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JOSEPH CONRAD IN THE LIGHT OF POSTCOLONIALISM

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Abstract: This article consists of two parts. The first part presents the main concepts and facts connected with the development of postcolonial studies as a relatively new academic discipline, while the second part discusses Conrad's two 'African' works, which — containing as they do an implicit critique of colonialism and imperialism — are now seen as being one of the very first 'postcolonial' books. Over the last thirty years, postcolonial studies have not only gained the status of an academic discipline, but have become one of the main schools of literary criticism. The postcolonial approach is also critical towards those systems of presenting the world that have existed for decades and have thus come to be regarded as being natural; it undermines their position and shows that they are nothing but ideological discourses which have been created by world empires. To a great extent, postcolonial theory has relied on existing theories for its methodology and terminology. On the one hand it relies on Marxism, while on the other it leans towards poststructuralism and postmodernism. Postcolonial theory also participates in discussions concerning the position of the Other (Spivak). As well as outlining the framework of postcolonial theory, it is important that we define such terms as 'colonial' and 'postcolonial' literature. In her book entitled *Colonial and Postcolonial Fiction* (1995), Elleke Boehmer suggests limiting the field of research in order to concentrate on the modern colonial empires that have emerged over the last four or five centuries, laying particular emphasis on the British Empire, as it was here that the greatest textualization of the idea of colonial expansion took place. The terms 'colonial' and 'post-colonial' are understood differently in *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), whose authors (Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin) suggest that the the term 'post-colonial' should refer to all cultures affected by imperial expansion — from the beginnings of colonization to the present day — arguing that the expansion of colonial empires in previous centuries exerted a considerable influence on historical processes that have lasted down to our own times. Because these definitions of post(-)colonial literature do not encompass such phenomena as the literatures of multicultural metropolies or literatures going beyond the realm of the English language or beyond the literature of British or French colonialism, critics now often prefer to use expressions such as 'literature in English', 'French-language literature' or 'literature of the Caribbean' (which indicate the language or the region where a given type of literature has emerged) instead of the term 'postcolonial literature'. Most contemporary scholars see Conrad as being one of the first postcolonial writers — someone who criticized the ruthless colonial expansion of European empires and the concept of the "White Man's Burden." The works which attract particular attention are, of course, those which relate to Conrad's African experience: *An Outpost of Progress* and the excellent, albeit overexploited novella *Heart of Darkness*, which — despite its having been mentioned and referred to so many times by postcolonial critics — still evokes a great deal of controversy. In 1975 the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe famously declared Joseph Conrad to be "a bloody racist." Since the publication of Achebe's *An image of Africa* many scholars have defended the position of Conrad as one of the chief opponents

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of colonialism, stressing the fictitious nature of *Heart of Darkness*, its experimental narration and its metaphorical and symbolic character. This controversy has by no means been laid to rest.

Keywords: *An Outpost of Progress*, colonial literature, Chinua Achebe, colonialism, Congo, *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad, postcolonial literature, postcolonial studies, postcolonialism, racism

1. POSTCOLONIALISM AND POSTCOLONIAL LITERATURE

It can be said without much fear of contradiction that, over the last thirty years, postcolonial studies have not only gained the status of an academic discipline, but have become one of the main schools of literary criticism. There are many reasons for this. Postcolonial studies are to a great extent interdisciplinary, hence they enrich the realms of literature, anthropology, culture, philosophy and history. The postcolonial approach is also critical towards those systems of presenting the world that have existed for decades and have thus come to be regarded as being natural; it undermines their position and shows that they are nothing but ideological discourses which have been created by world empires. In addition, postcolonial studies themselves have undergone a continual process of self-introspection in order to ward off the two dangers of cryptocolonisation on the one hand, and — on the other — the marginalization that results from constant criticism of existing canons of knowledge.

Postcolonial theory is by no means completely independent and it would be a mistake to claim that it was this discipline that originated discussions on the role of imperialism in academic discourse. It must be emphasized that — to a great extent — postcolonial theory relies on existing theories as far as methodology and terminology are concerned. On the one hand it relies on Marxism, while on the other it leans towards poststructuralism and postmodernism. Moreover, postcolonial theory participates in discussions concerning the position of the Other — establishing his or her identity and determining whether he or she is given a chance to speak in his or her own name (Spivak).[1] In the introduction to her book on postcolonial theory,[2] Leela Gandhi writes that thanks to its current approach, the discipline meets the needs of Western humanities, as it aims at reforming the intellectual and epistemological exclusions of Western academia and makes it possible for non-Western critics to present their own cultural legacy as certain knowledge (10). After a presence of thirty years, however, postcolonial theory is still difficult to define. It would therefore be useful at the beginning of this article to look at some facts connected with the development of this discipline over the last few decades.

As far as the Marxist approach is concerned, postcolonial theory owes a lot to a group of scholars who emerged at the beginning of the 1980s and are known as the

[1] Gayatri Spivak. *Can the Subaltern Speak?* [In:] *The Post-Colonial Reader*. Ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. London: Routledge, 1995, pp. 24–28.

[2] Leela Gandhi. *Postcolonial Theory. A Critical Introduction*. St. Leonards (Australia): Allen & Unwin, 1998.

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Subaltern Studies Group (SSG). This school of criticism includes among its numbers scholars such as Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, Gyanendra Pandey and Dipesh Chakrabarty, who use the term 'subaltern' to refer to all groups of people who are repressed by a dominant power (workers, peasants, women and the indigenous people colonized by Western Empires). Over the last ten years they have turned their attention to the concept of community, which is a source of resistance against the current dominant power, even though it may itself be a source of class, caste or gender oppression. Members of the SSG also criticize the modernist project of the hegemonic nation — based on the idea of progress and secular rationalism — opting instead for fragmented societies founded on local traditions.

One of the most interesting projects of the SSG has been the idea of "Provincializing Europe" put forward by Dipesh Chakrabarty in a book published in 2000 (*Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*), in which he tries to analyse the true nature of the discourse of academic history. Chakrabarty shows that this discourse recognizes only one subject — 'Europe' — which has dominated and silenced all other existing histories:

> It is that insofar as the academic discourse of history — that is, "history" as a discourse produced at the institutional site of the university is concerned — "Europe" remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call "Indian," "Chinese," "Kenyan" and so on. There is a peculiar way in which all these other histories tend to become variations on a master narrative that could be called "the history of Europe." (27)

History produced by 'Europe' has claimed to be an unbiased, objective discipline based purely on the analysis of facts. It has told stories which always present the Old Continent in an idealised manner. However, these stories — as Chakrabarty observes — have been nothing but fiction delivered to the colonized nations in order to naturalize the process of European dominance. Chakrabarty does not limit himself to the criticism of certain colonial practices. As part of the "Provincializing Europe" project, he demands that history produced by 'Europe' include chapters on the strategies of dominance and repression used by the Old Continent in the past, as well as chapters on the relationship between history and the tale about the State, citizenship and democracy.[3]

While some critics rely on Marxist theories, other postcolonial theoreticians are followers of the two main exponents of poststructuralism — Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida — who seem to have dominated this discourse in the field of Anglo-American humanities. Indeed, through its critical approach to Western civilisation, poststructuralism has contributed considerably to the development of postcolonial studies. Postcolonial critics have adopted the Foucaultian concept of Western supremacy as a kind of union of power and knowledge. Setting aside the economic paradigms of Marxism, postcolonial critics now concentrate on the analysis of the substantive consequences and implications of colonialism, treating it as a kind of epistemological disorder of Western rationalism.

[3] These issues are discussed in the chapters "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History" (pp. 27–46) and "Minority Histories, Subaltern Pasts" (pp. 97–113).

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Inspired by poststructuralist thinking (and in particular the concept of discourse put forward by Michel Foucault), in 1978 Edward Said published his book entitled *Orientalism* — one of his key works, which has contributed enormously to the emergence of postcolonial theory as an academic discipline. Said mainly concentrates on the problems of the discursive and textual creation of colonial meanings, which led to the reinforcement of the position of rapidly developing European empires. Although the analysis of colonial discourse is but one of many areas of research, it is nevertheless quite important for critics who specialize in this field. Nowadays Said is frequently criticized, mainly for the monolithic character of his theories (the oversimplistic division of the world into the Occident and an imagined Orient). Be that as it may, he remains one of the most important figures in the history of postcolonial theory.

As well as outlining the framework of postcolonial theory, it is important that we define such terms as 'colonial' and 'postcolonial' literature. Examples of these definitions may be found in Elleke Boehmer's *Colonial and Postcolonial Fiction* (1995) and the collective work *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), written by three contemporary critics: Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin.

The prefix 'post' would seem to indicate that before the emergence of 'postcolonial literature' there must have been 'colonial literature'. These terms, however, need closer scrutiny. Elleke Boehmer draws attention to the fact that were these terms to be taken at face value, Britain would have to be treated as a postcolonial country from the moment when the last Roman soldier left the British Isles, in which case works such as *Beowulf* or *The Canterbury Tales* would have to be interpreted as postcolonial works (Boehmer 1). This, however, can hardly be the right procedure, which is why Boehmer suggests limiting the field of research in order to concentrate on the modern colonial empires that have emerged over the last four or five centuries, laying particular emphasis on the British Empire, as it was here that the greatest textualization of the idea of colonial expansion took place. Boehmer goes on to state that:

> In general, texts described as colonial or colonialist are taken to be those, like *King Solomon's Mines* or Kipling's poems, which exhibit a tinge of local colonial colour, or feature colonial motifs — for example, the quest beyond the frontiers of civilisation. (2)

The distinction between 'colonial' and 'colonialist' literature is of primary importance, as the first term refers to literature which partly reflects colonial experience (for instance Dickens's novels), whereas the second term refers to literature which is explicitly concerned with the idea of colonial expansion and which gives an account of reality from the perspective of a European colonizer. We must remember, however, that postcolonial literature encompasses not only those works which were created after the end of the Empire, but also all those works which discuss and problematize the issue of relationships between the colonizer and the colonized — and in particular those masterpieces which offer an alternative to 'canonized' colonial fiction. As Boehmer writes:

> To give expression to colonized experience, postcolonial writers sought to undercut thematically and formally the discourses which supported colonization — the myths of power, the

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> race classifications, the imagery of subordination. Postcolonial literature, therefore, is deeply marked by experiences of cultural exclusion and division under empire. Especially in its early stages it can also be a nationalist writing. Building on this, postcoloniality is defined as that condition in which the colonized seek to take their place, forcibly or otherwise, as historical subjects. (3)

Boehmer also draws attention to the difference between the terms 'postcolonial' and 'post-colonial'; the latter term (which is hyphenated) refers to literature which emerged after the Second World War, which heralded the end of European colonial empires.

The terms 'colonial' and 'post-colonial' are understood differently in *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), whose authors suggest that the term 'post-colonial' should refer to all cultures affected by imperial expansion — from the beginnings of colonization to the present day. They argue that the expansion of colonial empires in previous centuries exerted a considerable influence on historical processes that have lasted down to our own times. Hence literature labelled as African, Australian, Canadian, Bangladeshi or Indian that was created during or after the time when colonial empires flourished is post-colonial (Ashcroft 1–2).

Interestingly, with the passage of time these definitions of post(-)colonial literature — which attempt to convey its nature — have begun to lose their relevance, mainly because it has proved difficult for this category to encompass such phenomena as the literatures of multicultural metropolies or literatures going beyond the realm of the English language or beyond the literature of British or French colonialism (i.e. Latin American or Philippine literature). That is why nowadays — instead of the term 'postcolonial literature' — critics frequently use expressions such as 'literature in English', 'French-language literature' or 'literature of the Caribbean', which indicate the language or the region where a given type of literature has emerged (Kołodziejczyk 24).

2. THE CRITIQUE OF COLONIALISM IN SELECTED WORKS BY JOSEPH CONRAD

Although postcolonial literature consists predominantly of works written over the last few decades, there are still many discussions concerning the status of authors who wrote at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. Of these, one of the most frequently discussed is, of course, Joseph Conrad, whom most contemporary scholars see as being one of the first postcolonial writers — someone who criticized the sometimes ruthless and pointless colonial expansion of European empires and the concept of the "White Man's Burden." The works which attract particular attention are, of course, those which relate to Conrad's African experience: *An Outpost of Progress* and the excellent, albeit overexploited novella *Heart of Darkness*.

As far as the anticolonial overtones of these works are concerned, it must be stressed that at the time of their writing Conrad was by no means the only writer to

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be so critical of European policy in the Congo basin, as there had already been several publications exposing the atrocities that had been taking place in the Congo under the régime set up by King Leopold. The first wide-ranging critique of the Congo Free State was written by George Washington Williams, who travelled there from the United States to see whether it would be possible to entrust the work of civilisation to Black Americans. Horrified by what he saw, he wrote an open letter to King Leopold in which he described in detail the crimes that were being committed by the régime which he — the King — had set up in the Congo (omnipresent violence, the exploitation of the native population, slave-trading, the sexual exlpoitation of local women and a complete lack of educational and philanthropic work). The reaction to this letter was immediate: Stanley and others who were involved in the commercial exploitation of the Congo issued angry statements refuting all the accusations. However, Williams's letter raised concerns in official quarters and in 1891 the Congo became the subject of a debate in the Belgian Parliament.

Other voices were also raised in Europe and in the United States. An American Baptist missionary whose name was J.B. Murphy gave a detailed account of the abuses of the "rubber system." Alfred Parminter — a British Citizen who had worked for the same company that Conrad worked for in the Congo — revealed in an interview given to Reuters that he had seen a Belgian officer returning from an expedition with a number of human ears tied together on a string. The Swedish missionary Sjöblom published a series of critical articles in a Swedish Baptist weekly and sent reports to the Congo Balolo Mission in London (Harris 40). Press interest in the matter grew and — as Sven Lindquist writes — in May 1896 Sjöblom's reports were commented on in the monthly magazine *Regions Beyond*, in which journalists stressed the need for an investigation (Lindqvist, 26, Polish edition). These press comments in turn attracted the attention of Sir Charles Dilke, a former Cabinet Secretary who in July 1896 published a very critical article about the Congo in a new magazine entitled *Cosmopolis* (Lindqvist 27).

It is of more than passing interest to note that in the same year and in the same magazine Conrad published his story entitled *An Outpost of Progress*, which was his first fictional work set in Africa and which related to his own experiences in the Congo. The story is about two ordinary white men, Kayerts and Carlier, who have been posted to a distant trading station in the heart of Africa. In spite of the fact that they lack all qualifications for such work, they are withdrawn from their government posts at home and sent to an unknown country with a mission to "civilize" the wilderness and establish local markets in order to stimulate trade that will be profitable for the home country. It soon becomes obvious, however, that they are completely unprepared and lack the skills that are necessary to do what is expected of them. Moreover, their behaviour is marked by a certain arrogance resulting from feelings of fear and insecurity. Even though they show that they are able to carry out their duties, something tells them that in such conditions this is virtually impossible: "To grapple effectually with even purely material problems requires more serenity of mind and more lofty courage than people generally imagine. No two beings could have been more unfitted for such a struggle." (6)

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Kayerts and Carlier both lack the motivation to perform the tasks that they have been set and in the course of time they seem to realize that their position is rather hopeless. However, their hours of idleness spent together and the mere fact of living in total isolation draw the two men closer. As Conrad writes, "The two men got on well together in the fellowship of their stupidity and laziness. Together they did nothing, absolutely and enjoyed the sense of the idleness for which they were paid. And in time they came to feel something resembling affection for one another" (7). Their only "reliable" helper is Makola, "a Sierra Leone nigger, who maintained that his name was Henry Price" (3). He is not only totally indifferent to Kayerts and Carlier, but takes advantage of the situation and trades ten local men for ivory offered by a group of hostile tribesmen. It is worth noting that the ten station men from the neighbouring tribe are forced to live and work in appalling conditions and as a result do very little — because of their declining physical health and their low morale. While Kayerts and Carlier are disgusted with the station men's laziness and their inability to perform the tasks required of them — the very qualities which they themselves exhibit — they take pity on them and treat them with relative kindness, thus demonstrating the complex and contradictory nature of nineteenth-century colonial reality.

Kayerts and Carlier are also unfit to work in the extreme tropical conditions which are an everyday reality in central Africa. As is the case in many other accounts of colonial undertakings, Kayerts and Carlier see the wilderness around them as being untamed and threatening — not necessarily because of what it contains, but because they do not know what it might contain:

> On the sands in the middle of the stream, hippos and alligators sunned themselves side by side. And stretching away in all directions, surrounding the insignificant cleared spot of the trading post, immense forests, hiding fearful complications of fantastic life, lay in the eloquent silence of mute greatness. (8)

Their lack of mental resistance to living and working in extreme, hostile conditions makes the two Europeans speculate about what awaits them here. On the one hand they fear the dangers lurking in the impenetrable jungle, while on the other hand they know that the forest contains treasures which, though hard to get, could bring them immeasurable wealth. The wildness of their surroundings also mirrors and amplifies their inner fear of the unknown:

> [T]he contact with pure unmitigated savagery, with primitive nature and primitive man, brings sudden and profound trouble into the heart. To the sentiment of being alone of one's kind, to the clear perception of the loneliness of one's thoughts, of one's sensations — to the negation of the habitual, which is safe, there is added the affirmation of the unusual, which is dangerous; a suggestion of things vague, uncontrollable, and repulsive, whose discomposing intrusion excites the imagination and tries the civilised nerves of the foolish and the wise alike. (5)

Nevertheless, working in such conditions, Kayerts and Carlier enjoy a great amount of free time. They spend it on vain discussions about the heroes and plots of the tattered novels abandoned by their predecessor:

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> In the centre of Africa they made the acquaintance of Richelieu and of d'Artagnan, of Hawk's Eye and of Father Goriot, and of many other people. All these imaginary personages became subjects for gossip as if they had been living friends. They discounted their virtues, suspected their motives, decried their successes; were scandalised at their duplicity or were doubtful about their courage. The accounts of crimes filled them with indignation, while tender or pathetic passages moved them deeply. (8)

Carlier considers the virtues of the people in the books they read as utter "nonsense." Kayerts for his part says: "I had no idea there were such clever fellows in the world" (8). They also discover an old newspaper discussing the values of civilisation and progress brought to Africa by the white men:

> That print discussed what it was pleased to call "Our Colonial Expansion" in high-flown language. It spoke much of the rights and duties of civilization, of the sacredness of the civilizing work, and extolled the merits of those who went about bringing light, and faith and commerce to the dark places of the earth. Carlier and Kayerts read, wondered, and began to think better of themselves. Carlier said one evening, waving his hand about, "In a hundred years, there will be perhaps a town here. Quays, and warehouses, and barracks, and — and — billiard-rooms. Civilization, my boy, and virtue — and all. And then, chaps will read that two good fellows, Kayerts and Carlier, were the first civilized men to live in this very spot!" Kayerts nodded, "Yes, it is a consolation to think of that." They seemed to forget their dead predecessor; but, early one day, Carlier went out and replanted the cross firmly. "It used to make me squint whenever I walked that way," he explained to Kayerts over the morning coffee. "It made me squint, leaning over so much. So I just planted it upright. And solid, I promise you! I suspended myself with both hands to the cross-piece. Not a move. Oh, I did that properly." (8–9)

Contrary to the expectations evoked by the newspaper article, neither Kayerts nor Carlier has the potential to create a new future for this place. They are not imperialistic enough — nor do they work towards increasing colonial expansion. Even their director considers them to be useless men left in the wilderness to care for a "useless station"[4] (4). Nevertheless, by reading the newspaper the men begin to gain a sense of self-esteem. Unfortunately for them, replanting the cross is the only positive action they take.[5] They simply lack initiative, which is confirmed by their admission that they have come to Africa not entirely of their own free will, but rather because of others in their lives. Carlier refers to his brother-in-law, whereas Kayerts mentions his daughter: "If it wasn't for my Melie, you wouldn't catch me here" (6). It may be that their lack of progress is due to the fact that "they are prisoners, with no conception or knowledge of alternative options; and as a result, they are forced to remain within the confines and rules of the society."[6] In addition, colonial propaganda excluded any possibility of integrating with the local people: "These facts are the major contributor to the reason why Kayerts and Carlier are unable to cope with their new

[4] Trudy A. Martinez. "An Analysis of Joseph Conrad's *The Outpost of Progress*". http://gramatrudy.wordpress.com/2006/12/12/an-outcast-of-progress-by-trudy-a-martinez-an-analysis-of-joseph-conrads-the-outpost-of-progress/ (August 2012).

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] *Ibid.*

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environment, and the resulting reason why they lack initiative."[7] This also explains why they suffer from extreme loneliness.

Their lack of initiative also leads Kayerts and Carlier to accept the evil slave trade in which Makola is involved:

> To be sure of their demise, Makola has only to gain the white man's acceptance of the evil deceitful trade he makes. So, he places his dependence on vice and greed in his efforts to sway the white man's deteriorating values away from the virtues of civilisation. Once the two men accept vice as a method of gain over virtue, they begin to have an "inarticulate feeling something within them is gone, something that worked for their safety"(17). Then, they become fearful and distraught, totally dependent upon their own deficient faculties in a struggle for survival (The men effectively strip themselves of the values they previously clung to). Finally, Kayerts and Carlier become distrusting of each other, quarreling over any minute trivial. In essence, they become savages. Failure after failure besets them.[8]

As a result, the reader is not surprised by the meaningless death of Carlier and by Kayerts' suicide. Conrad's concluding lines express his attitude towards the idea of bringing European civilisation to Africa:

> A shriek inhuman, vibrating and sudden, pierced like a sharp dart the white shroud of that land of sorrow. Three short, impatient screeches followed, and then, for a time, the fog-wreaths rolled on, undisturbed, through a formidable silence. Then many more shrieks, rapid and piercing, like the yells of some exasperated and ruthless creature, rent the air. Progress was calling to Kayerts from the river. Progress and civilisation and all the virtues. Society was calling to its accomplished child to come, to be taken care of, to be instructed, to be judged, to be condemned; it called him to return to that rubbish heap from which he had wandered away, so that justice could be done. (22)

Conrad's most bitter irony concerning the mission of the white men is expressed in the very last scene, in which Kayerts — who is already dead — "[puts] out a swollen tongue at his managing director" (23). This is also a clear criticism of the naive belief of some Europeans in the steadfastness of their convictions — a belief which more than once has unleashed useless violence leading to the deaths of many thousands of people, be they those who served their "King and Country" or those who were their victims.

Although the problem of the exploitation of Africa by colonisers is one of the central issues discussed in Conrad's unforgettable novella *Heart of Darkness*, it is interesting to note that this work, which has been mentioned and referred to so many times by postcolonial critics, still evokes a great deal of controversy. We all remember Chinua Achebe, who — while lecturing at the University of Massachusetts in 1975 — declared that Joseph Conrad was "a bloody racist."[9] Though not the first reference to the issue of racism in Conrad's works, this statement gave rise to a heat-

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] Achebe used the expression "bloody racist" in the first version of the paper which he presented at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst in February 1975 ("An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*"). In the later, amended versions he changed it to "thoroughgoing racist."

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ed debate on, among other things, Conrad's view of other, and in particular non-European nations.

As Achebe himself admitted, the inspiration to write this paper came from a few conversations he had had with acquaintances and from a discussion with students attending an "African literature" course. These conversations made him realize that very few people were aware of the existence of such areas of study as African literature or African history. This ignorance, he claims, is unfortunately reinforced by the publications of scholars such as Trevor-Roper, who in 1963 ventured the opinion that: "Perhaps in the future there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none, or very little: there is only the history of Europe in Africa. The rest is largely darkness."[10] Achebe concludes that such views prove that there is "the desire — one might indeed say the need — in Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations" (2). These negations exist in many canonical literary texts, particularly those whose action is set on the black continent — hence Achebe's decision to provide a critical analysis of Conrad's masterpiece about a journey up the River Congo.

The plot of *Heart of Darkness* is well known and there is no need to provide a summary here. It may be useful, however, to discuss a few important issues which appear in most interpretations. The first of these is the very title of the novella. The metaphor "heart of darkness" not only suggests that Africa is imagined to be a benighted, primitive and isolated Black Continent, but refers to the archetypal evil that is latent in every human being. The title is also an ironic comment on a speech made in 1876 by King Leopold, who proclaimed the need to "pierce the darkness enshrouding entire populations" (Lewis 35). As regards the motif of the journey, most scholars agree that Conrad's novella is not only an account of Marlow's expedition up the river Congo, but is also a journey back in time to places that are still ruled by the mysterious forces of nature (Marlow's digression on the Roman conquest of Britain is very important here), as well as being the journey of a European inside his own mind. In the case of Kurtz, the journey ends when he reaches the layers of monstrosity that have been suppressed by his civilised European superego and are released by the wild, overwhelming power of nature. Marlow for his part travels up the snake-like river in a quest for his true "self." Tempted by this snake, Conrad's protagonist condemns himself to self-exile, as there is no return from the "heart of darkness" — into which he is going — to an ontologically stable world with incontrovertible values and a clearly defined identity.

In his paper, Achebe says that when Conrad wrote *Heart of Darkness*, he mocked African landscapes as well as African people.[11] In Conrad's novella — according to the Nigerian critic — the African land of his birth becomes a different, alien world — the antithesis of European civilisation — a primitive and brutal place where primordial instincts reign supreme. The story begins on the silent River Thames which,

[10] The Oxford professor Hugh Trevor-Roper aired this opinion during a series of lectures that were broadcast by the BBC in 1963.

[11] Cf. Caryl Phillips. "Out of Africa". *The Guardian*, 22nd February 2003, http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/feb/22/classics.chinuaachebe (August 2012).

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as Conrad writes, has also been "one of the dark places of the earth" (33). Soon afterwards, however, the reader is taken to the distant River Congo — one of the dark places of those times: "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 impenetrable forest" (61). An analysis of the experience that Marlow gains during his journey suggests that the reality of Africa has left an indelible imprint on his psyche. The problem that Achebe wishes to highlight is that in the souls of white men the Black Continent and its primaeval world release the evil that has been suppressed by European culture and civilisation:

> I tried to break the spell — the heavy, mute spell of the wilderness — that seemed to draw him to its pitiless breast by the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts, by the memory of gratified and monstrous passions. This alone, I was convinced, had driven him out to the edge of the forest, to the bush, towards the gleam of fires, the throb of drums, the drone of weird incantations; this alone had beguiled his unlawful soul beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations. (94)

However, as Caryl Phillips observes in his article entitled "Out of Africa": "it is when Achebe turns to Conrad's treatment of African humanity that he is most disparaging of Conrad's vision. He quotes from the moment in the novel when the Europeans on the steamer encounter real-life Africans in the flesh":[12]

> 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 — and you so remote from the night of first ages — could comprehend. (63–4)

"These people are 'ugly', — Phillips continues — but what is even more disturbing is that they are in some way also human. A half-page later, Conrad focuses on one particular African, who, according to Achebe, is rare, for he is not presented as 'just limbs or rolling eyes'(5). The problem is that the African man is, most disturbingly, not 'in his place'."[13]

> And between whiles I had to look after the savage who was a fireman. He was an improved specimen; he could fire up a vertical boiler. He was there below me, and, upon my word, to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind legs. (64)

Phillips notes that "Those critics who have defended *Heart of Darkness* against charges of racism have often pointed to both the methodology of narration and

[12] *Ibid.*

[13] *Ibid.*

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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":[14]

> 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 to be totally wasted because he neglects to hint, clearly and adequately, 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. Conrad seems to me to approve of Marlow. Marlow seems to me to enjoy Conrad's complete confidence — a feeling reinforced by the close similarities between their two careers. (7)

Phillips also notes that "Achebe is […] aware of Conrad's ambivalence towards the colonising mission, and he concedes that the novel is, in part, an attempt to examine what happens when Europeans come into contact with this particular form of economic and social exploitation. In the lecture he remembers that a student in Scotland once informed him that Africa is 'merely a setting for the disintegration of the mind of Mr Kurtz', which is an argument that many teachers and critics, let alone students, have utilised to defend the novel. But to read the book in this way is to further stir Achebe's outrage":[15]

> Africa as a setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as a 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. (9)

Concluding his account of Achebe's critical evaluation of Conrad, Phillips observes: "Achebe has no problem with a novel that seeks to question both European ambivalence towards the colonising mission and her own 'system' of civilisation. 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."[16]

Since the publication of Achebe's lecture (under the title *An Image of Africa*) there have been dozens of articles and critical works defending the position of Conrad as one of the chief opponents of colonialism. They have stressed the fictitious nature of *Heart of Darkness*, its experimental narration and its metaphorical and symbolic character. They have also drawn attention to the personal experience Conrad gained while working for the Belgian company *Société Anonyme Belge pour le Commerce*

[14] *Ibid.*

[15] *Ibid.*

[16] *Ibid.*

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du Haut-Congo. Here it must be said that Conrad was one of the few Europeans who had the opportunity to travel to the Congo towards the end of the nineteenth century (i.e. in 1890) and see with his own eyes how the achievements of civilisation were being brought to central Africa. It is also worth remembering that in order to get to Léopoldville — where he was to board his steamer — he first had to walk 230 miles in tropical conditions. We find references to this in Conrad's *Congo Diary*:

> Thursday, 3rd July (1890)
> […] Met an off[ic]er of the State inspecting; a few minutes afterwards saw at a camp[in]g place the dead body of a Backongo. Shot? Horrid smell. […]
> Friday, 4th July
> Left camp at 6 a.m. after a very unpleasant night. Marching across a chain of hills. At 8:15 opened out into an undulating [sic] plain. […] Sharp ascents up very steep hills not very high. The higher mountains recede sharply and show a low hilly country. At 9:30 market place. […]
> Saw another dead body lying by the path in an attitude of meditative repose (Conrad, qtd in Najder 129).

Zdzisław Najder writes that after Conrad's African experience, the Congo remained in his memory as a "fixed nightmare" (140). As he penetrates deeper and deeper into the dense African jungle and its mysterious, metaphorical darkness, the image of the interior of the Black Continent and Conrad's own memories become more and more hazy, uncertain, confusing and even obscure. Looking at other notes in the *Congo Diary*, we notice irritation and disgust at what the author saw. After what are sometimes detailed descriptions of landscapes, people and difficulties encountered on the journey ("water scarce and bad, mosquitos, bad night, no sleep, dead bodies"), he concludes: "Glad to see the end of this stupid tramp. Feel rather seedy." (qtd in Najder 132). What is important to note, however, is that nowhere in the diary do we find any explicit comments which might show that Conrad was in any way prejudiced against indigenous Africans.

Contrary to what Achebe suggests in his lecture, *Heart of Darkness* does contain a very severe critique of colonialism in Africa. Indeed, in the opinion of many scholars it is one of the first texts to have been classified as being 'postcolonial'. The months Conrad spent there made him aware not only of the avarice and insincerity of the colonisers, who were desperate to gain as much as possible in the shortest possible time, but also of the chaotic nature and sheer absurdity of their actions. The most terrible experience, however, was that of witnessing the violence and ill treatment meted out to the indigenous Africans. Conrad's description of people building the railway line from Matadi is one of the most moving in the whole book:

> 'Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees, leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair. Another mine on the cliff went off, followed by a slight shudder of the soil under my feet. The work was going on. The work! And this was the place where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die.
>
> '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,

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> lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. Brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest. These moribund shapes were free as air — and nearly as thin (44).

As has been mentioned above, Conrad makes use of a multi-level narration and this has a considerable influence on the reception of *Heart of Darkness*. The extradiegetic narrator who presents the background of the story is an unnamed character who meets a few other people on board the cruising yawl *Nellie* in order to listen to the tale of a journey up the River Congo told by Marlow, who is the central, albeit intradiegetic narrator in the novella. In his critical interpretation of *Heart of Darkness* Achebe makes a serious mistake in trying to identify the voice of Marlow as that of Conrad himself, but such inferences are nothing new, given that both Conrad and Marlow have had similar experiences. In his *Notes on My Books*, published in 1921, Conrad offers the following explanation:

> The origins of that gentleman [Marlow] (nobody as far as I know had ever hinted that he was anything but that) — [and] his origins have been the subject of some literary speculation of, I am glad to say, a friendly nature.
>
> One would think that I am the proper person to throw a light on the matter; but in truth I find that it isn't so easy. It is pleasant to remember that nobody had charged him with fraudulent purposes or looked down on him as a charlatan; but apart from that he was supposed to be all sorts of things: a clever screen, a mere device, a "personator," a familiar spirit, a whispering "dæmon." I myself have been suspected of a meditated plan for his capture.
>
> That is not so. I made no plans. The man Marlow and I came together in the casual manner of those health-resort acquaintances which sometimes ripen into friendships. This one has ripened. For all his assertiveness in matters of opinion he is not an intrusive person. He haunts my hours of solitude, when, in silence, we lay our heads together in great comfort and harmony; but as we part at the end of a tale I am never sure that it may not be for the last time. Yet I don't think that either of us would care much to survive the other. In his case, at any rate, his occupation would be gone and he would suffer from that extinction, because I suspect him of some vanity. I don't mean vanity in the Solomonian sense. Of all my people he's the one that has never been a vexation to my spirit. A most discreet, understanding man. […][17]

The stories told by this character (who has been created by Conrad) are fiction and ought to be interpreted as such. Contrary to Achebe's inference, Marlow's point of view cannot be considered to be that of Conrad, even though the novella itself contains autobiographical elements. It is clear that in many parts of the book Conrad distances himself from the narrator he has created — to mention but the way Marlow is characterized by the extradiegetic narrator:

> The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine. (33)

[17] Joseph Conrad. *Notes On My Books*, www.gutenberg.org. Note on *Youth* (August 2012).

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In this passage Conrad stresses the impressionistic, metaphorical and symbolic nature of *Heart of Darkness*: Marlow's tale emerges from the mist of the narrative and we are unable to clearly comprehend and evaluate the characters themselves or the actions they take.

Was Conrad a racist, as Achebe claims? In his book entitled *Postcolonial Criticism* Nicholas Harrison writes that "by today's standards, Joseph Conrad was, in fact, racist, in ways that were all but inevitable given that he lived when and where he did." (3) He adds, however, that those who wish to espouse Achebe's way of thinking ought to be aware of two important consequences that it entails. The first is that the very concept of racism needs recontextualization, for — interestingly — the term itself was first coined as late as the 1930s, i.e. several decades after the first publication of *Heart of Darkness*. The second consequence is that the whole debate must be about Conrad's text and not about Conrad himself. Bearing this in mind, we need to remember one more thing: the very structure of *Heart of Darkness*, — its vagueness, its incomprehensibility, its jumbled chronology, its omissions and Marlow's frequent digressions — enables us to see the weakness of colonial discourse, which is all the more reason for making it the subject of critical analysis. Apart from giving powerful descriptions of the physical violence that was part and parcel of colonialism, Conrad was also successful in exposing the epistemological violence that was perpetrated in its name. In his day, anyone who openly attempted to criticize the colonial policies of the European empires was often silenced or marginalized by a volley of extremely angry, bitter refutations and counter-charges, which Conrad — who was at the beginning of his writing career — no doubt wished to avoid. Notwithstanding the arguments put forward by Achebe, when we read *An Outpost of Progress* and *Heart of Darkness* today we cannot but realize that — long before the emergence of poststructuralism and postcolonial studies — Conrad made a successful attempt to challenge colonial discourse from within and thus reveal its hypocrisy.

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