

HEART OF DARKNESS AND THE AFRICAN STORY:
THE (NOW QUESTIONED) CRITICISM OF COLONIALISM

Heart of Darkness is one of the most emblematic works written by Conrad and occupies a paramount position in English studies. Its influence has transcended the literary context, one of the best examples of this phenomenon being Francis Ford Coppola's film *Apocalypse Now*, a version of Conrad's novella. A possible explanation for this success has been given by Robert Burden who has said that *Heart of Darkness* is the ideal modernist set text, pointing out that although it is a brief work it is full of different layers of meaning (ix).

This complexity poses the problem of interpretation. Conrad himself thought that works of art inevitably acquire a symbolic character. In fact, two main trends, sometimes antagonistic, can be distinguished in the critical analysis of *Heart of Darkness*. One that sees it as a realist work, dealing with adventure and political affairs; the other considers it a typical modernist novel, mainly impressionistic.

Following this second line, several symbolic and archetypal story patterns have been formulated. Thus Marlow's voyage has been taken as a kind of quest for self-knowledge. The work has also been related to myths enshrined in the literary tradition, as the quest for the Holy Grail or the descent into hell; in turn, Kurtz's "unspeakable rites" have prompted critics to trace satanic features in his personality, echoing the faustian myth and suggesting the existence of a compact with the wilderness.¹

All these metaphorical interpretations comply with the idea expressed by Doris Lessing that Africa is used by European writers "as a peg to hang their egos on" (700). The Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe has similar ideas saying that "A novel written about Africa by Joseph Conrad, Joyce Cary, or Graham Greene is also a novel about Europe" (Carroll, 2). According to these views, Conrad's Africa would be the dark continent of the European imagination, merely a symbol or a backcloth (Carroll, 3).

There is no doubt that *Heart of Darkness* stands as the masterpiece it is on account of these multiple meanings and the rich symbolism it embraces. But the fact is that the African story of adventures and colonial involvement is always present and this is one of the core texts in several scholarly fields labelled as colonial, post-colonial or political studies.

¹ Many more interpretations could be mentioned. Kimbrough has analysed the story in terms of phallus and vulva (413). Burden has seen the journey as quest (for the other / for the self), enigma and revelation, life and death (76). Similarly, Albert Guerard says the novel belongs to the genre of the spiritual autobiography, it is not simply a travelogue because it attempts to convey the spiritual nuances of spiritual crisis and change, thus it belongs to archetypal-myth literature (2-14). The connection with the faustian myth has been studied, among others, by Cedric Watts, Ian Watt and Jeremy Hawthorn.

Heart of Darkness has been considered for many years a classic in the denunciation of imperialism but some post-colonial critics, in their attempt to reappraise classical canonical texts, have exposed Conrad as a representative of the imperialistic values he was allegedly attacking. These scholars point out how Conrad uses Africa as a symbol for evil and primeval force. Furthermore, they say he does not provide psychological insights into his black characters, who are reduced to playing marginal roles (Ward, 62).

In fact, if we apply the theory of descriptive focus in fiction put forward by Leech and Short we will realize that concentration on the Africans' physical detail may appear as derogatory. Thus, Marlow sees on the river bank "naked breasts, arms, legs, glaring eyes -the bush was swarming with human limbs in movement" (46). On the other hand, animal imagery is used too often when describing human beings: "That fool-helmsman his hands on the spokes was lifting his knees high, stamping his feet, champing his mouth, like a reined-in horse" (46). The description of the steamer's fireman is not more appreciative, establishing a link between the African and a circus figure: "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 waling on his hind legs" (38).

All this has led Chinua Achebe to denounce Conrad as a racist. He points out how Africans are consistently portrayed in *Heart of Darkness* as primitive individuals without even proper verbal communicative capacity, the descriptive passages reducing them to a savage appearance. From a linguistic point of view, Achebe has even said that Conrad's love of the word nigger should be of interest to psychoanalysts" (Ward, 258).

Following a similar line of reasoning, Frances Singh says that Conrad uses semantic fields conveying the idea of brutality, monstrosity, evil, so that "the people of Africa begin to be tinged by the qualities that these words connote" (271). This critic further says that "Marlow's sympathy for the oppressed blacks is only superficial. He feels sorry for them when he sees them dying, but when he sees them healthy, practising their customs, he feels nothing but abhorrence and loathing ..." (272).

The Marxist critic Terry Eagleton points out that Conrad questions the materialism and commercialism of the imperialistic adventure but, as a conservative man, he does not condemn its general basis. According to him, Conrad limits his criticism to the worst excesses of colonialism while approving of the general idea that it is right for Europe to conquer those underdeveloped territories which need superior forms of civilization (251-262).

Other scholars have expressed similar ideas by equating the figures of author (Conrad) and main narrator (Marlow). As Robert Hamner says "Marlow can deplore excesses of exploitation while he reflects simultaneously the slightly less violent ideology of England" (112).

In fact, Marlow condemns nations as Belgium or France whose action in Africa is disqualified as the exertion of brute force but he refers to the red spots on the map of Africa (presumably British) as places where real work is done. He appreciates the British colonization as having positive undertones: "what saves us is efficiency" he will say, reflecting Con-

rad's own perception that "liberty ... can only be found under the English flag all over the world" (Baines, 238).

Martin Green, in his study of imperialism in contemporary English literature, is categorical when saying that Conrad "was never the anti-imperialist artist he has been taken to be. Even *Heart of Darkness*, canonical amongst the documents of modern literature, has adventure motifs, and even imperialist themes" (38). He proceeds to quote the passage at the beginning of the work in which mention of the glorious past of the river Thames is made:

The tidal current runs to and fro in its unceasing service ... It had known and served all the men of whom the nation is proud, from Sir Francis Drake to Sir John Franklin, knights all, titled and untitled -the great knights-errant of the sea ... Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame they all had gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire. (8)

No doubt, this passage is imbued with an imperialistic rhetoric. The task of colonization is described as a demanding service with spiritual connotations. The style is pompous so as to achieve an epic effect which suits the grandeur of the events.

However, when discussing the meaning and interpretation of *Heart of Darkness* and Conrad's attitude towards colonialism, we cannot forget that all these controversial critical stances must be considered taking into account the point of view from which the story is told.

The coincidences between the figures of Conrad and Marlow are so many that some critics as Wayne Booth, Ian Watt and Frederick Karl readily identify both personalities. But this identification is not to be taken for granted and it is actually counterbalanced by the fact that Marlow's story comes to us through another narrator. It is this narrator, and not Marlow, the one who utters the words quoted above.¹ It is therefore incongruent to attribute to Conrad simultaneously the perceptions of Marlow and those of the first narrator who, although unnamed, is clearly distinct from both character and author.

Some prominent post-colonial writers and critics as Wilson Harris and V. S. Naipaul have expressed their recognition of Conrad's contribution to literature and to the anti-colonialist cause. Even the Kenyan Ngugi wa Thiong'o, well known for his militant anti-imperialistic attitude, has repeatedly written about his admiration of Conrad.

In this line of recognition, the Ugandan scholar P. Nazareth has expressed his view that while Conrad reflects the racial and colonialist prejudices of the time, his radical exposure of the

¹ As Andrea White has remarked it is necessary to distinguish a subtle distancing between creator and character. Conrad presents Marlow as a narrator who understands only partially his experiences, his knowledge of reality is incomplete, characterized by ellipses, gaps and uncertainties (179). David Ward points out how Marlow introduces his words while addressing an audience of sailors. We may consider the oral character of the narrative as an influence of the yarns of seamen which Conrad should be much acquainted with. This critic suggests that novels which are based on oral skills are typical of some writers who use a language which is not their mother tongue. This would be the case with Conrad, Karen Blixen and Nabokov (47).

evils of colonization makes him a “mental liberator: not only for those blinded at home but also for those who were to come later, the colonized elite wearing the eyes of Europe” (178).

As Nazareth suggests, any critical interpretation of *Heart of Darkness* must have as its starting point the consideration of the intellectual circumstances at the end of the 19th century, pervaded by an imperialistic ideology represented by figures as Cecil Rhodes who suggested the superiority of the white race or Herbert Spencer who adapted Darwinism to deal with social matters, referring to the survival of the fittest. These ideas encouraged the conquest of overseas territories so as to increase the wealth and capability for survival of Europe, in the belief that, at the same time, a superior civilization was being spread to the rest of the Earth.

In this intellectual context, Edward Salmon published in 1924 *The Literature and Art of the Empire*, dealing with the work of authors as Kingsley, Marryatt or Kipling.¹ Curiously enough, Conrad is not included in this selection, something we can interpret as a consequence of his dissident attitude towards celebration of imperialism. In this respect, the American scholar Mary Louise Pratt includes the Anglo-Polish Conrad in the category of “hyphenated white men” (with the Franco-American Du Chailu and the Anglo-Irish Roger Casement) who were instrumental in exposing European excesses in the Congo since “Each was a white man whose national and civic identifications were multiple and often conflicted; each had lived out in deep personal and social histories the raw realities of Euroexpansionism, white supremacy ...” (210-213).

No doubt, Conrad’s origin and family circumstances help to understand why he wrote a work as *Heart of Darkness* precisely at the time of maximum expansion and glorification of the European empires. We must admit that the second narrative voice (i.e. Marlow) is clearly involved in the denunciation of the evils of colonialism. The very first words uttered by him in the book (“And this also, has been one of the dark places of the earth”, 9) obviously combat the common view of the Europeans as superior, at least they ask for the condemnation of the abuse of human beings by those who had been once colonized too. Marlow refers later to the vast spaces in Africa left by their inhabitants and a sympathetic narrative voice makes an irrefutable comment:

If a lot of mysterious niggers armed with all kinds of fearful weapons suddenly took to travelling on the road 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. (23)

The domestic reference to well-known places in Britain is clearly intended to provoke some kind of emotional involvement on the part of the narratee. Furthermore, Marlow refers to the

¹ The three authors exemplify imperialistic celebration as can be seen in Kipling’s poem “Recessional” or in his novels. Captain Frederick Marryatt (1792-1848) is the author of *Peter Simple*, *Masterman Ready* (about a family who have to fight savages to survive). Henry Kingsley (1830-1876) spent five years in Australia where he served in the mounted police, he wrote as a result of that voyage *Geoffrey Hamlyn* and *The Hillyars and the Burtons*.

sound of African drums in the bush as having “as profound a meaning as the sound of bells in a Christian country” (23). Africans are not considered here as anonymous savages and Marlow dares to suggest their similarity -at least spiritually- with the honourable churchgoers in Britain or any other European nation. It is evident that, the more dignity the natives are endowed with, the more abominable European abuses will seem.

The absurdity of the European presence in Africa is frequently referred to. At the very beginning of the story there is a passage which shows how the incongruities of white men may turn painfully harmful for the African continent:

Once, I remember, we came upon a man-of-war anchored off the coast. There wasn't even a shed there and she was shelling the bush. It appears the French had one of their wars going on thereabouts. Her ensign drooped limp like a rag, the muzzles of the long six-inch guns stuck out all over the low hull, the greasy, slimy swell swung her up lazily and let her down, swaying her thin masts. In the empty immensity of earth, sky, and water, there she was, incomprehensible, firing into a continent. (17)

There is a first reference to the particular circumstance, the shelling of the bush, the presence of the ship off the coast prepared for its destructive action, its power conveyed through the detailed description of the guns. Taking into account that “muzzle” is also the nose of an animal, we might be reminded of a scene in nature in which a pack of wolves or lions were ready to attack a prey, but the accuracy of the measures provided (six-inch guns) points to a different kind of danger, that posed by technology to a world which is in its purest primeval state.

The description of the French flag is extremely critical. This archetypal symbol of nationhood has very often martial implications of power and national prestige but the fact that it is drooping limp, as it is scornfully described here, suggests images of decadence or moral corruption.

While there is no doubt of the superiority of the French troops and their military equipment, there is a secondary reference, which takes us away from this particular scene, placing the ship in a new context, the immensity of the earth, of a continent. Even the measures previously provided have a totally different relevance when set against the new scale. On the other hand, sibilant alliteration “the greasy, slimy swell swung her up lazily” recreates an atmosphere of smoothness and quietness, which emphasizes the role of the French as trespassers.

It is clear then, that Conrad's work can be interpreted in radically different ways depending on the critical stance we take. Even the same passage may get opposite appraisals:

the crowd ... filled the clearing, covered the slope with a mass of naked, breathing, quivering, bronze bodies. I steamed up a bit, then swung downstream, and two thousand eyes followed the evolutions of the splashing, thumping fierce river-demon beating the water with its terrible tail and breathing black smoke into the air. In front of the first rank, along the river, three men, plastered with bright red earth from head to

foot, strutted to and fro restlessly. When we came abreast again, they faced the river, stamped their feet, nodded their horned heads, swayed their scarlet bodies: they shook towards the fierce river-demon a bunch of black feathers, a mangy skin with a pendent tail -something that looked like a dried gourd: they shouted periodically together strings of amazing words that resembled no sounds of human language; and the deep murmurs of the crowd, interrupted suddenly, were like the responses of some satanic litany. (66)

We can find elements which would attest to Conrad's supposedly racist attitude. There are some reasons to take this passage from the end of the story as representative of an imperialistic ideology. On the one hand there is an obvious concentration on physical detail when describing the Africans, portrayed as "a mass of naked bronze bodies". On the other the reference to the lack of verbal capacity ("words that resembled no sounds of human language") is striking. We must also note how Africans are presented performing strange rituals which astonish the Western observer who ends up by granting them satanic status.

But, at the time we draw these conclusions, we have to acknowledge the self-criticism implicit in the presentation of European action in Africa. The description of the steamer makes it appear also as strange and alien to the natives, the same satanic connotations mentioned before are similarly attributed to the ship, the "fierce river-demon beating the water with its terrible tail". No doubt, Marlow refrains from considering himself a saviour or a messenger of civilization, he rather seems to assume the role of intruder.

We might conclude by summing up the traditional and the post-colonial evaluations of *Heart of Darkness* and Conrad by quoting Robert Hamner: "As an outsider, he could not authentically reflect the African's inside view: nevertheless, he had clarity of vision to see more in Africa than the accepted European glosses" (115). Similarly C. P. Sarvan has said that "Conrad was not entirely immune to the infection of the beliefs and attitudes of his age, but he was ahead of most in trying to break free" (285).

Jesús Varela Zapata
University of Santiago de Compostela

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