

Was joseph conrad a rascist

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



Is it fair to call Joseph Conrad a thoroughgoing racist? To call someone a thoroughgoing racist is to say that they are a person who completely and knowingly considers one race of humans superior to others. This is precisely what Chinua Achebe is accusing Joseph Conrad of. It is Achebe's opinion that Conrad wrote his 'Heart of Darkness' from a racist point of view intentionally to belittle Africa and its people and to raise up Europe and its people. While I agree that Joseph Conrad may have been a racist and that 'Heart of Darkness' certainly has racism in it, I believe it unfair to call Conrad a thoroughgoing racist.

Conrad is simply a victim of his time, having lived from 1857-1924 when the racism against Africans was widespread, even considered normal. He was not intentionally trying to be racist. "It is the desire- one might even say the need- of Western psychology to set up Africa as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest" (Achebe, 1). In other words, Europeans want to directly compare Africa to Europe in a way that the 'darkness' of Africa makes Europe seem lighter.

This shows that Conrad may even not have been racist at all. He could be simply writing a novel that the people wanted at that time. Achebe even briefly states this as a possibility: "It might be contended... that the attitude to the African in 'Heart of Darkness' is not Conrad's but that of his fictional narrator, Marlow, and that far from endorsing it Conrad might indeed be holding it up to irony and criticism" (Achebe, 4). This is my opinion of Conrad. He was not actually a racist. He was a brilliant storyteller of fiction that knew the people who would be reading the book.

In that time period, most readers were racist against Africans. That was OK back then. Conrad didn't agree with it but he wrote a short novel highlighting it to appease the masses, while subtly showing how wrong racism is. "Heart of Darkness projects the image of Africa as "the other world," the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality. The book opens on the River Thames, tranquil, resting, peacefully "at the decline of day after ages of good service done to the race that peopled its banks. But the actual story will take place on the River Congo, the very antithesis of the Thames. The River Congo is quite decidedly not a River Emeritus. It has rendered no service and enjoys no old-age pension. We are told that "going up that river was like back to the earliest beginnings of the world." (Achebe, 2). The Heart of Darkness mentions 'the race that peopled its banks' on the River Thames and then later talks about the people who people the banks of the River Congo. "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- you so remote from the night of the

first ages- could comprehend. Conrad, 153). This passage is a direct comparison of the “ savages” in Africa to the “ civilized” in Europe. Yet there is a connection, a “ kinship,” between these two beings. Conrad knows that Europeans love to view Africans as these uncivilized brutes in order to make themselves look better; but then he slips in that the two peoples are actually of the same heritage, separated only by the flow of time. Africans may appear to be these black monsters incapable of speech, only a dialect of grunting and screaming; but they are actually the just as human as any one else. Conrad later depicts the African savages as ‘ dogs’: And between whiles I had to look after the savage who was 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. A few months of training had done for that really fine chap. He squinted at the steam-gauge and at the hot water-gauge with an evident effort of intrepidity- and he had filed his teeth too, the poor devil, and the wool of his pate shaved into queer patterns, and three ornamental scars on each of his cheeks.

He ought to have been clapping his hands and stamping his feet on the bank, instead of which he was hard at work, a thrall to strange witchcraft, full of improving knowledge. ” (Conrad, 154). This is a very sudden and drastic change from just half of a page earlier when the African savages were “ kin” to the Europeans. Now they’re dogs. Perhaps Conrad really is a thoroughgoing racist. However, one must remember that the Heart of Darkness is a story within a story. It is Conrad writing of a man in London called Marlow who is recounting his experience in Africa on the River Congo.

So it is not Conrad who is the racist; his fictional character Marlow is. This is a very different style of storytelling and it is easy to forget whose words we are reading. Sometimes we are reading Conrad's words when we are on the River Thames; but usually we are reading Marlow's words. Achebe contends, "Conrad appears to go to considerable pains to set up layers of insulation between himself and the moral universe of his history. He has, for example, a narrator behind a narrator. The primary narrator is Marlow but his account is given to us through the filter of a second, shadowy person" (Achebe, 4).

One of Achebe's main arguments is that "art is more than just good sentences; this is what makes this situation tragic. The man [Conrad] is a capable artist and as such I expect better from him. I mean, what is his point in that book [Heart of Darkness]? Art is not intended to put people down. If so, then art would ultimately discredit itself" (Phillips, 1). This statement simply isn't true. Art is not exclusively a happy thing that only raises people up. There is such a thing as depressing art. *The Bluest Eye* is a great example of this. It too has tones of racism, being about a girl who hates herself because she is black and therefore ugly.

The ending of that story is very sad and the conflict is not resolved. This means that, according to Achebe, *The Bluest Eye* does not qualify as art. It's unfair of Achebe to only accept art that is happy and uplifting. The world is not a happy and uplifting place. There is darkness in the world. Conrad is attempting to point this out in the title alone, *Heart of Darkness*. He even suggests that London was once one of the dark places of the world. Achebe expects Conrad to be one of the artists who is "bigger than their times" (Phillips, 5). He says that that is what makes you a great artist.

Being ahead of your time is not a requirement of great artistry. That's not to say that there are no great artists who were ahead of their time; but there are plenty of great artists who weren't. To be bigger than your time takes a highly innovative and rebellious mind, which is a rare thing. All great innovations are mocked upon first arrival. This is why they are called innovations; they go against the norm. One cannot expect a writer in a racist world to write a book that speaks out against racism. That being said, it can be argued that *Heart of Darkness* does speak out against racism from an ironical standpoint.

The overarching question is, what happens when one group of people, supposedly more humane and civilized than another group, attempts to impose itself upon its inferiors? In such circumstances will there always be an individual who, removed from the shackles of civilized behavior, feels compelled to push at the margins of conventional morality? What happens to this one individual who imagines himself to be released from the moral order of society and therefore free to behave as savagely or decently as he deems fit? How does this man respond to chaos? (Phillips, 4). When considering these questions, I am forced to recall the movie "Three Kings." This whole movie seems to be based upon these questions. It takes place in Iraq right at the end of the Gulf War, Operation Desert Storm. A group of American soldiers discover a map leading to the Kuwaiti gold stolen by Iraq. One soldier asks "what is the most important thing in life?... Necessity... As in people do what is most necessary to them at a given moment" (Clooney, *Three Kings*). This is the answer to Phillips' question "how does this man respond to chaos? He does whatever he needs to do, not whatever he wants

to do. In *Heart of Darkness* each man is thrown into his own chaos and they all respond differently, but each man does what he feels is the most necessary. The idea of necessity can be applied to Conrad as well. What was most necessary to a writer living in the early 20th century? For Conrad, it was to stick to the status quo, to write a book that uses Africa as a foil, which portrays Africans as savage beasts. This does not make him a racist, merely a man who is following the trend of society.

Assuming that Conrad wasn't a racist, what if he had written *Heart of Darkness* without any racism? He would have been mocked, perhaps even cast out or discredited. Today he would be revered as one of the great futuristic minds of his time of course; but he has no way of knowing that. So he took the safe route and wrote *Heart of Darkness* from a more racist point of view. This does not make Conrad a thoroughgoing racist, as Achebe would accuse him. Arguments could be made either way; that Conrad was racist or that he wasn't. If he was not a racist at all then that's the end of it.

However, if he was a racist it becomes more complicated. Although due to the time and society in which Conrad was born and raised, his racism is therefore not intentional. He is not a racist in a non-racist society; he is simply another racist just like nearly everyone else. Works Cited Achebe, Chinua. "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'" *Massachusetts Review*. 18. 1977. Clooney, George, Perf. "Three Kings" Warner Bros Pictures. 1999. Film. Conrad, Joseph. "Heart of Darkness" 1902. Phillips, Caryl and Chinua Achebe. Personal Interview. 21 February 2003.