

Heart of darkness vs chinua achebe



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Heart of Darkness, a novel written by Joseph Conrad, was published in 1902. The novel is mainly about the experience of the protagonist, Marlow, in the Congo River and Africa. Through Heart of Darkness, Conrad refers to Africa as the place of darkness and projects its image and its people to the readers to being the other world, in contrast with Europe and Europeans and therefore antithesis for civilization. Humiliation and sympathy for Africa and the Africans, was also obvious throughout the novel. Heart of Darkness portrays the way white people see the black. He expresses all his thoughts through the main protagonist, Marlow.

Things fall apart, a novel written by Chinua Achebe, was published in 1958. In the novel, Achebe presents a different idea of the Africans; in total contrast of what Conrad wrote in his novel. He views them as people of great history, tradition and institutions. They have families, religion, their own language, famous and wise proverbs and enormous art of conversation. Achebe persists on the idea that Africans are normal human beings “ they laugh and talk among themselves like all and with others who stand near them”.

Heart of Darkness and Things Fall Apart may seem different, but they have some aspects in common. The two books parallel each other in the killing of the first white man, the coming of the missionaries for the aim of enlightenment and spread of Christianity, the great use of diction and description and most important of all, the view of black people in the eyes of white people.

The focal point of this essay is a question; is Joseph Conrad a racist or not? Now you might be asking yourself, why would he be a racist? What has he done or written to deserve negative comments from critics and authors claiming him to be a racist? Did he mean to be a racist or he misused the use of words in specific situations?

Before these questions are answered and comments from critics are discussed, let's take a look on some of Joseph Conrad's work. In Heart of darkness, as stated earlier, Conrad gives detailed description of Marlow's (the protagonist) journey in Africa along with the people he meets there.

“ 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”

In February 1975, Chinua Achebe presented a famous lecture at Amherst college in the United States, entitled “ An image of Africa: Racism of Conrad's Heart of Darkness”. In his lecture, Achebe attacks Conrad's Heart of Darkness and accuses him of being a “ bloody racist”. Achebe also states that the novel de-humanized Africans, denied them from language and culture and reduced them to a metaphorical extension of the dark and dangerous jungle into which the Europeans venture, “ Conrad refuses to bestow human expression on Africans, even depriving them of language”.

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

In the lines above, the reader could realize that Conrad used impolite words to describe the Africans. First, Conrad refers to Africa as a “ prehistoric earth” that had “ black limbs” living on it. Second, Conrad compares the Africans to animals and objects calling them “ ants”, “ savages”, “ glistening white eyeballs” and worst of all that disturbed Achebe is the use of the word “ savage specimen” that means that the Africans are samples.

What makes Achebe more frustrated is the use of the word “ nigger” several times throughout the novel. In the lecture, Achebe quotes a sentence from the novel that explicate Marlow’s first encounter with a black man in his life :

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

“ It is clear that Conrad had problems with black people” he stated in his lecture. He also disagreed with people that consider Heart of Darkness a great work of art by saying “ 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”.

In defense of Conrad in my point of view, I realized that his main intention in writing Heart of Darkness is to show the imperialism that Africa was drowning in that it was receiving from the Europeans. He didn't mean to show any racist acts or thoughts toward the Africans; instead, he wanted to, first, reveal the reality and life conditions that the Africans were truly living in, and second, to show the deterioration of one European mind caused by solitude and sickness. He wanted to also portray the real treatment and real thoughts of Europeans toward the Africans through Marlow. To support this idea, even though Marlow was using a humiliating manner toward the poor Africans in some aspects, he was also showing sympathy toward them in other aspects.

All in all, racism and discrimination played a major role in the novel.

Nevertheless, the defending of the Africans and showing sympathy towards them had a major part in the novel as well. Joseph Conrad has also tried to reveal the real imperialistic acts of the Europeans. However, the ideology of whether Conrad is a racist or not, is still debatable as some critics says “

Although Conrad saw and condemned the evil of imperial exploitation of Europeans, He was strangely unaware of the racism on which it sharpened its iron tooth".

Things Fall Apart, Chinue Achebe, page 34

Heart Of Darkness, Joseph Conrad.

An Image of Africa: Racism of Conrad's Heart of Darkness", Chinua Achebe's lecture

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Heart of Darkness, Joseph Conrad

Unknown Critic.