way you will get to interview the celebrity activist. Often a book cover with a heroic-looking conservationist on it works magic for sales. Anybody white, tanned and wearing khaki who once had a pet antelope or a farm is a conservationist, one who is preserving African's rich heritage. When interviewing him or her, do not ask how much funding they have; do not ask how much money they make off their game. Never ask how much they pay their employees.

Readers will be put off if you don't mention the light in Africa. And sun, the African sunset is a must. It is always big and red. There is always a big sky. Wide empty spaces and game are critical—Africa is the Land of Wide Empty Spaces. When writing about the plight of flora and fauna, make sure you mention that Africa is
overpopulated. When your main character is in a desert or jungle living with indigenous peoples (anybody short, it is okay to mention that Africa has been severely depopulated by Aids and War (use caps).

You'll also need a nightclub called Tropicana, where mercenaries, evil nouveau riche Africans and prostitutes and guerrillas and expats hang out.

Always end your book with Nelson Mandela saying something about rainbows or renaissances. Because you care.

[2005]

Questions

1. Wainaina writes in imperative sentences, giving what seem to be commands or issuing edicts. To whom is he speaking?
2. Identify and discuss several of the stereotypes that Wainaina describes. Are you familiar with any of these from movies you've seen? television shows? Heart of Darkness? “The Old Chief Mahlanga” children's films or plays?
3. At what point did you realize Wainaina's ironic tone— from the very outset? Find examples of hyperbole and understatement. What other techniques does he use to develop his satire? Consider the imperative sentence form, sentence fragments, choice of details, and visual images.
4. Explain whether you think Wainaina would have been more successful in making his point if he had written without satire—that is, more like Achebe in "An Image of Africa."
5. Discuss whether you think Wainaina goes too far. How do you interpret the ending comment about Nelson Mandela? As you answer that question, ask yourself if the audience Wainaina addresses as "you" is actually his audience.

Entering the Conversation

As you develop a response to one of the following questions, refer to the texts you have read in this section. You may also draw on your own experience or knowledge relating to colonialism and its legacy.

1. Write an essay analyzing at least three different types of cultural clashes or conflicts that result from colonialism. Refer to at least three texts from this Conversation when responding.

2. So much of the literature and commentary about colonialism centers around its impact on large groups of people, whether national or ethnic groups. Some of the texts in this chapter, however, explore its consequences on individuals. Write an essay discussing the way at least two of these texts provide insight into the influence of colonialism on the individual.

3. Albert Memmi describes the destructive nature of colonialism for the colonizer. Using at least two texts chosen from this Conversation or Heart of Darkness, discuss why you agree or disagree with his analysis.

It is impossible for him [the colonizer] not to be aware of the constant illegitimacy of his status. It is, moreover, in a way a double illegitimacy. A foreigner, having come to land by the accidents of history, he has succeeded not merely in creating a place for himself but also in taking away that of the inhabitant, granting himself astounding privileges to the detriment of those rightfully entitled to them. And this is not by virtue of local laws, which in a certain way legitimize this inequality by tradition, but by upsetting the established rules and substituting his own. He thus appears doubly unjust. He is a privileged being and an illegitimately privileged one; that is, a usurper. Furthermore, this is so, not only in the eyes of the colonized, but in his own as well.

— The Colonizer and the Colonized

4. Write an essay discussing five of the stereotypes discussed in this Conversation. Develop your essay by including photographs, artwork, or video clips that illustrate the stereotypes in action. Use at least three of the texts in your analysis.

5. Select a contemporary film set in Africa. Write a script of an imagined conversation among three or four of the authors featured in this Conversation addressing the following question: Does this film stereotype African people and cultures, or is it a valid and meaningful depiction?

6. There is debate about whether Heart of Darkness is a racist book that has no place in the classroom, or an important window onto the Eurocentric tradition and its own heart of darkness. Drawing from at least three of the pieces in this Conversation, write an essay taking a position in that debate.

Close Reading: Fiction

Sarah Blumler, a twelfth-grade AP literature student, wrote the following essay in forty minutes. She had neither read nor discussed the full story prior to writing the essay; she read only the passage beginning with the third sentence in paragraph 8 ("Mr. Kapasi was forty six years old . . .") and ending with paragraph 3.

In the following passage from "Interpreter of Maladies" by Jhumpa Lahiri, the character Mr. Kapasi is serving as a tour guide in India for an Indian American family. In a well-organized essay, explain how Lahiri conveys Mr. Kapasi's perception of the Das family.

[Signature]

Student Writing
MEETING MR. KURTZ

At the beginning of August 1890, several weeks after he wrote his furious Open Letter to King Leopold II, George Washington Williams finished the long return journey down the Congo River to the station of Kinshasa, on Stanley Pool. Either in the waters of the pool or when docked on the riverbank at Kinshasa, Williams’s steamboat crossed paths with a boat that was at the start of its voyage upstream, the Roi des Belges, a long, boxy sternwheeler with a funnel and pilot house on its top deck. Had Williams managed to catch a glimpse of the other boat’s crew, he would have seen a stocky, black-bearded officer with eyes that look, in the photographs we have, as if they were permanently narrowed against the tropical sun. Newly arrived in the Congo, the young officer would be at the captain’s side for the entire trip upstream, learning the river in preparation for taking command of a steamer himself.

The apprentice officer was in many ways typical of the whites who came to the Congo at this time: an unmarried young man, in need of a job, who had a yen for adventure and some troubles in his past. Konrad Korzeniowski, born in Poland, had grown up with an image of Africa based on the hazy allure of the unknown: “When nine years old or thereabouts... while looking at a map of Africa of the time and putting my finger on the blank space then representing the unsolved mystery of that continent, I said to myself... ‘When I grow up I shall go there.’” In his youth, partly spent in France, he had problems with debts, dabbled, claimed, in gunrunning, and made a suicide attempt. He then spent more than a decade as a ship’s officer in the British merchant marine, learning

English along the way, although never losing his strong Polish accent. In early 1890, Korzeniowski was looking in vain for a master’s berth at sea. While job-hunting in London, a city filled with talk of Stanley’s just-completed Emin Pasha expedition, he began thinking again of the exotic land of his childhood fantasies. He went to Brussels, applied for work on the Congo River, and returned to Belgium for his final job interview just as Stanley was finishing his gala visit to the city.

In conversations before he took up his new job, the thirty-two-year-old Korzeniowski showed that, like almost everyone in Europe, he believed Leopold’s mission in Africa was a noble and “civilizing” one. He then said goodbye to his relatives and sailed for the Congo on the ship that carried the first batch of rails and ties for the new railway. Like other white men heading for the interior, he first had to make the long trek from Matadi around the rapids, along with a caravan of black porters. Once he reached the river at last, he filled his diary with the notes of a businesslike seaman, making long entries about shoals, refueling points, and other items not included on the primitive navigational charts available. It would be almost a decade before the aspiring steamship captain managed to get down on paper the other features of the Congo not shown on the map, and by that time, of course, the world would know him as Joseph Conrad.

He spent some six months in the Congo altogether, carrying with him the partly written manuscript of his first novel, Almayer’s Folly: The thousand-mile apprenticeship trip upriver, from Stanley Pool to Stanley Falls, took only four weeks, a fast voyage for the time. Sandbars, rocks, and shallow water made navigation tricky, especially far up the river in the dry season, which it then was. “The subdued thundering mutter of the Stanley Falls hung in the heavy night air of the last navigable reach of the Upper Congo...” he later wrote, “and I said to myself with awe, ‘This is the very spot of my boyish boast... What an end to the idealized realities of a boy’s daydreams!’”

At Stanley Falls, both Conrad and the steamer’s captain fell ill. Conrad recovered sooner, and on the first part of the return trip downriver — going with the current, the boat traveled almost twice as fast as earlier — he was in command of the Roi des Belges. But a few weeks after the voyage ended, he canceled his contract and began the long journey back to Europe.

Several bitter disappointments punctured Conrad’s dreams. At the start, he hit it off badly with an official of the company he was working for,
which meant that he would not gain command of a steamer after all. Then, after coming downstream, he got sick again, with malaria and dysentery, and had to convalesce at an American Baptist mission station on Stanley Pool, in the care of a Scotch missionary doctor. He remained so weak that he had to be carried back to the coast and never fully recovered his health. Finally, he was so horrified by the greed and brutality among white men he saw in the Congo that his view of human nature was permanently changed. Until he spent six months in Africa, he once told his friend the critic Edward Garnett, he had had “not a thought in his head.”

After brooding about his Congo experience for eight years, Conrad transformed it into Heart of Darkness, probably the most widely reprinted short novel in English. The nautical jottings in his ship’s officer’s notebook—“Lulanga Passage...NbiB to INE. On the Port Side: Snags. Soundings in fathoms: 2, 2, 2, 1, 1, 2, 2, 2,” now become prose unsurpassed by any of the other literary travelers to the Congo over the years:

Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impene-trable forest. The air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish. There was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine. The long stretches of the waterway ran on, deserted, into the gloom of overshadowed distances. On silvery sandbanks hippos and alligators summed themselves side by side. The broadening waters flowed through a mob of wooded islands. You lost your way on that river as you would in a desert and bustled all day long against shoals trying to find the channel till you thought yourself bewitched and cut off for ever from everything you had known.

Marlow, the narrator of Heart of Darkness and Conrad’s alter ego, is hired by an ivory-trading company to sail a steamboat up an unnamed river whose shape on the map resembles “an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country and its tail lost in the depths of the land.” His destination is a post where the company’s brilliant, ambitious star agent, Mr. Kurtz, is stationed. Kurtz has collected legendary quantities of ivory, but Marlow learns along the way, is also rumored to have sunk into unspecified savagery. Marlow’s steamer survives an attack by blacks and picks up a load of ivory and the ill Kurtz; Kurtz, talking of his grandiose plans, dies on board as they travel downstream.

Sketched with only a few bold strokes, Kurtz’s image has nonetheless remained in the memories of millions of readers: the lone white agent far up the great river, with his dreams of grandeur, his great store of precious ivory, and his fieldston carved out of the African jungle. Perhaps more than anything, we remember Marlow, on the steamboat, looking through binoculars at what he thinks are ornamental knobs atop the fenceposts in front of Kurtz’s house—and then finding that each is “black, dried, sunken, with closed eyelids,—a head that seemed to sleep at the top of that pole, and with the shrunk dry lips showing a narrow white line of the teeth.”

High school teachers and college professors who have discussed this book in thousands of classrooms over the years tend to do so in terms of Freud, Jung, and Nietzsche; of classical myth, Victorian innocence, and original sin; of postmodernism, postcolonialism, and poststructuralism. European and American readers, not comfortable acknowledging the genocidal scale of the killing in Africa at the turn of the century, have cast Heart of Darkness loose from its historical moorings. We read it as a parable for all times and places, not as a book about one time and place. Two of the three times the story was filmed, most notably in Francis Ford Coppola’s Apocalypse Now, it was not even set in Africa. But Conrad himself wrote, “Heart of Darkness is experience...pushed a little (and only very little) beyond the actual facts of the case.” Whatever the rich levels of meaning the book has as literature, for our purposes what is notable is how precise and detailed a description it is of “the actual facts of the case”: King Leopold’s Congo in 1890, just as the exploitation of the territory was getting under way in earnest.

In the novel Marlow, as Conrad had done, begins his trip with the long walk around the rapids: “A slight creaking behind me made me turn my head. Six black men advanced in a file toiling up the path. They walked erect and slow, balancing small baskets full of earth on their heads, and the creak kept time with their footsteps...I could see every rib, the joints of their limbs were like knots in a rope, each had an iron collar on his neck and all were connected together with a chain whose sights swung between them, rhythmically clinking.” These were the laborers starting work on Leopold’s railway.

A few pages later, Marlow describes a spot where some starving rail-
way workers had crawled away to die. Farther along the trail, he sees "now and then a carrier dead in harness, at rest in the long grass near the path, with an empty water-gourd and his long staff lying by his side," and notes the mysterious "body of a middle-aged negro, with a bullet-hole in the forehead." This is a record of what Conrad himself saw on his walk around the rapids to Stanley Pool. In his diary entry for July 3, 1890, he noted: "An officer of the State inspecting; a few minutes afterwards saw at a camp place the dead body of a Backonga. Shot. Horrid smell." The following day: "Saw another dead body lying by the path in an attitude of meditative repose." And on July 29: "On the road today passed a skeleton tied up to a post."

During the hike around the rapids, Marlow also describes how people had fied to avoid being conscripted as porters: "The population had cleared out a long time ago. Well a lot of mysterious niggers armed with all kinds of fearful weapons suddenly took to travelling on the road [in England] between Deal and Gravesend catching the yokels right and left to carry heavy loads for them. I fancy every farm and cottage thereabouts would get empty very soon. . . . I passed through several abandoned villages." This, too, was what Conrad himself saw. The porters of the caravan the novelist was with came close to mutiny during the trip. Only three and a half years later a fierce uprising would break out along the very route, as Chief Nzanzu and his men fought their long, doomed battle against the Force Publique.

In describing the caravans of porters that walked this trail, Marlow gives a crisp summary of the Leopoldian economy: "a stream of . . . rubbishy cottons, beads, and brass—wire set into the depths of darkness and in return came a precious trickle of ivory." In 1890, this was still the colony's most prized commodity. "The word 'ivory' rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed. You would think they were praying to it," says Marlow. He even mentions Leopold's commission system for agents: "The only real feeling was a desire to get appointed to a trading-post where ivory was to be had, so that they could earn percentages."

Conrad stayed true to life when creating the charismatic, murderous figure at the center of his novel, perhaps the twentieth century's most famous literary villain. Mr. Kurtz was clearly inspired by several real people, among them Georges Antoine Klein, a French agent for an ivory-gathering firm at Stanley Falls. Klein, mortally ill, died on shipboard, as Kurtz does in the novel, while Conrad was piloting the *Roi des Belges* down the river. Another model closer to Kurtz in character was Major Edmund Bartelot, the man whom Stanley left in charge of the rear column on the Emin Pasha expedition. It was Bartelot, remember, who went mad, began biting, whipping, and killing people, and was finally murdered. Yet another Kurtz prototype was a Belgian, Arthur Hodister, famed for his harm of African women and for gathering huge amounts of ivory. Hodister eventually married in too aggressively on the territory of local Afro-Arab warlords and ivory-traders, who captured and beheaded him.

However, Conrad's legion of biographers and critics have almost entirely ignored the man who resembles Kurtz most closely of all. And he is someone we have already mentioned, the swashbuckling Captain Léon Rom of the Force Publique. It is from Rom that Conrad may have taken the chief feature of his villain: the collection of African heads surrounding Kurtz's house.

The "Inner Station" of *Heart of Darkness*, the place Marlow looks at through his binoculars only to find Kurtz's collection of the shrunken heads of African "rebels," is loosely based on Stanley Falls. In 1895, five years after, Conrad visited this post, Léon Rom was station chief there. A British explorer-journalist who passed through Stanley Falls that year described the aftermath of a punitive military expedition against some African rebels: "Many women and children were taken, and twenty-one heads were brought to the falls, and have been used by Captain Rom as a decoration round a flower-bed in front of his house!" If Conrad missed this account, which appeared in the widely read *Century Magazine*, he almost certainly noticed when *The Saturday Review* a magazine he admired and read faithfully, repeated the story in its issue of December 17, 1898. That date was within a few days of when Conrad began writing *Heart of Darkness*.

Furthermore, in the Congo, Rom and Conrad may have met.

On August 2, 1890, Conrad, accompanied by another white man and a caravan of porters, finished his month-long trek inland from the coast. Five miles before his caravan reached the village of Kinshasa on Stanley Pool, where the *Roi des Belges* was waiting, it had to pass through the neighboring post of Leopoldville. These two collections of thatch-roofed buildings were only an hour and a half's walk apart. (They soon grew and merged into one city, called Leopoldville by the Belgians and Kinshasa today.) When Conrad's caravan, trudging along a road near the riverbank, passed through Leopoldville, the station chief there was Léon Rom. Conrad made no entry in his diary on August 2, and Rom's notebook, which
in a calligraphic hand faithfully records any raid or campaign that could win him another medal, mentions no expeditions away from Leopoldville at that time. If Rom was on hand, he would certainly have greeted a caravan with European newcomers, for there were only a few dozen white men at Leopoldville and Kinshasa, and new ones did not arrive every day. What, if anything, spoken or unspoken, passed between Rom and Conrad we will never know. Rom's collection of twenty-one African heads lay in a different place and a different time, half a decade in the future, but when Conrad read about Rom in December 1898, it is possible that he made the connection to a young officer he had met in the Congo.

Heart of Darkness is one of the most scathing indictments of imperialism in all literature, but its author, curiously, thought himself an ardent imperialist where England was concerned. Conrad fully recognized Leopold's rape of the Congo for what it was: "The horror! The horror!" his character Kurtz says on his deathbed. And Conrad's stand-in, Marlow, muses on how "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." Yet in almost the same breath, Marlow talks about how the British territories colored red on a world map were "good to see at any time because one knows that some real work is done in there"; British colonialists were "bearers of a spark from the sacred fire." Marlow was speaking for Conrad, whose love of his adoptive country knew no bounds: Conrad felt that "liberty . . . can only be found under the English flag all over the world." And at the very time he was denouncing the European lust for African riches in his novel, he was an investor in a gold mine near Johannesburg.

Conrad was a man of his time and place in other ways as well. He was partly a prisoner of what Mark Twain, in a different context, called "the white man's notion that he is less savage than the other savages." Heart of Darkness has come in for some justified pummeling in recent years because of its portrayal of black characters, who say no more than a few words. In fact, they don't speak at all: they grunt; they chant; they produce a "drone of weird incantations" and "a wild and passionate uproar"; they spout "strings of amazing words that resembled no sounds of human language . . . like the responses of some satanic litany." The true message of the book, the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe has argued, is: "Keep away from Africa, or else! Mr. Kurtz . . . should have heeded that warning and the prowling horror in his heart would have kept its place, chained to its lair. But he foolishly exposed himself to the wild irresistible allure of the jungle and lo! the darkness found him out."

However laden it is with Victorian racism, Heart of Darkness remains the greatest portrait in fiction of Europeans in the Scramble for Africa. When Marlow says goodbye to his aunt before heading to his new job, "she talked about 'weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways,' till, upon my word, she made me quite uncomfortable. I ventured to hint that the Company was run for profit."* Conrad's white men go about their rape of the continent in the belief that they are uplifting the natives, bringing civilization, serving "the noble cause."

All these illusions are embodied in the character of Kurtz. He is both a murderous head collector and an intellectual, "an emissary of . . . science and progress." He is a painter, the creator of "a small sketch in oils" of a woman carrying a torch that Marlow finds at the Central Station. And he is a poet and journalist, the author of, among other works, a seventeen-page report — "vibrating with eloquence . . . a beautiful piece of writing" — to the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs. At the end of this report, filled with lofty sentiments, Kurtz scrawls in a shaky hand: "Exterminate all the brutes!"

In Kurtz's intellectual pretensions, Conrad caught one telling feature of the white penetration of the Congo, where conquest by pen and ink so often confirmed the conquest by rifle and machine gun. Ever since Stanley shot his way down the Congo River and then promptly wrote a two-volume best-seller, ivory collectors, soldiers, and explorers had tried to imitate him — in books, and in thousands of articles for the geographical society journals and magazines about colonial exploration that were as popular in the late nineteenth century as the National Geographic

* The biggest proctor, King Leopold II, does not appear in Heart of Darkness, although he does in The Inheritors, the lesser novel that Conrad later co-authored with Ford Madox Ford. One of its central characters is the heavily bearded Duc de Mersch, who controls the Greenland Protectorate. The duc's Society for the Regeneration of the Arctic Regions is dedicated to uplifting the benighted Eskimos by bringing them a railway, proper clothes, and other benefits of civilization. The duc has invested in an English newspaper in an attempt to buy favorable press coverage of his "philanthropic" activities. "We have," he says, "protected the natives, have kept their higher interests ever present in our minds." The Greenland of the novel is rich in oil and gold.
is in the United States today. It was as if the act of putting Africa on paper were the ultimate proof of the superiority of European civilization. This aspect of Kurtz is yet another reason to suspect that, in creating him, Conrad was partly inspired by Léon Rom. Rom, we saw, was a budding entomologist. He was also a painter; when not collecting butterflies or human heads, he did portraits and landscapes, of which five survive in a Belgian museum today. Most interesting of all, he was a writer.

In 1899, Rom, by then back in Belgium, published a book of his own. *Le Nègre du Congo* is an odd little volume — jaunty, arrogant, and sweepingly superficial. Short chapters cover “Le Nègre en général,” the black woman, food, pets, native medicine, and so on. Rom was an enthusiastic hunter who jubilantly posed for one photo atop a dead elephant, and his chapter on hunting is as long as those on Congolese religious beliefs, death rituals, and chiefly succession combined.

The voice we hear in Rom’s book is very much like the voice in which we might imagine Mr. Kurtz writing his report to the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs. Of *la race noire*, Rom says, “The product of a mindless state, its feelings are coarse, its passions rough, its instincts brutish, and, in addition, it is proud and vain. The black man’s principal occupation, and that to which he dedicates the greatest part of his existence, consists of stretching out on a mat in the warm rays of the sun, like a crocodile on the sand...” The black man has no idea of time, and, questioned on that subject by a European, he generally responds with something stupid.”

There is much more in this vein. When Rom describes, for example, the Congolese conscripted to work as porters, he says they enjoyed themselves splendidly. As a caravan sets off in the morning, the porters all bustle noisily about; each one eagerly wanting “to succeed in finding a place in line of his choice, for example beside a friend with whom he can trade dreams of the previous night or elaborate the menu, more or less varied and delicious, of the meal they will have at the next stop.”

At some point while he was in the Congo, Rom must have given up planning his book. Did Rom, finding that Conrad spoke perfect French, confide in him his literary dreams? Did Conrad see one of Rom’s paintings on the wall at Leopoldville, just as Marlow sees one of Kurtz’s? Or was it sheer coincidence that the real head-collector Rom and the imaginary head-collector Kurtz were both painters and writers? We will never know.

There are several other tantalizing parallels between Léon Rom and

Mr. Kurtz. In the novel, Kurtz succeeds in “getting himself adored” by the Africans of the Inner Station: chiefs crawl on the ground before him, the people obey him with slavish devotion, and a beautiful black woman apparently is his concubine. In 1895, a disapproving Force Publique lieutenant confided to his diary a strikingly similar situation involving a fellow officer:

He makes his agents starve while he gives lots of food to the black women of his harem (for he wants to act like a great Arab chief).... Finally, he got into his dress uniform at his house, brought together his women, picked up some piece of paper and pretended to read to them that the king had named him the big chief and that the other whites of the station were only small fry... He gave fifty lashes to a poor little negro because she wouldn’t be his mistress, then he gave her to a soldier.

What is significant is how the diarist introduces his account of the officer: “This man wants to play the role of a second Rom.”

Finally, the murderoussness of Kurtz seems to echo one other detail about Rom. When Rom was station chief at Stanley Falls, the governor general sent a report back to Brussels about some agents who “have the reputation of having killed masses of people for petty reasons.” He mentions Rom’s notorious flower bed ringed with human heads, and then adds: “He kept a gallows permanently erected in front of the station!”

We do not know whether Rom was already acting out any of these dreams of power, murder, and glory when Conrad passed through Leopoldville in 1890 or whether he only talked of them. Whatever the case, the moral landscape of *Heart of Darkness* and the shadowy figure at its center are the creations not just of a novelist but of an open-eyed observer who caught the spirit of a time and place with piercing accuracy.