Marlowe's Questionable Racism: The Struggle between Human Sentiment and Nurtured Principles

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the article's first paragraph.

Written between the years of 1898 and 1899, Joseph Conrad's famous novella, Heart of Darkness, fictionalized the historical reality of an area secretly steeped in colonial rule by the viciously greedy and cruel King Leopold II. Between the years of 1885 and 1908, the Belgian ruler transformed the African Congo into his personal empire by exploiting not only the Congo's natural resources (rubber and ivory), but also the Congolese Africans' slave labor. Joseph Conrad published Heart of Darkness in response to his own experiences while traveling in the Belgian Congo. For decades Heart of Darkness was hailed a literary masterpiece written with a critical attitude towards the colonization of Africans by foreign powers, and especially the denunciation of Belgium's justified ownership of the Congo. However, during the twentieth century critical debates began to arise around the novella's narrator, Charles Marlow, and whether or not his view of the Africans is racist, and by extension, whether or not Heart of Darkness is a racist novella altogether that does not deserve the literary credit it has gained in the past.
Marlow’s Questionable Racism:  
The Struggle between Human Sentiment and Nurtured Principles  
By Michelle Rizzo

Written between the years of 1898 and 1899, Joseph Conrad’s famous novella, Heart of Darkness, fictionalized the historical reality of an area secretly steeped in colonial rule by the viciously greedy and cruel King Leopold II. Between the years of 1885 and 1908, the Belgian ruler transformed the African Congo into his personal empire by exploiting not only the Congo’s natural resources (rubber and ivory), but also the Congolese Africans’ slave labor. Joseph Conrad published Heart of Darkness in response to his own experiences while traveling in the Belgian Congo. For decades Heart of Darkness was hailed a literary masterpiece written with a critical attitude towards the colonization of Africans by foreign powers, and especially the denunciation of Belgium’s justified ownership of the Congo. However, during the twentieth century critical debates began to arise around the novella’s narrator, Charles Marlow, and whether or not his view of the Africans is racist, and by extension, whether or not Heart of Darkness is a racist novella altogether that does not deserve the literary credit it has gained in the past.

From examining the tension between Marlow’s innate human nature and his nurtured principles an answer to this discussion can most appropriately be developed. However, in order to be familiar with how this conflict applies to Marlow, the reader must first understand exactly what the terms “human nature” and “nurtured principles” refer to within the context of this discussion. The concept of “nature” holds that all organisms possess distinct characteristics that are not created or developed as a result of one’s environment but rather because of one’s genetic framework. For humans, one’s “nature” includes one’s instinctive emotion and/or behavioral reactions to instances that occur within one’s environment (Maciônis 62). Therefore, for this discussion references to Marlow’s “nature” refer to his emotional reactions based on his genetic code. What is meant by nurtured, or learned, principles are the attitudes towards imperialism and Africans that Marlow possesses due to the influence and teaching of his environment. By the 19th century, most Europeans held many arrogant attitudes regarding themselves. Europeans defined themselves as a technologically and intellectually superior race, and they used this haughty attitude to justify the colonial rule of those less “civilized.” According to George Fredrickson, whatever their practical intentions or purposes, the invaders did not confront the native peoples without certain preconceptions about their nature that helped shape the way they pursued their goals. Conceptions of ‘savagery’ [developed] in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and became the common property of Western European culture...These beliefs were not yet racist in the nineteenth century sense of the term because they were not based on an explicit doctrine of genetic or biological inequality; but they could provide an equivalent basis for considering some categories of human beings inferior to others in ways that made it legitimate to treat them differently from Europeans. (7)

From Fredrick’s statement, readers of Heart of Darkness can historically situate the text and, more importantly, Marlow’s racist attitude in the novella’s opening. This statement, and more specifically the phrase “explicit doctrine of genetic or biological inequality,” is extremely significant because it directly states that between the sixteenth and nineteenth century a radical idea regarding the nature v. nurture conflict developed.

By the nineteenth century, Europeans felt that they were excluded from the concept of “savagery” based primarily on their biological and/or genetic makeup rather than their intellect. According to the Australian Psychological Society, “Psychology’s emergence as a new branch of science [in the mid-nineteenth century] was also located within the context of the rise of imperial powers such as Germany and Britain. Pioneers in the new science of human measurement...contributed much to theories which relied on skull measurements as ‘proof’ of the superiority of the European (male) brain” (1). Therefore, racism towards others included and demonstrated biological inferiority as well as intellectual inadequacies. In fact, Herbert Spencer’s concept of Social Darwinism spread all throughout Europe in the mid-nineteenth century and heightened the Western attitude that society was a “jungle,” and that Europeans were the “fittest” to survive. According to Ian Watt, “[Social Darwinism] provided an ideology for colonial expansion. Merely by occupying or controlling most of the globe, it was assumed, the European nations had demonstrated that they were the fittest to survive; and the accelerating exportation of their various economic, political and religious institutions was therefore a necessary evolutionary step towards a higher form of human organization in the rest of the world” (80).

Therefore, Marlow’s attitude towards imperialism in Heart of Darkness’ opening centers around the nurtured principle that Europeans nobly brought “civilization” to the world’s “savages” specifically for the latter’s spiritual and/or intellectual benefit. As a result of this line of reasoning, the harsh treatment of
the Africans as well as the conquest of the earth (more appropriately referred to as “the scramble for Africa”) was justified.

Based on the language in the opening of Marlow’s narrative, one can unquestionably state that Marlow does indeed depict the Africans in a negative manner and supports the European’s so-called humanitarian explanation of imperialism. Marlow’s nurtured principles chiefly govern his inner self by suppressing his human sentiments, and so his racist references towards the Africans are appropriate for portraying 19th century attitudes of European racism. However, after specific incidents where Marlow interacts with these supposedly “savage” natives, the emergence of his intrinsic emotions begins to influence his previously prejudice views and demean Europe’s attempted justification of imperialism. Therefore, in order for one to argue that Marlow is or is not unquestionably a racist, one would have to prove that either his human sentiments or his learned principles solely dominate his consciousness. However, the purpose of this discussion, through the analysis of the language in key passages, is to show that the struggle between Marlow’s emotional reaction to situations (his nature) and his European attitudes (his nurture) is never solved. Even at the novel’s closing, human sentiment and nurtured reasoning are treated as mutually exclusive components of Marlow’s inner self that constantly conflict with one another. Because the result of Marlow’s experiences is mainly a feeling of ambiguity, one cannot argue with complete certainty whether or not Marlow is racist, but one can prove that the authenticity of Marlow's indoctrinated principles are beginning to weaken due to the recognition and acceptance of his inherent emotions.

For instance, African writer and critic Chinua Achebe argues in his article “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness” that Marlow, and by extension Conrad, is mostly concerned with the negative effects imperialism has on the reputation and portrayal of the privileged Europeans rather than the horrific acts committed against the natives. He states, 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, that the point of the story is to ridicule Europe’s civilizing mission in Africa...The real question is the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in this 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. (12)

Although Marlow becomes extremely judgmental of the moral breakdown of Kurtz and attributes it to the influence of the barbarous African jungle, Achebe’s argument that Marlow is racist is rather tenuous. Marlow’s direct experiences in the Congo do challenge his previously racist conceptions of the Africans, so even if Marlow cannot positively be labeled racist or not racist, one can certainly prove that the “fostered attitude” that Achebe speaks of does in fact diminish. For instance, one example emerges in Part II when Marlow journeys up the river toward the Inner Station and obtains glimpses of African villages along the riverbank. The following statement highlights Marlow’s internal confusion of the experience as a result of his human sentiment beginning to influence his prejudice attitudes:

*It was unearthly, and the men were—No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—the 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. And why not? (62-63)*

In this description, the reader understands that Marlow does indeed recognize the “humanness” of the Africans to at least a certain extent because he says directly, “No, they were not inhuman.” The tone of the first sentence, the double-negative syntax, as well as the use of a dash, suggests that Marlow internalizes and interprets his emotional reaction while also outwardly narrating the incident. This observation indicates that Marlow’s instinctive reaction to the incident immediately, and maybe even unconsciously, causes him to have reservations about his previous beliefs. According to Fredrickson, “accounts of creatures who seemed more animal than human must have raised doubts in the minds of many Europeans as to whether they really shared ‘one blood’ and a common ancestry with many of the types of men being brought to their attention by the explorers and travelers of the late Renaissance” (11). Granted, the tone of Marlow’s voice indicates that he does not equate the Africans with himself, but the mere recognition of the African’s “humanness” suggests that the Western principle that Fredrickson refers to is weakening. The phrase “you know, that was the worst
of it” indicates that Marlow is attracted to and engaged in the sounds of the drums, chants, and rituals, but the experience also troubles him because it suggests that a “kinship” or connection exists between himself and the supposedly “inhuman” Africans. The “kinship” that Marlow refers to can very allude to the Darwinian argument that all human races have a common ancestor, or the religious notion that “God hath made of one blood all the nations of the earth” (The New American Bible, Acts 17:26). With either reference, the use of the word “kinship” basically has an affiliating connotation, and what makes the idea more bothersome for Marlow is that this word must reflect his “gut reaction” because it contradicts all ideas of British superiority. One may see this viewpoint and Marlow’s troublesome reaction as racist, which Achebe argues, but the reader must remember that Marlow represents the product of a society that ingrains these misconceptions into individuals, and so his reaction is suitable for authentically representing his society. However, the word “thrilled” reflects Marlow’s natural emotion and adds to the idea of “kinship” a feeling of excitement, almost as if Marlow had previous doubts concerning the legality of African savagery. On the other hand, the reader sees Marlow’s nurtured attitude dominate his internal struggle with the phrase, “Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough,” which is so blatant that it needs no explanation. However, the unresolved battle continues with the word “but,” which represents his sentiments. The sentence “if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you...a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you—you so remote from the night of first ages—could comprehend” expands on the argument that Marlow’s human nature influences his indoctrinated beliefs. Marlow’s statement “if you were man enough” suggests that by acknowledging the emotionally triggered idea that a kinship between the Africans and Europeans exists, “you” (the Europeans) will achieve an elevated or matured state of mind. The “man” is the person who can admit, accept, and deal with these previously suppressed truths. The phrase “first ages” does racially separate the Africans from the Europeans, but the words “could comprehend” suggests an acceptance and understanding of the basic, yet significant, connection between their existences regardless of the more advanced state of the Europeans. This statement not only proves that the internal conflict between these dichotomous elements keep Marlow’s racism from being definitely established, it also shows that if nothing else, Marlow recognizes the limits of his previous awareness and perception.

Marlow’s experience with the cannibals on his steamer is another example that supports his internal confusion regarding his experiences as well as the weakening of previously unchallenged European stereotypes. The following passage highlights his observations of the cannibals and occurs during the journey down to the Inner Station when the cannibals are suffering from starvation.

Why in the name of all gnawing devils of hunger [the cannibals] didn’t go for us...amazes me now when I think of it...I saw that something restraining, one of those human secrets that baffled probability had come into play there. I looked at them with a swift quickening of interest—not because it occurred to me I might be eaten by them before very long, though I own to you that just then I perceived—in a new light, as it were—how unwholesome the pilgrims looked....Yes; I looked at [the cannibals] as you would on any human being, with a curiosity of their impulses, motives, capacities, weaknesses, when brought to the test of an inexorable necessity. Restraint! What possible restraint? Was it superstition, disgust, patience, fear—or some kind of primitive honor?...Don’t you know the devilry of lingering starvation, its exasperating torment, its black thoughts, its somber and brooding ferocity? Well, I do. It takes a man all his inborn strength to fight hunger properly. (70-71)

The phrase “amazes me” in the first sentence emphasizes Marlow’s astonishment regarding the self-control of these cannibals and reflects the emotional side of his inner self. However, the reader also sees from the first sentence that the European stereotypes of cannibals focus on their animal-like and ravenous appetite, which Marlow keeps in mind while he internalizes and tries to reconcile this shocking experience with his learned attitudes. These cannibals are supposed to behave like uncontrolled beasts according to the principles that Europe has taught Marlow. So when Marlow’s experience with these cannibals develops quite differently from his expectation, it honestly leaves him emotionally baffled. The phrase “swift quickening of interest” and/or the word “curiosity” emphasizes Marlow’s inquisitiveness and interest regarding the exploration of his newly discovered response to the situation, which he feels uncomfortable with because it is unfamiliar territory for him to regard Africans as a self-controlled people. However, the mere phrase “swift quickening of interest” reflects the same type of excitement produced with the word “thrilled” used in the previous passage. Even with the cannibal situation, the feeling of enthusiasm or even anticipation possibly suggests that Marlow always doubted the learned attitude that African’s behavior reflected a bestial existence. The language of the image “I perceived—in a new light” plays on the theme of lightness v. darkness displayed throughout the work. Throughout Heart of Darkness, the image
of “light” usually refers to awareness or the reversal of previous ignorance. The image can be connected to the symbolic painting Kurtz created of the blindfolded woman carrying a torch light through a dark and somber atmosphere. The blindfolded woman can represent the disillusioned company that believes they are bringing knowledge and civilization (the light) to an ignorant and benighted society. However, in this situation the European (Marlow) represents the ignorant and oblivious party that becomes enlightened are bringing knowledge and civilization (the light) to Marlow’s represent the disillusioned company that believes they by a new experience. The “new light” that Marlow “perceives” can be attributed to the surfacing of his previously subdued human sentiments. Therefore, Marlow’s action of “look[ing]” at the cannibals projects a new consciousness where his innate human emotions, stripped from the influence of his environmental upbringing, plays a significant role in his interpretation of his interactions with the natives.

Truly the key word in this passage is “restraint.” Marlow’s learned philosophy embraces the idea that self-control and constraint against primitive pleasures raises the human being to a higher level of prestige, intelligence, and worth. In fact, one of Marlow’s, and by extension Conrad’s, major criticisms (based on Marlow’s reaction to Kurtz) is that once one removes oneself from the protective veil of behavioral constraints, one will eventually revert back to a primitive consciousness. However, the situation with the cannibals challenges this established European social attitude. Instead of inside the white pilgrims, innate restraint exists inside the cannibals. One could suggest that the pilgrims’ blinded sense of their own infinite superiority, inadvertently causes them to succumb to flabbiness and inefficiency (McClure qt. in Adelman 64). The phrase “It takes a man all his inborn strength to fight hunger properly” expands on the idea of “humanness” described in the previous passage to include Marlow’s idea of “manhood,” or efficiency. Unlike one’s “humanness,” Marlow does not define manhood as an inherent trait but rather a reward gained through one’s efficiency at a given task. This idea of efficiency is an extremely integral concept behind Marlow’s attitudes. Even though Heart of Darkness’ overall attitude towards the morality of imperialism is questionable, one can certainly claim that, if nothing else, Conrad is extremely critical of the Belgian’s unsystematic, immoral, and selfish method of rule in the Congo. According to Pericles Lewis, “Marlow is careful to distinguish the efficient and humane English, who rule by law and get ‘some real work’ done in their possessions from other European imperialists, who plunder their dependencies purely for their own material advantage while treating the natives indiscriminately as ‘enemies’ and ‘criminals’” (2). Unlike the equally ravenous pilgrims or greedy Belgians, Marlow assigns the rewarding title of “man” to the cannibals who have admirable internal strength and self-control. Therefore, from this passage the “gnawing devils of hunger” almost serve as a catalyst or test for the cannibals to prove their manhood, which they pass. Because of this success, Marlow has no choice but to alter his prejudiced stereotypes in order to admit, accept, and deal with these new observances as well as remain true to his own definition of “manhood.”

Conrad could have borrowed this idea of the “self-controlled cannibal” from Michel de Montaigne’s 1850 essay, “On Cannibals,” in order to support Marlow’s reaction to the cannibals. In “On Cannibals,” Montaigne favors the cannibalistic Native Americans over the Europeans because the Native Americans live in a state of “original naivete” that gives rise to their noble morality (2). This observation led to the paradoxical idea of the “noble savage” image, which admired the Native Americans’ natural existence “equivalent to that of Eden before the fall” (Fredrickson 11). While writing about Marlow’s experiences with the cannibals, Conrad could have kept this statement in mind from Montaigne’s essay: “I am not so concerned that we should remark on the barbaric horror of such a deed, but that, while we quite rightly judge their faults, we are blind to our own. I think it is more barbaric to eat an animal alive than to eat him dead, to tear apart through torture and pain a living body which can still feel, or to burn it alive by bits, to let it be gnawed and chewed by dogs or pigs...and—what is worse—under the pretext of piety and religion. Better to roast and eat him after he is dead” (3). From this passage, and the rest of Montaigne’s essay, one can see that Montaigne believes that the cannibals have an inherent goodness. They certainly obey certain “natural laws” even though they do not follow European standards of acceptable behavior.

William Shakespeare’s The Tempest is another work that deals with similar attitudes in Heart of Darkness regarding the cannibals. Many critics comprehend the relationship between Prospero and Caliban, especially Prospero’s treatment of Caliban, as Shakespeare’s commentary on European colonialism. Caliban, whose name is a play on “cannibal,” is often described as a “slave,” “savage,” “brute,” “hagseed,” and even “earth,” which all negatively connote him as a physical and even evil incarnation of “Nature.” According to Prospero, Caliban is “A devil, a born devil, on whose nature / Nurture can never stick,” which suggests that even European influence cannot elevate or totally erase Caliban’s bestial state of existence (IV. i. 188-189). However, despite all these horrible connotations, the reader regards Caliban with a degree of sympathy. Caliban’s speeches about his island home contain very beautiful passages that deal with similar attitudes in Heart of Darkness regarding the cannibals. Many critics comprehend the relationship between Prospero and Caliban, especially Prospero’s treatment of Caliban, as Shakespeare’s commentary on European colonialism. Caliban, whose name is a play on “cannibal,” is often described as a “slave,” “savage,” “brute,” “hagseed,” and even “earth,” which all negatively connote him as a physical and even evil incarnation of “Nature.” According to Prospero, Caliban is “A devil, a born devil, on whose nature / Nurture can never stick,” which suggests that even European influence cannot elevate or totally erase Caliban’s bestial state of existence (IV. i. 188-189). However, despite all these horrible connotations, the reader regards Caliban with a degree of sympathy. Caliban’s speeches about his island home contain very beautiful images that serve to remind the reader that Caliban did occupy the
island before Prospero’s arrival, and so Caliban’s enslavement is severely unjust. Also, Shakespeare endows Caliban with an intelligent and adequate defense of his evil “nature”: “You taught me language, and my profit on’t/Is I know how to curse. The red plague rid you/For learning me your language” (I. ii. 437-439). This statement is a momentary victory for Caliban that suggests his evil demeanor is not the result of his own “nature,” but rather of the European’s “nurture,” and so the Europeans are the true source of villainy. Furthermore, Prospero’s statement, “this thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine” could read as Prospero’s acknowledgment of a distant bond with Caliban and mirrors many of Marlow’s statements already described (V. i. 275-276). However, because Caliban attempts to rape Miranda, the reader may also argue that just like Conrad, Shakespeare bestows limitations on the idea of complete equality between Europeans and the natives. The result of these mixed views is the same feeling of ambiguity that Conrad adopts for his own text. According to Paul Brown, The Tempest, then, declares no all-embracing triumph for colonialism. Rather it serves as a limited text in which the characteristic operations of colonialist discourse may be discerned—as an instrument of exploitation, a register of beleaguerment and a site of radical ambivalence. These operations produce strategies and stereotypes which seek to impose and effect colonialist power; in this text they are also driven into contradiction and disruption. (151)

The last situation that clearly shows Marlow’s growing realization towards the humanness of the natives is the scene with the African helmsman. After reflecting on the meaning of the helmsman’s death Marlow states,

I missed him even while his body was still lying in the pilot-house. Perhaps you will think it passing strange this regret for a savage who was no more account than a grain of sand in the black Sahara. Well, don’t you see, he had done something, he had steered; for months I had him at my back—a help—an instrument. It was a kind of partnership. He steered for me—I had to look after him, I worried about his deficiencies, and thus a subtle bond had been created, of which I only became aware when it was suddenly broken. 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. (84-85)

The earliest set of conflicting words is “missed” and “think” displayed in the first two sentences. The word “missed” alludes to an emotion and an uncontrollable reaction to the helmsman’s death, whereas the phrase “you will think it passing strange” suggests the logical rationalization of the attitude Marlow should exercise due to his European attitudes. Even though this African should be regarded as insignificant as a “grain of sand,” Marlow cannot help feeling sorrow intrinsically for his death. According to Sung Ryol Kim, “Marlow’s realization entails precisely a recognition of his crewman’s humanity and individuality. He is moved by the loss of an individual human life…And it is not in his functional role as helmsman that Marlow misses his crewman” (10). In some sense, this feeling of bereavement equalizes the helmsman and Marlow because Marlow grieves for his fellow man and shipmate to the same degree he would mourn the death of a pilgrim, if not more. However, through the language of the next sentence, the reader sees that Marlow tries to justify his sentiments with nurtured reasoning. The phrase “he had steered; for months I had him at my back” once more displays Marlow’s recognition of “efficiency” at a given task. Because the helmsman completes the job required of him, Marlow’s ideals of “efficiency,” respect, duty, and even leadership responsibilities require him to recompense the helmsman with at least acknowledgment of a “job well done.” However, the words “it was kind of a partnership” once again turns the tone of the passage towards sentiment rather than reason. The concept of “partnership” takes the previous idea of “kinship” one step further because the word connotes an equalizing gesture.

The relationship between the helmsman and Marlow becomes even more genuine when Marlow admits, “I worried about his deficiencies, and thus a subtle bond had been created.” One may argue that this statement is racist because the helmsman’s “deficiencies” portray him negatively and inferior to Marlow, but this phrase more appropriately connotes the relationship between that of a caretaker and dependant, or perhaps even a parent and a child. The affection displayed with the words “I worried” suggests the same feelings of anxiety a parent possesses towards the child, and even the earlier phrase, “for months I had him at my back,” indicates that at times the helmsman adopts the role of the caretaker by protecting Marlow from harm. Therefore, from this relationship the reader comprehends an equal exchange of human compassion and reverence for one another. The phrases “bond created” and “intimate profundity” also connote an internally sentimental connection based on mutual respect that unites the helmsman and Marlow. The idea that this bond is described as a revelation “affirmed in a supreme moment” indicates that the fallibility of Marlow’s previous conceptions are revealed to him suddenly and unexpectedly without giving him the chance to adequately comprehend his newly found sentiments. However, as time goes on and Marlow becomes more inclined to see the truth
behind the atrocities of imperialism (such as when he witnesses the decapitated heads that decorate Kurtz’s house), the reader sees Marlow’s attempt to gradually decipher his true feelings regarding Europe’s political control over Africa. This idea of gradual realization also emerged in the first passage with the phrase, “[The suspicion of their not being human] would come slowly to one,” and reinforces the argument that even though Marlow cannot unquestionably be labeled unprejudiced, each of Marlow’s experiences is a baby step towards the idealistic, but highly impractical, end of Belgium’s “absolute power corrupting absolutely.” Based on this conflicting dichotomy and the emergence of his human sentiment, this passage also strongly suggests that Marlow’s prejudiced attitudes become lessened through his emotional reactions to situations experienced in the Congo, but they can never be totally rationalized by his British principles, and so the reader still cannot define Marlow as a racist narrator.

Whether or not Marlow is considered a racist is significant for arguing that the novel depicts the “dehumanization of Africans and the African race” but not so much for defining Marlow’s purpose as a character (Achebe 12). First of all, if Marlow were depicted as a role model or heroic example, then Marlow’s alleged racism is clearly a problem. However, Conrad’s purpose regarding Marlow is not to portray him as the unorthodox and nonconforming hero, but rather to create a fictionalized figure through which he can express his own very real and conflicted feelings regarding his experiences in the Congo. Gary Adelman agrees with this argument when he states, “Through the subjective impressions of an intermediary struggling with hard truths, Conrad was able to explore his own feelings without exposing them. Marlow was Conrad’s way of evading direct confrontation with his neuroses” (24, emphasis added). Even Achebe admits that Conrad does not create enough distance between himself and Marlow: “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” (10). Based on these ideas, one can view Marlow’s ambiguity not only as a reflection of Conrad’s weakened ideals but also as a sign of his fallibility as an ethical narrator. According to the frame narrator of Heart of Darkness, “to [Marlow] the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze...” (18). The image of a “kernel” (the protected part of a nut or fruit that lies within the shell) as well as the verb “enveloping,” suggests that the “meaning” of Marlow’s experiences do not contain any type of central, clear, and/or concrete significance; the meaning of Marlow’s realization surrounds the tale rather than comes from within it. Furthermore, the description of the “glow [bringing] out the haze” produces an image of a misty and dull source of illumination, not a powerful enlightenment. Therefore, these images along with the statement, “we knew we were fated...to hear about one of Marlow’s inconclusive experiences,” indicate from the very beginning of the text that Marlow is a faulted narrator and one should question his ethical perspectives (21, emphasis added). According to Sung Ryol Kim, “[Marlow’s] failure to grasp the full implications of his African experience is part of a larger human inadequacy...[Marlow] is susceptible to biases and contradictions in thinking and in feeling, whose acts do not at times correspond with his statements and observations” (2). A logical explanation for Marlow’s fallible narrative directly correlates with his relationship to Conrad: Heart of Darkness should not be read as Conrad’s flawlessly argued political platform. It is more appropriately the channeled public exposure of Conrad’s personal feelings regarding his own attempts to reconcile the confusion experienced with his previously justified ideals of imperialism after witnessing the reality behind Leopold’s rule. Peter Brooks argues that,

If we ask what a meaning that is outside rather than within the narrative might be, what status it might have, we are forced to the conclusion that such meaning must reside in the relation between the tale’s telling and its listening, in its reception, its transaction, in the interlocutionary relation. The truth value of Marlow’s narrative must be in what his listeners can do with it. Perhaps the most important dramatization of interlocution comes at the moment when Marlow appeals to his listeners to “see.” (122)

This statement shows that Conrad calls readers to decipher their own views towards imperialism rather than to adopt his narrator’s attitude, obviously because Marlow and/or Conrad cannot provide the reader with a clear interpretation. In fact, throughout the narration, Marlow must appeal to his audience’s senses because he cannot solely rely on language to communicate his experiences. Therefore, because of the novel’s ambiguity that results from Conrad’s own confusion, much of Heart of Darkness’ didactic message is left to personal interpretation based on one’s own perceptions.

Because neither Marlow’s human sentiment or his nurtured principles dominate his inner self at the novel’s end, the reader sees that Marlow cannot undoubtedly be labeled a racist. However, based on Marlow’s purpose as character the reader sees that Marlow’s internal conflict between human nature versus nurtured principles is appropriate, and if nothing else, eventually leads to the weakening of the legitimacy of British prejudices towards the Africans as well as the justification of imperialism. Once again,
through *Heart of Darkness* Conrad puts many perspectives of imperialism and racism right on the table but allows the reader to develop his/her own opinions. Consequently, Conrad’s writing was never hailed to be without imperfections, and even V.S. Naipaul, a great admirer of Conrad, admits this fact: “There was something unbalanced, even unfinished, about Conrad...And I found Conrad...Not as a man with a cause, but a man [that offered]...sixty or seventy years ago a [meditation] on my world, a world I recognize today” (212, 219, emphasis added). Because Naipaul uses the story line of *Heart of Darkness* in at least three of his major works, including *An Area of Darkness, A Bend in the River,* and “In a Free State,” readers can conclude that Conrad’s work exposes certain truths regarding the chaotic atmosphere of post-colonial states worth examining even though the novella’s holistic view of imperialism is rather ambiguous and racist statements undoubtedly exist. Naipaul provides an appropriate resolution to Achebe’s reading of *Heart of Darkness* as an unquestionably racist piece of literature when he says, “we read at different times for different things. We take to novels our own ideas of what the novel should be; and those ideas are made by our needs, our education, our background or perhaps our ideas of our background” (213, emphasis added). Therefore, modern day readers of *Heart of Darkness* must not forget that one’s nurtured principles based on the values of one’s society may also have an effect on his/her attitude regarding the text. It is up to the reader to maintain an appropriate balance between human sentiment and nurtured principles in order to assign Marlow’s character and narration a fair judgment.

**Works Cited**


