

# Heart of darkness and things fall apart: complements, or contrasts?

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



When the Europeans arrived in Nigeria to harvest ivory and spread their religious ideals, many Africans were exploited and their cultures were irreversibly changed. Two novels, *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad and *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, provide accounts of how the white man impacted Africa. Yet whether the novels actually complement each other is questionable. Conrad's work has been labeled "racist" by Chinua and contains some elements, such as language and perspective, that allow it to be open to interpretation. Though suggestions of racism do exist in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, further analyzation shows that it does depict some sympathy towards the Africans. It particularly shows African dignity and culture through contrast with the brutality of the Europeans, making the book a complement to *Things Fall Apart*. In both works, the authors show the humanity of African culture through the actions and traditions of the Nigerians. Conrad, for example, emphasizes the amount of control exhibited by the locals, particularly through Marlow's reactions and observations. Though he says he "would just as soon have expected restraint from a hyena prowling amongst the corpses of a battlefield" than from the "natives," Marlow admires the strong will possessed by the starving cannibals on the boat. He says, "it's really easier to face bereavement, dishonour, and the perdition of one's soul-than this kind of prolonged hunger." Though the comparison of a person to a hyena is crude, the respect conveyed in these lines show that Conrad does acknowledge the honorable traits possessed by the Nigerians. Achebe's novel goes beyond mere acknowledgement, however. Instead, it gives an in-depth look at the culture of the Nigerians by following the life of Okonkwo, a respected member of the Umuofia tribe. The

narrator remains objective throughout the piece and describes customs performed by the tribe that may be viewed as either positive or negative by the reader. This point of view provides a different perspective than Conrad, who exclusively views events from a European standpoint. One example of the traditions in Achebe's novel is the sacred week of peace held between the harvest and the planting. When Okonkwo breaks the peace by beating his wife, he is forced to give a sacrifice to the earth goddess. Previously, we discover, the punishment was to be dragged through the village until death, but this practice was discontinued because it broke the peace it was meant to protect. Though this custom may seem barbaric, it shows the importance of justice and peace to the society, contrasting Conrad's depictions of "grotesque" and "horrid" behavior. Rather, Achebe shows that there was a type of government in place that was respected and obeyed. A strong sense of ancestry and family ties is also evident. When the white man threatens the tribe, Okonkwo, a speaker, says that those who remain to protect the old ways "have remained true to their fathers." Furthermore, when Okonkwo's son Nwoye joins the Christian missionaries, Okonkwo is not only angry, but worried that his spirit will never be respected by his descendants after his death. This connection to other human beings, though essential to Umuofia, is never alluded to by Conrad. Achebe continues to show the depth of the emotions experienced by the natives, especially those felt by Okonkwo. By giving the history of his father, one is able to clearly discern the motives that drove Okonkwo to become the proud and hardworking individual described in the novel. This personal background gives extra insight into the reasoning behind his emotions and makes his "savage" personality seem more

humane. The capacity for emotion is further emphasized by the strong connection he feels with the rest of the tribe. Shortly before his death, “ Okonkwo was deeply grieved. And it was not just a personal grief. He mourned for the clan, which he saw breaking up and falling apart.” Okonkwo was not a mindless brute, but a human being with emotions, attitudes, and motivations. These concise observations provide far more insight into the humanity of the Nigerians than Conrad provides. In Heart of Darkness, none of the Africans are given a name and their perspectives and opinions are not acknowledged or speculated on. The deepest connection any European feels is from Marlow, who feels a “ claim of distant kinship” to the helmsman of the boat. He also engages in a few friendly deeds, such as sharing a biscuit with a dying local, but there are no close relationships with any of the natives. Conrad’s redemption is in how starkly he describes the exploitation of the Africans. When Marlow arrives at the Congo, he meets an accountant who is unconcerned with the well-being of the native people around him. When working, he comments that the groaning of a dying man are distracting and that “ when one has got to make correct entries, one comes to hate these savages  $\frac{3}{4}$  hate them to the death.” By showing the callousness of the explorers, Conrad suggests that the European settlers contained as much primitiveness as the “ prehistoric” men they oppressed. But despite the dark portrayal of the whites in Conrad’s novel, Things Fall Apart provides a clearer picture of how the Europeans truly affected the culture of Nigeria through the use of two different missionaries: Mr. Brown and Mr. Smith. When the church comes, they bring a government and belief system radically different from those in place in Umuofia. Though Mr.

Brown's approach to evangelism was relatively unobtrusive, Mr. Smith shows how much influence and power the Europeans were able to have over the Africans by actively working to change the traditions and beliefs of the Nigerians. When Okonkwo leads the revolt against the missionaries, he is placed into their prison and he breaks down. Though he has great respect for the laws and traditions of Umuofia, he commits suicide, one of the most disrespected crimes. This extreme act shows how great of an impact the white men had on an individual as well as the tribe as a whole. Though Okonkwo took his own life, his friend, Obierka, places the ultimate blame on the Europeans. "That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia," he states. "You drove him to kill himself, and now he will be buried like a dog." By using a native to put the responsibility of the death on the missionaries, Chinua provides a more powerful account of Europeans coming to Africa than Conrad. Thus, though Heart of Darkness does convey some parallel ideas of the European influence in Africa, it lacks the force contained by Things Fall Apart. Conrad attempts to show the savage nature inherent in the whites, but uses language that could still be interpreted as racist and does not offer any thoughts from the locals affected by the settlers. Chinua, on the other hand, utilizes point of view to focus on the individual and the tribe in times of change and provides a more extensive background of the Nigerian culture before the arrival of the Christians. Heart of Darkness and Things Fall Apart complement each other in theme, but Chinua's work is more effective in conveying its ideas and contains less ambiguity.