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ACHEBE'S WEAKEST LINK: AN ANALYSIS

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Abstract: Chinua Achebe, author of *Things Fall Apart*, states in an interview that Joseph Conrad ensconces racism in his adjective-ridden writing style. More than that, Achebe even states that Conrad intentionally tries to confuse his readers so that they do not detect his racism. Arguments of intention are dangerous, especially when the author that is subjected to one is deceased. They cannot defend themselves. In order to see if Achebe's claim of hidden racism in *Heart of Darkness* is true or not, I have read two other works by Conrad, *The Secret Sharer* and *The Shadow Line: A Confession*, and compared their writing. Using more analyses of Conrad's works, I discover that Conrad is not too confusing for his readers; most people understand him. However, I notice that *Heart of Darkness* is written in a more confusing style. Adding Conrad's philosophy and reviewing it with Nietzsche's philosophy, we see that Conrad doesn't seem like someone who would try to be racist and then hide it. The argument of intention would also seem to have an air of arrogance, as it appears Achebe thinks other readers are unable to comprehend Conrad's text the way he can, or at least without his guidance. In conclusion, I surmise that arguments of intention are dangerous and that no one should make them because they are largely insupportable. If anything, an argument of intention has all the qualities of prejudice and once investigated, seems just as absurd as arguments for racism.

Keywords: Africa, arguments of intention, Chinua Achebe, comparison, Conrad's style, crypto-racism, *Heart of Darkness*, intention, Joseph Conrad, Nietzsche, prejudice, racism, syntax, *The Secret Sharer*, *The Shadow Line*

Joseph Conrad is an unbearably frank man — frank and inscrutable. He never writes with certainty — as is shown by his labyrinthine syntax — and constantly harms the reader with adjectival ejaculations that can go on for multiple lines. While this may upset the new Conrad reader in high school, many grow to be fond of these highly descriptive lines. Perhaps his style is due to English being his third language, but this is unlikely, owing to the fact that Conrad was a true writer, and he would not let such a blatant device clutter his pages without it being an integral part of his work. He keeps his focus on the unfathomable because he finds it apropos for some reason or another to do so. This writing style has been critiqued by Chinua Achebe (the famous author of *Things Fall Apart*) as a method that Conrad uses to flummox the reader in his novella, *Heart of Darkness*, with the effect of ensconcing his own racism (Phillips & Achebe 60). This does not appear to be the case, though, because Conrad

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uses this style in all of his works. For example, in his famous short story *The Secret Sharer* and in one of his last books, *The Shadow Line: A Confession*. I am going to juxtapose these three well-known works by Conrad in order to come to a conclusion as to the nature of Conrad's style — to see whether it is indeed a style made to confuse the reader or — on the contrary — a style meant to be understood; or whether, in a sense, it is meant to be both. If his style is indeed used to confuse the reader, then I will explore to what extent it may be used to hide racism in *Heart of Darkness*.

Let us be clear about what Achebe thinks of Conrad's sentence structures and what his argument is about their use in *Heart of Darkness*. In a new-journalism style debate article, Caryl Phillips, an English Professor at Yale University, speaks with Achebe in his then home in upstate New York (Achebe was a professor at Bard College at the time). Achebe's arguments against *Heart of Darkness* are that Conrad mocks "both the African landscape and the African people," that he diminishes the Africans' humanity while trying to defend them and that language is not given to the Africans, who are instead given 'dialects' (Phillips & Achebe 60, 64). These arguments have received supernumerary responses. However, I have yet to find one essay that properly engages Achebe's concept of Conrad's style being a sort of membrane that protects a racist core. I cannot understand why one has not been written, especially considering the boldness of Achebe's statement:

> According to Achebe, Conrad's long and famously hypnotic sentences are mere "trickery," designed to induce a hypnotic stupor in the reader. Achebe drafts the support of "the eagle-eyed English critic F.R. Leavis," who many years ago noted Conrad's "adjectival insistence upon inexpressible and incomprehensible mystery," whose cumulative effect is to suggest that poor Africa is inexplicable. (Phillips & Achebe 60)[1]

From this excerpt, we can see that Achebe believes Conrad's sentences are devised to fool the reader, to confuse them into a formless mass that cannot comprehend, cannot engage with the text; his sentences are there not to stimulate the reader to philosophize, but to keep them in a somewhat inebriated state of ignorance. Could Conrad really have meant to do this to his audience? In the Aristotelian sense, this would be any artist's fall, because it could cut the audience out of the rhetorical triangle, creating disengagement with his literature that could then cause loss of interest and the loss of his voice in the canon. It is apparent that this is not the case, since there are a volume of people who have dedicated their life's studies to analyzing Conrad, and since in Conrad's time his books were read and enjoyed by many.

Conrad's literature usually has a negative hero, e.g. Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, Jim in *Lord Jim*, etc., who start with grand ideas — typically political in nature — and fall with their ideals and absolutes. However, there are two notable works by Conrad, *The Secret Sharer* and *The Shadow Line: A Confession*, which have heroes that succeed in their tasks and initiate themselves into the world — and all without absolutes. In this way, we begin to see a trend in Conrad's writing: he hates absolutes and believes them to be the cause of tyranny, whereas he seems to think seeing the world as

[1] Cf. "Chinua Achebe on Conrad's Image of Africa". [In:] *Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism – Infobase Publishing, 2009, p. 74.

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it is and coping with it is the way of life (Ryf 35). Allan Burns observes that in *The Shadow Line* the "narrator … often forgoes the casually seductive lucidity of generalization that the privilege of retrospection affords for a deeper, more opaque involvement with the experiential process whereby meanings are hypothesized, apprehended, rejected, or forged" (Burns 519) — a speculation that supports the view that Conrad wants no fantasy here; the narrator is not allowed to look back and mythologize anything, but instead looks at the present experience. This is how the narrator in *The Shadow Line* crosses the titular shadow line, which has two sides: "youthful egotism and mature judgment" (Burns 521). In *The Secret Sharer* this is also how the narrator matures, how he successfully gets his secret sharer off ship before he is discovered.

In *The Shadow Line* and *The Secret Sharer* — as in all his works — Conrad makes use of his famously implacable syntax. Here is an example of a confusing sentence in *Heart of Darkness* to use as a premise for the analysis of his other texts:

> And at last, in its curved and imperceptible fall, the sun sank low, and from glowing white changed to a dull red without rays and without heat, as if about to go out suddenly, stricken to death by the touch of that gloom brooding over a crowd of men. (*Heart of Darkness and The Secret Sharer* 66)

Notice how it is confusing in its length; it is nearly a paragraph-long sentence. Also, Conrad uses the words "imperceptible" and "brooding," which give a sense of unknowing, a sense of struggle. Reading over eighty pages of this will make you confused often enough, but look at how Conrad writes:

> The poor man's nerves were gone. Mine were not in much better case. It was the moment of breaking strain and was relieved by the abrupt sensation of the ship moving forward as if of herself under my feet. I heard plainly the soughing of the wind aloft, the low cracks of the upper spars taking the strain, long before I could feel the least draught on my face turned aft, anxious and sightless like the face of a blind man. (*The Shadow Line: A Confession* 116–117)

It appears that Conrad uses long sentence structures in *The Shadow Line*, too. Also, notice how Conrad chooses to describe his narrator as "sightless like the face of a blind man." I doubt that it is just me, but when reading this passage I feel no difference with the style used in *Heart of Darkness*; I do, however, feel a difference in attitude. The attitude or humor of the first is that of adumbration, a sort of premonition of struggles ahead, whereas the tone in the latter is of present struggle. Therefore, the difference between these two excerpts is that one is foreshadowing action while the other is in action. But the style is the same: long sentences, strong use of simile and metaphor. Achebe is onto something here, though. Even though the syntax is the same, Conrad does heavily use adjectives of confusion and mystery, which so far create a feeling of more confusion in me than in *The Shadow Line*.

What about *The Secret sharer*? This short story is roughly the same story, in many ways, as *The Shadow Line*. The critic Albert J. Guerard "goes so far as to say that if the first two chapters" of *The Shadow Line* "were 'cut out,' the story would be comparable to *The Secret Sharer*" (Burns 518). I can agree with this statement because, in

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a way, the stories are both bildungsromans: they both have someone come into the position of captain of a ship in the Gulf of Siam (Larabee 348) and both of the narrators subsequently learn to deal with the command, in the end maturing into what Conrad seems to think wisdom is. Being as such, the diction and syntax in *The Secret Sharer* are identical to that of *The Shadow Line*:

> But what I felt most was my being a stranger to the ship; and if all the truth must be told, I was somewhat of a stranger to myself. The youngest man on board (barring the second mate), and untried as yet by a position of the fullest responsibility, I was willing to take the adequacy of the others for granted. They had simply to be equal to their tasks; but I wondered how far I should turn out faithful to that ideal conception of one's own personality every man sets up for himself secretly. (*Heart of Darkness and The Secret Sharer* 21)

This passage shows how in *The Secret Sharer* the narrator is often thinking to himself. Since he is a young man set upon conquering a task — that being his captainship — his mind and thoughts are clear and driven. In apposition, Marlow's recitation and remembrances as the narrator of *Heart of Darkness* are confused — the confusion that comes from reaching back into time to learn from what one has done. It is a common fact that people tend to look on the past with fondness, but also with confusion. However, after seeing these three passages, I think it is safe to assume that in many ways what Achebe believes about *Heart of Darkness* is true. But I am not sure if Achebe is interpreting them correctly.

As mentioned before, Conrad wrote many political novels, which took absolute ideas and demonstrated how absolutes do not fit into life well; this is shown by how crazy Kurtz becomes in the Congo. Also, the message in *Heart of Darkness* appears not to be a message of racism, but an inquiry as to the true nature of humanity. As Robert S. Ryf, former professor of English and Comparative Literature at Occidental College, says, "Conrad's method of indirection, then, raises specific questions not only about Kurtz but, by extension, about the nature of motive, of human nature, and of reality itself" (Ryf 21). Here is where we grasp a Nietzschean aspect of Conrad's writings.

Nietzsche writes in *Beyond Good & Evil* that:

> one may doubt, first, whether there are any opposites at all […]. For all the value that the true, the truthful, the selfless may deserve, it would still be possible that a higher and more fundamental value for life might have been ascribed to deception, selfishness, and lust. It might even be possible that what constitutes the value of these good and revered things is precisely that they are insidiously related, tied to, and involved with these wicked, seemingly opposite things — maybe even one with them in essence. Maybe! (Nietzsche 10)

Here Nietzsche is introducing the idea that opposites, or absolutes, are contraptions humans make, but the laws of opposites may not be true the way we see them. This is essentially what Conrad shows us he believes, since in *Heart of Darkness* he shows us someone like Kurtz — someone who fully believes in these opposites and 'good' — and has him destroyed by what he thinks reality is.

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Given this meaning in *Heart of Darkness*, I find it hard to believe that Conrad was overtly racist. The idea that Conrad is ensconcing his racism in his diction and syntax is absurd.

Given this knowledge, it becomes clear that Achebe is making an argument of intention, i.e. he thinks that Conrad intends to hide his racism in his language. A review of Conrad's work from 1914 by James Huneker shows how Conrad's work was seen when it was just coming out:

> He is unique as a stylist. He first read English literature in Polish translations, then in the original; he read not only the Bible and Shakespeare, but Dickens, Fenimore Cooper, and Thackeray; above all Dickens […]. He possesses pathos, passion, sincerity and humor. Wide knowledge of mankind and nature he has, and in the field of moral power we need but ask if he is a Yes-Sayer or a No-Sayer, as the Nietzschians have it. He Says Yes! To the universe and of the eternal verities he is cognizant. (Huneker 272, 276)

According to this review, Conrad was very popular in his time with the critics. Conrad is also seen in a very good light. What does this tell us about him? It shows that he was likely trying to get this response from the critics and his readers. This is further proof that Conrad could not be writing confusing sentences simply in order to shield his racism from the world. When reading *Heart of Darkness*, one should read it knowing who Conrad was — that he was a powerful man with a strong writer's hand, a sad past and a diverse life. Reading the book in a modern context and then accusing Conrad's intentions is a critical error and unfair to the actual greatness of *Heart of Darkness*. But — Achebe would likely say — perhaps Huneker's review is mere puffery. Even if that is the case, decrying someone's intentions on the basis of their literary text is a flimsy way to argue for racism in an author.

But there is something more that should be looked at in regard to Achebe's statement. He says as straightforwardly as possible that Conrad confuses his readers into a stupor — and that is what allows for Conrad's racism to slip around most peoples' defenses (Phillips & Achebe 60). I think that this statement is appalling. How could Achebe even say such a thing? Does he not realize that by saying this he is truly insulting the intelligence of every single person who has read *Heart of Darkness*? Basically, Achebe thinks that Conrad has fooled everyone except him with his magical and occult lines. I absolutely disagree with such an idea.

There are many reviews and works that speak about *Heart of Darkness* and which are simply brilliant analyses of Conrad's novella. Take Robert S. Ryf's essay, *Joseph Conrad*, in which he makes an outstanding interpretation of Conrad's text:

> Although the plot of Heart of Darkness is absorbing, it hardly accounts for the total impact of the novel, which in the short space of slightly more than one hundred pages profoundly probes the darkness not only of the Congo, but of the psyche. Marlow's journey up the river to find and bring back Kurtz is also Marlow's journey into himself, is also man's archetypal quest for enlightenment. (Ryf 16)

Could anyone really say that — with such a goal — Conrad is intent on being racist throughout? Conrad's message in *Heart of Darkness* is utterly profound and puissant. There are no grounds for making the judgment that Conrad is trying to be racist,

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or that he is intentionally ensconcing his racism by using so called 'blur-words.' If perhaps Achebe changed his wording, instead saying that the reason most people do not see some of Conrad's racist remarks is because *Heart of Darkness* is a difficult text to read and typically one does not search books for racism — in other words, 'No wonder not many people see Conrad's racism: his book is damned confusing,' — this argument could work more effectively. But as his argument stands, Achebe is being arrogant toward the majority of readers and he completely underestimates Conrad's literary genius.

Now that I have compared *Heart of Darkness* briefly to *The Secret Sharer* and *The Shadow Line: A Confession* — as well as having looked at other sources to analyze Conrad's writing style — I find it safe to make a conclusion. By looking at Conrad's theme of human nature and the depreciation of absolutes, we can see that Conrad not even remotely focuses on ensconcing his racism in his text. He uses confusion — indeed, likely his own confusion — as a device to show the shaky nature of recollection and the difficulties of searching for enlightenment and reality. Syntactically, Conrad's works are not too dissimilar: he continues to use simile and metaphor and long sentences through at least the three works analyzed. Achebe's argument, since it is an argument of intention, fails to include anything but a narrow view of Conrad's sentences, when in fact Achebe should be seeing if Conrad is actually trying to hide his racism. This does not seem to be a goal of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, as the main theme of the book is about the search for truth and reality — and how this can lead to a terrible fall. Also, Achebe's argument can simply be arrogant by presuming that no others can see racism hidden by Conrad's famously perplexing syntax. In light of this knowledge, Achebe's other arguments — the ones that receive attention from critics — are much better arguments against Conrad. (No wonder I have never read an essay that discusses the argument of intention). Perhaps if Achebe changed his argument in a few ways it could work. But, as it stands, he really should try to forget about this argument and refrain from clumsily harking back to it.

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