

The two halves of racism in heart of darkness: was marlow a racist?

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



The Two Halves of Racism: Was Marlow a Racist? To consider the charge that Marlow in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is racist, racism must first be defined. Racism has two components – a belief in the inherent superiority of one race over another, and secondly, the right of the superior race to dominate the other (Gove 1870). According to this definition, Marlow fits only into the first half of what is considered racist. Marlow, like Conrad “ was a man of his times, and as such, reflected the current anthropological position which held that primitive people were morally inferior to civilized ones” (Singh, 280). But despite his racist views, Marlow does not participate in the attempt to dominate, exploit or mistreat the natives in the manner of the European Imperialists, and therefore does not fit the second component of the racist definition. With examples of Marlow's views of the “ savages”, and of the Imperialists, it can be shown that Marlow was indeed a racist, but only half of one. Marlow reveals his racist position in his many descriptions of the natives. Rarely does he refer to them as men or give them human qualities. They were “ niggers,” “ savages,” “ creatures,” and “ prehistoric”. Marlow sees them as having more animal characteristics than human. He describes one of these ‘ creatures’ as walking on all-fours like an animal. Even their faces are not human. They were “ like grotesque masks” (Conrad, 17). Nowhere does Marlow suggest that the natives are equal to Europeans. Marlow is particularly patronizing in his description of the savage who was the fireman. Marlow describes him as an ‘ improved specimen’. Even though he could fire up a vertical boiler, he was no more human than the savages who ‘ howled and leaped’ on the shore. “ He was there below me” (Conrad, 38), Marlow thought, meaning that the fireman was literally below him on

the boat, but also below him in terms of race. Marlow again reduces the native to having animal characteristics in stating that looking at him “ was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind legs” (Conrad, 38). It is a ridiculous sight for Marlow, but the fireman is useful to him because he has been instructed to do a human task. Otherwise the inferior race is as useless as a pack of wild animals dancing wildly on the shore. But while Marlow sees the natives as ‘ savages’ and ‘ creatures’, he does not view them as the ‘ criminals’ and ‘ enemies’ the imperialists and ‘ pilgrims’ claim them to be. He does not wish to dominate the inferior race and is conversely appalled by the way the ‘ savages’ are mistreated. After walking up the path and being passed by a chain-gang of six black men, Marlow ironically says that he was after all “ a part of the great cause of these high and just proceedings” (Conrad, 19). Being white, he naturally associates himself with the Imperialists, but his statement mocks their motives. Standing on the hillside in the blinding sun Marlow foresees becoming acquainted with a “ flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly” (Conrad, 20). The weak-eyed devils are the imperialists who in the cause of greed, enslave, murder, and torture natives. Finding “ black shadows of disease and starvation” (Conrad, 20) dying slowly on the hillside, Marlow is ‘ horror-struck’, and ‘ appalled’. Although he sees the natives as unequal, he does not perform one act of cruelty towards them. When confronted with the face of a dying native near his hand, he parts with one of his good biscuits. Whether Marlow’s act was out of generosity or not is irrelevant. The point is that a man with racist inclinations of domination would surely have committed an act of cruelty in Marlow’s

place. While it has been shown that Marlow fulfills the first component of the racist definition and not the second, there is evidence that he questions some aspects of his racial predisposition. As C. P Sarvan suggests, 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.” (Sarvan, 285). In commenting on Conrad’s beliefs one also comments on the beliefs of Marlow. After all, “Marlow is both Conrad and all men who have taken the night journey into the primeval depths of their own...racial consciousness.”(Wilcox, 212). Marlow seems to view the natives differently when he sees them wild and free as opposed to when he encounters them as criminals. But the racist in Marlow makes him fearful of his suspicions that they might be human. He was “accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster”, but the ‘prehistoric’ man cursing or praying from the shore was “monstrous and free..... No they were not inhuman. Well, you know that was the worst of it – this suspicion of their not being inhuman” (Conrad, 37). Marlow suggests that this feeling that they were not inhuman would come slowly to one. This sentiment supports the idea that Conrad and his character Marlow may have been becoming less racist. But as the story stands, Marlow only questions whether the savages are human. He does not give humanity to them. Perhaps Conrad and Marlow were ahead in trying to break free of their cultural boundaries, but they do not achieve freedom from racism within the text of Heart of Darkness.. Their disgust with the brutal acts of violence and greed they encountered in the Congo was surely a solid starting point to reassess their racial views. However, it is evident that both Conrad and Marlow were not ready to give a human face to the natives. Even

when it appears that Marlow will give the natives some sort of human recognition, he quickly reneges as evidenced in his thoughts about the death of his helmsman. Marlow describes that he missed his helmsman awfully and that finding Kurtz was not worth the life lost. But he suggests that his regret might seem strange when the helmsman was merely a “savage who was no more account than a grain of sand in a black Sahara” (Conrad, 51). Marlow does not regret the death of a man. He regrets the loss of a useful native, one who steered for him for months, and was a useful instrument. Although Marlow was appalled by the atrocities committed against natives in the efforts of Imperialism, it does not exempt him from the label of racist: “He may sympathize with the plight of blacks, he may be disgusted by the effects of economic colonialism, but because he has no desire to understand or appreciate people of any culture other than his own, he is not emancipated from the mentality of a colonizer” (Singh, 272). Noted African writer Chinua Achebe charged that Conrad was a “thoroughgoing racist” (Achebe, 257), and therefore commented upon Marlow as well. However, in the preceding assessment of Marlow’s character it seems that this claim is too harsh. In the Heart of Darkness Marlow is only half racist. Works Cited Achebe, Chinua. “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness.” In Joseph Conrad. Heart of Darkness. Ed. Robert Kimbrough. Norton Critical Edition, 3rd ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988. Pages 251-262. Conrad, Joseph. “Heart of Darkness.” Ed. Robert Kimbrough. Norton Critical Edition, 3rd ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988. Gove, Philip Babcock. Ed. “Webster’s Third New International Dictionary.” [[put book title in italics]] Springfield: Miriam-Webster Inc, 1993. Page 1870. Sarvan, C. P. “Racism and

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