

Colonial and Postcolonial Rewritings of "Heart of Darkness"
A Century of Dialogue with Joseph Conrad

by

Regelind Farn

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*Colonial and Postcolonial Rewritings of "Heart of Darkness":
A Century of Dialogue with Joseph Conrad*

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In memoriam Jack Canavan

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Using the PDF version

To find significant words with special characters, search for the word with the basic character instead. E.g. to find “Döring”, search for “Doring”; to find “Céline”, search for “Celine”, to find “Ngũgĩ”, search for “Ngugi”. However, these words cannot be found as part of longer search strings.

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3.11	Graham Greene, <i>A Burnt-out Case</i> (1961)	133
3.19	Robert Silverberg, <i>Lord of Darkness</i> (1983)	185
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3.27	Redmond O’Hanlon, <i>No Mercy</i> (1996)	233
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Settler colonies: Australia

3.7	Charlotte Jay, <i>Beat Not the Bones</i> (1952)	102
3.8	Patrick White, <i>Voss</i> (1957)	109
3.16	Patrick White, <i>A Fringe of Leaves</i> (1976)	166
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Settler colonies: South Africa

3.17	J. M. Coetzee, <i>In the Heart of the Country</i> (1977)	172
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3.9	Chinua Achebe, <i>Things Fall Apart</i> (1958)	115
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3.15	Arun Joshi, <i>The Strange Case of Billy Biswas</i> (1971)	159
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Introduction

“Heart of Darkness” is the only text that many people have ever read about the time when the Congo was a personal colony of King Leopold II of Belgium. After more than a hundred years, it is still the standard narrative about that place and time, and still has an important position in the curricula of the Western world. (Post)colonised countries, too, started out with Western curricula, and are continuing to redefine their position with regard to this tradition. One man’s blend of representation, cultural allusions and highly personal emotion, shaped by his individual aesthetic aims, has made an immense contribution to the world’s image of Central Africa and indeed of (post)colonised peoples in general. Conrad’s image is not a positive one. Though his narrator passionately denounces the way Leopold’s men exploited and harmed Africans and Africa, he also pictures Africans as prehistoric, savage and half-formed humans, and Africa as a dangerous and mysterious site that attracts and destroys the white traveller.

The master narrative that lives on through “Heart of Darkness” has confronted its readers with two questions for over a hundred years: first, how do the colonised or their descendants represent themselves, and what do they set against, or contribute to, the tradition founded on “Heart of Darkness”? Second, how can whites (like myself) approach these countries and these people again, how can we see and represent them, and ourselves in relation to them, when we cannot help but acknowledge our cultural inheritance, whether by perpetuating or by rejecting it?

A surprising number of authors have outlined answers to these questions in their own works of fiction or travel accounts. These rewritings of “Heart of Darkness” are not history books, yet they all contribute to the representation of historical realities and of human beings living in them. This representation has a political dimension, however highly one may value artistic qualities.

Beyond responding to Conrad’s image of colonial Africa, authors take up a wealth of different subjects suggested by the many layers of meaning in “Heart of Darkness”. Conrad alludes to a variety of discourses and texts of his time, and reacts to much of the Western *zeitgeist* of the period. He thus foreshadows the concept of rewriting itself. Conrad’s narrator, Marlow, ironically distances himself from every value system and explanation he evokes. By this, he creates space for other points of view.

The first responses to "Heart of Darkness" stem from white Western writers. Like Marlow, they are becoming aware of the limitations and injustices of the colonial system, but are deeply influenced by the discourses and ideas that sustain it. Wilson Harris has called "Heart of Darkness" a "frontier novel" in that it identifies, but cannot transcend such influences. This frontier still exists in white rewritings as late as the 1960s, in some respects even until today. Today's Western rewriters, among them such diverse and illustrious figures as Redmond O'Hanlon and Barbara Kingsolver, identify contemporary discursive frontiers far more explicitly than their earlier predecessors.

All over the world, dialogues with pre-texts are becoming increasingly explicit. Many texts of fiction or travel diaries incorporate methods of reception history and discourse analysis. Texts from white settler colonies have shown this development for a long time. Patrick White's *Voss* identifies how imported European discourses, which are epitomised by "Heart of Darkness", were incorporated into the discursive field of emerging Australian society. This approach becomes more intense over time in white writing from Australia. J. M. Coetzee describes comparable developments in white South Africa, and like Conrad pictures a time in which people begin to analyse and reject earlier discourse. The growing doubt of traditions of factual and emotional dominance that is intensely described in "Heart of Darkness" has invited rewritings from many moments of historical transition.

Around the defining time of decolonisation, black African authors began to address Conrad's image of Africa, starting with Achebe and Ngũgĩ. They were initially read with a view to ethnological counterrepresentation and sociopolitical didactic intentions. Later critics have discovered their discourse-analytical contributions. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, for instance, echoes Conrad's style wherever Igbo customs appear unnecessarily violent, and thus points out that those customs are just what Conrad readers expect from Africa. More recently, Tayeb Salih from the Sudan discusses how school readings and popular stereotypes among Africans and Europeans contribute to both exoticist attraction and desires for dominance or revenge. Relating to Conrad, Salih and many other rewriters show that both the dominant and the dominated feel drawn to the Other in situations in which they feel destabilised in their own culture, and that they are simultaneously afraid of 'going under' to the closeness to the Other.

Many authors reinterpret the fantasy of being absorbed into the Other, which scares Marlow. Arun Joshi rereads it as a true quest for identity. In *The God of Small Things*, his compatriot Arundhati Roy names a house that is the place of international and intercommunity encounters the Heart of Darkness. This shows how much Conrad's words have entered world-wide imagery. Roy studies how upper-middle-class Indians have an unwanted, but deep-seated reflex to identify with Conrad's Congolese in contact with whites, although in contact with less privileged Indians, they rather act like former colonisers.

Roy uses the word ‘Anglophilia’ for her characters’ tendency to evaluate themselves through white eyes. Anglophilia is also an issue for migrants from the former colonies who live in the West. In Dabydeen’s *The Intended*, young migrants in Britain find that Conrad’s tale, which is presented to them as an integral part of British culture, affects both their self-images and their image of Africa, while actual information about Africa is harder to come by.

Dabydeen and other writers from the Caribbean relate to the absence or fragmentation of knowledge about history and ancestral places available in the Caribbean. Some of them use Conrad’s model of layered meaning as a frame in which to address this fragmentation, most famously Wilson Harris, who insists that after the destruction described by Conrad, people and societies can re-create themselves and go beyond the symbolic limit embodied by Conrad’s Inner Station. Writers from the Caribbean also react intensely to the absence of names and geographical details in “Heart of Darkness”. While this omission helps Conrad stress how many universal rather than historically specific experiences he addresses, Caryl Phillips and Marlene NourbeSe Philip use it to create new outlooks on history.

NourbeSe Philip reinterprets the ‘silence’ that Conrad and other colonial writers created by leaving out African names and voices. She links the silencing of Africa and Africans, which accompanies well-intentioned but autocratic white dominance, to another act of silencing in “Heart of Darkness”, Marlow’s withholding information from a woman out of what he feels is protectiveness. Authors all over the world relate to Marlow’s lie when describing difficult communication between men and women. They struggle to situate this and other psychological issues somewhere between what is specific to their respective cultures and what Marlow calls the common humanity of different peoples. Graham Greene already draws parallels between gender-related communication problems and those of late colonialism.

Around these and many other themes, authors world-wide portray characters who either try to view their own experience in terms of “Heart of Darkness” (and soon learn the limitations of this approach), or who evaluate “Heart of Darkness” socially and politically relative to their own experiences.

By identifying Marlow’s implicit assumptions and judgements, rewriters make it easier for their readers to relate to “Heart of Darkness”. Simultaneously, their characters demonstrate how to analyse and rework discourses that they (or others) have so far taken for granted. Accordingly, literature classes and book lovers increasingly read “Heart of Darkness” together with one or more of its rewritings. Scholars are contributing a growing number of essays and talks. They usually cover one or a few texts. I discuss 30 novels, short stories and travel accounts from five continents. Most critics emphasise individual

aspects of the reuse of "Heart of Darkness" in the more recent texts.¹ This provides new approaches for reading those texts, whereas I focus on how rewritings help reread "Heart of Darkness". Some authors, such as Greene, Achebe and Naipaul, have been at the centre of attention in connection with "Heart of Darkness" for some time. Others have not received due consideration in this context before.

This study provides a quick and comprehensive guide for teachers who wish to introduce their students to "Heart of Darkness" and to choose works to read together with it. My work is also aimed at first-time readers of "Heart of Darkness", who are often considerably puzzled by Conrad's many allusions and abstractions, and react intensely to his image of Africa. They can relate to rewriters as fellow (re)readers. Chapter 1 identifies layers of meaning in "Heart of Darkness" by giving an overview of critical approaches to the novella. Chapter 2 adapts these approaches to read its varied rewritings. This consistent framework relates the texts to "Heart of Darkness" and can also help compare them to each other. While showing what insights can be found with existing critical tools, I also offer a new set of reading tools for rewritings, and provide some ideas for teaching thematic selections. Chapter 3 summarises and analyses the individual creative responses.

¹On research trends see Nakai, "Centenary Conference", or Nakai, *English Book* 31, and the bibliographies in *Conradiana*. For short overviews see Moore, and Knowles & Moore 168-71. Examples of typical essays are those by Peters, by Schwerdt, and the contributions by Davies and Fincham in de Lange & Fincham, *Conrad in Africa*. Nakai studies a single statement of postcolonial theory for six authors (*English Book*), while Caminero-Santangelo discusses five rewritings under the specific aspect of neocolonialism.

Chapter 1

Reading “Heart of Darkness”

The number of critical publications on “Heart of Darkness” has reached thousands and is still growing fast. The different approaches highlight the many perceptual modes or discourses Conrad’s tale interweaves.¹

1.1 Historical and biographical background

The past and present of the country that has been known as the Congo Free State (1885-1908), the Belgian Congo (1908-60), Zaire (1971-97) and the Democratic Republic of the Congo has been the focus of increasing public interest in recent years. Historical works (notably Hochschild’s) make a fascinating read and help understand the complex background of “Heart of Darkness”. In addition, numerous biographers have studied Joseph Conrad’s time in the Congo (June 12 to December 12, 1890). Here, I will give only a few salient facts that are taken up in the rewritings discussed.²

The Bantu kingdom of Kongo, which straddled the estuary of the Congo River, was a thriving imperial federation when Portuguese settlers and slavers arrived in 1482 to establish a small colony. The first European explorer of the vast interior was David Livingstone (1813-73), a Scottish doctor, missionary and scientist. He was not motivated by material greed but by personal curiosity, religion and later by a wish to free Central Africa from Afro-Arab slave traders. Then followed Henry Morton Stanley (1841-1904), whose famous search for Livingstone may be one of the inspirations of the search for the originally idealist Kurtz in “Heart of Darkness”. With the help of the locals, Stanley

¹This chapter is based on Watt 147-253 (*fin de siècle*); Watts; Tredell; Knowles & Moore, unless otherwise noted. These works also contain extensive bibliographic information on Conrad criticism, which is omitted here for the sake of brevity.

²Information in this section stems from Ascherson; Sherry; Hawkins, “Exploitation”; Hawkins, “Reform Movement”; Najder; Pakenham; Lindqvist; Hochschild.

found Livingstone in 1872. He greeted him with the famous words "Dr. Livingstone, I presume?" While Stanley insisted that he wanted to aid Africa and may well have believed this in earnest, he was infamous for his violence against African members of his large expeditions and his willingness to shoot indigenes who got in his way. In this respect, he may have served as an inspiration for Kurtz himself.

Stanley wrote countless newspaper articles and more than twenty books (Kurtz, too, writes for the papers). Several of Stanley's book titles contain the word 'dark' — *Through the Dark Continent* (1878), *In Darkest Africa* (1890), *My Dark Companions and Their Strange Stories* (1893). He wrote passages like "the dark spectral isles of the stream; the sepulchral gloom beneath the impervious foliage" (*Founding*, par. 2). They are echoed in "Heart of Darkness" in descriptions such as "the forest stood up spectrally in the moonlight" (28). Stanley anthropomorphised tropical nature, and endowed it with intentions: "Ah! the hateful, murderous river, so broad and proud and majestically calm, as though it had not bereft me of a friend, and of many faithful souls [...]. What a hypocritical river!" (*Dark Continent*, par. 1). Marlow describes the river as "this strange world of plants, and water, and silence [...] brooding over an inscrutable intention" (36).

From 1884 to 1908, the Congo was the personal colony of Leopold II of Belgium (1835-1909). He defined the borders of the huge state. Leopold exploited the country ruthlessly and gave it very little in return. He was very good at presenting a philanthropic facade to the world, and passed off his acts of greed as selfless charity. Most Europeans admired him and believed that it was important to "open to civilization the only part of our globe which it has not yet penetrated, to pierce the darkness which hangs over entire peoples"³, as he described it. Conrad was almost certainly influenced by this discourse before his Congo journey. He learned the truth when he was there, which disillusioned him intensely. King Leopold may thus have served as another inspiration for Kurtz. "Heart of Darkness" also contains detailed information on some of the king's methods in the Congo, which included thinly disguised slavery and a commission system in which agents could "earn percentages" ("Heart" 27) according to how cheaply they procured the ivory. This encouraged many of them to seize it at gunpoint. Some agents became utterly cruel in their position of unchecked power supported by superior weapons. Later, in England, Conrad was able to access information about such men from newspapers, including an agent who ornamented his flowerbeds with human heads to intimidate Africans. Several men have been discussed as possible models for Kurtz. Conrad may not have witnessed all of the cruelties he describes in "Heart of Darkness", but based some of them on the atmosphere in which he travelled, and on reports in the papers.

³Leopold II, welcoming speech to his 1876 Geographical Conference, qtd. in Hochschild 44.

The ‘Arab’ or Afro-Arab slavers whom Livingstone wanted to replace by legitimate trade under European control were mostly speakers of Swahili from what is today Kenya and Tanzania. At the time, they had carved out a commercial empire in a large region around Stanley Falls (now Kisangani), Kurtz’s Inner Station. Stanley and Leopold fought them, but also made contracts with them, notably with their leader Tippu Tip. At Stanley Falls, there was no Kurtz on his own, but a station with several white men and a few hundred black State workers, as well as a large Afro-Arab settlement.

Afro-Arab power is one of the most important historical facts not mentioned in “Heart of Darkness”. The result is a purely binary encounter between black and white, weak and strong, victims and intruders. African achievement, too, is omitted. Conrad was present at some negotiations with dignified and still powerful African chiefs (Karl 289), and he was able to witness such complex achievements as a gigantic system of vertical poles stuck in the river bed, even in the rapids and cataract, that held fishing nets and weirs (Baumann). Finally, Conrad leaves out the names and characteristics of places and countryside, though he mentions them in his private “Congo Diary”. Similarly, he does not name most of his characters. This creates the impression that Marlow journeys through a featureless void, or a dark tunnel without distinctive traits and points of reference, and that atrocious deeds are done, but not by real people to real people.⁴

In Conrad’s only other story with a Congo setting, “An Outpost of Progress” (written before “Heart of Darkness”), African characters have names and agency, they talk with the white characters, and the setting is far less abstract or ‘mysterious’. This shows that his reductive image of places and people in “Heart of Darkness” is based on a conscious artistic decision, not on a deplorable limitation of his perception.

Conrad’s first biographer G. Jean-Aubry believed that he had really seen and experienced everything as he wrote it. Only later was it recognised that the Kurtz story is fictional and that Conrad invented, changed or re-arranged many other events, though he retained his basic trajectory and numerous actual observations.

Conrad’s representation of the Congolese as ‘savages’ without merit can inspire a real craving for historical fact, because it depicts Central Africa as being without a history and geographically unspecific. Recent researchers, including Norman Sherry and Hunt Hawkins, have invested a lot of work in tracing Conrad’s experience. Others, especially Sven Lindqvist, have researched into what Conrad may have heard and read about the Congo and other colonies while he was writing.

⁴Cf. Hochschild 204 for a similar argument about another text.

1.2 Formal techniques and impressionism

Conrad used many literary techniques in novel and surprising ways.

He used existing genres, but subverted them and added approaches of his own. "Heart of Darkness" is ostensibly an adventure story, an important genre at the time, but is filled with stagnation, failure and futility, and peopled with starched-shirt bureaucrats instead of men of action. Moreover, the novella contains psychological and other aspects that are not normally part of an adventure story. It also is a story of the colonies, another important contemporary genre, but Conrad's whites are neither noble, triumphant nor pleasantly titillated by their 'exotic' surroundings. The contemporary stereotype of African darkness is used, but is partially reversed by suggesting that whites have their own darkness and bring it to Africa.

Guerard suggests that "Heart of Darkness" is "not primarily about Kurtz or about the brutality of Belgian officials but about Marlow its narrator" (37). To his listeners, this narrator appears like a "Buddha [...] without a lotus-flower" ("Heart" 10). This introduces a meditative frame, which helps add to a simple tale of action an inquiry into its moral and philosophical implications. However, it also indicates that Marlow does not possess the full truth about the meaning of his tale (revelation being symbolised in Buddhism by the lotus flower).

Marlow is a limited narrator, relating the story from his personal viewpoint, as opposed to narrative omniscience. Some critics even call him an unreliable narrator, for instance by claiming that he misinterprets Kurtz's last words as a moral judgement, consistent with his own frame of reference, while the reader has enough information to understand them as an assertion that Kurtz actually enjoys and craves the horror (Batchelor 91-92), or that he claims the human condition in general to be one of horror (Watt 236).

Marlow is introduced by a frame narrator. This is another common technique of the time. In "Heart of Darkness", the indirect narration contributes to the ambivalence and irony of the tale, and the paraphrase by the frame narrator even makes it hard to assign complete responsibility for particular attitudes to Marlow. There is a third nested level, as another limited individual, the Russian, narrates to Marlow much of the information the reader gets about Kurtz.

The reader is drawn into the intimate connection between Marlow and his audience of friends as a fellow listener. The description of the relationship between the listeners and the narrator foregrounds the reader's active role in conferring meaning to the tale, and the link between personal and social experience. In his spontaneous, highly personal narrative, Marlow tries to interpret the Congo journey of his youth. He distrusts

his own ability to relate this experience. This emphasises the subjectivity and relativity of individual perception. The unnamed frame narrator explicitly introduces this highly modernist concept, stressing the “inconclusive” (11) quality and even the oblique technique of Marlow’s oral narrative, whose “meaning [is not] inside like a kernel but outside” like a halo produced by a glow (9).

Marlow, who narrates four of Conrad’s works, has often been considered Conrad’s British alter ego. However, there are differences. Karl states that Marlow “is a misogynist and Conrad was not” (284). Orr argues that like some other characters of Conrad’s, Marlow is partially what the author did *not* want to be (9) — such as a racist or a liar.

Finding it difficult to come to terms with his experience, Marlow resorts to irony. Irony points to discrepancies in a given situation, such as the difference between high-flown words and actual deeds or, more generally, between claim and reality. It establishes a special relationship between the narrator and the reader in that the reader has to perceive and interpret the ironic undercurrent under a surface statement (or can refuse to do so). Irony makes it possible to point out problems without offering a solution or even a complete value judgement. For instance the descriptions of a soldier as “one of the reclaimed” (19) and of a fireman as “an improved specimen” (38) point out that the colonisers force these Africans to act in ways that are violent or benefit only the colonisers. However, these ironic descriptions do not imply a rejection of the general ideology that claimed whites had a duty to draw blacks towards their own work ethics and raise their standing on a Social Darwinist scale. While the instances in question are not an improvement of the Africans’ condition, the basic possibility of an improvement is not challenged. Irony and sceptical sarcasm add to the modernist presentation of an elusive reality and of unstable value judgements, making the text more complex, more ambivalent and less activist in nature.

Some critics find satirical elements in the exaggeration of white inefficiency and even in the extremes of Kurtz’s character. Some even claim sardonic comical elements, such as the visual impression of the helmsman’s slow fall and his hanging on to the spear as to an intimate possession, or Marlow’s musings about whether he looks appetising to cannibals.

Probably the most frequently expressed criticism of Conrad’s style is that of his insistent use of negative adjectives like ‘impenetrable’ or ‘unspeakable’. Leavis was the first to find fault with this technique, which makes a more precise meaning impossible, while others later praised it for conveying a dream-like quality.

Marlow narrates his sensory perception and the meaning he subsequently deduces from it, in that order, so that the reader only gradually finds out what is going on, for example in the realisation that the clinking sound is made by men who form a

chain gang (19). This technique, which Watt has dubbed "delayed decoding" (175), gives the reader access to Marlow's immediate sensations, complete with a true-to-life delay between impression and understanding.

Though Conrad used techniques from many literary styles and traditions, he did not want to be a member of any particular artistic movement. It is however helpful to take a look at traditions that influenced him and that he influenced.

The term 'impressionism' first referred to the famous school of painting whose heyday roughly coincided with Conrad's creative life. It privileges the perceiving consciousness over the perceived object, for instance by creating an effect of mist or changeable light through the broad brushstrokes into which the actual object is decomposed. Similarly, Conrad created a sense of imprecision, haze and changing perspective that show a person's perception of facts, rather than an attempt to pin down the facts themselves. Parts of this method are the delayed decoding and 'impenetrable' adjectives, the insistence on mist or shadow, and the absence of a claim to a unified message in the narrative. The frame narrator in "Heart of Darkness" evokes the effect of impressionist paintings by talking of a "misty halo" (9) that envelops Marlow's tale.

Closely connected with this method is Conrad's way of creating synaesthetic effects through descriptions of sensory perceptions. "Heart of Darkness" presents an almost cinematic sequence of strong visual scenes.

1.3 Biographical and psychological interpretations

As a child, Conrad (1857-1924) experienced the subjection of his home region in partitioned Poland to the Russian Empire. As a seafarer, he saw the workings of imperialism throughout the world. These experiences, together with an energetic alignment with English culture and values, had a complex influence on his view of imperialism. Conrad was naturalised as a British subject, but remained in many respects a foreigner. His marginality in England and in English literature enabled him to take a self-conscious, fresh look at the certainties and uncertainties of a person's place in the world. It reinforced his insistence on the fluidity of perception and values.

Most of Conrad's biographers claim that he suffered from depression, exacerbated by physical diseases, which were caused or worsened by his stays in the tropics. Najder (145) draws on medical works to cite symptoms of depression, and shows that numerous indications of these occur in Conrad's letters and works. He relates the dark-tunnel feeling created by "Heart of Darkness" to such symptoms as "shrinkage of psychological space; [...] seeing his world in gray and dark colors, and feeling it is unreal and chaotic".

This feeling, together with one of “incapacity” and inaction “sometimes to the extent of stupor”, may have contributed to the futility Conrad saw in white activities in the Congo (which in fact were goal-oriented and effective in themselves), while he projected a “fear of madness and of the disintegration of personality” onto Kurtz.

Batchelor claims that with “Heart of Darkness”, Conrad descended into the depths of his depression, to emerge a healthier and stronger man (88-95). He shows how Marlow initially uses work as a therapy against his disengagement from reality when he states that work offers “the chance to find yourself. Your own reality” (“Heart” 31), but moves on to a direct confrontation with his fears as embodied in Mr. Kurtz: “Marlow recognizes both that Kurtz is mad and that he, Marlow, resembles Kurtz more closely than he resembles anyone else” (Batchelor 90). Sherry (347) points out that given the “choice of nightmares” between Kurtz’s sensitive moral destabilisation and the callous, bureaucratic everyday cruelty of the ‘pilgrims’ that is stable normality for them, Marlow chooses the former (“Heart” 62). During his encounter with the Intended, Marlow makes an effort to end the “moral relativity” (Batchelor 91) of his experience by firmly banning Kurtz’s horror from her and his life. Paradoxically, he can only get a grip on reality back in Europe by using a lie about colonial reality in the Congo, a lie that keeps the Intended’s illusions about Kurtz’s high mission intact. It can be seen as a comment on human nature that after Marlow’s destabilising experience, and after he has felt alienated from people in Europe for a while, his way back to normality is through a self-deception that realigns him with society and helps him repress what he can’t come to terms with — and what is systematically not permitted to be known in a world dominated by words like Kurtz’s (or Leopold’s). In this context, the irony and bitterness of his tale can be seen as signs of his acknowledged impotence in the face of a disturbing reality.

The insistence on dream and nightmare in “Heart of Darkness” anticipates some of the interest of Freud’s book *The Interpretation of Dreams*, which was published later in 1899. Freud argued that dreams are coded signals for repressed fears and conflicts within the unconscious self. He investigated the influence of the unconscious on a person’s conscious mind. In a Freudian reading, the darkness of African nature in the novella stands for unconscious fears and anxieties lining Marlow’s retrogressive (dream) journey into the self, the dancing shore-dwellers stand for primal bogeyman-like aggressors, Kurtz’s female African friend for rather frightening sexual needs, and so on. The identification of darkness with the unconscious, together with the Freudian and Jungian idea that the unconscious is the place of primordial or even pre-human emotions, may explain Conrad’s conflation of assumed African darkness with primeval human traits.

Kurtz and Marlow are sometimes interpreted as two aspects of the same self, with Kurtz standing for the Freudian id (the anarchic desire to gratify basic instincts) and Marlow standing for the ego (the human consciousness negotiating between the id and the superego, or conscience). In his quest for his alter ego or even for a presumed superego embodied by the "remarkable man" ("Heart" 61) who has some ideals, Marlow thus finds an addict of "monstrous passions" (65) or his own id.

On another level, that of the actual (not symbolic) encounter with Africa, Marlow projects his expectations, desires and fears onto the Congo, resulting in a mixture of temptation and threat that seem to be inherent in the alien world. To avoid or delimit anything that eludes control and in order to make the lack of understanding feel less threatening, he names the Other as strange or 'mysterious'. Due to a mechanism of psychological displacement, he perceives the discomfort caused by his projections and his lack of comprehension as an essence of Africa.

1.4 Myth, allegory and symbolism

Myth was to become an important focus both in psychoanalysis and in the modernist movement. It was considered a goldmine of tales about ageless, universal human experiences. In the absence of a belief in religion and in heroes, myth can be evoked in order to provide a substitute orientation, or it can contribute to the irony of an imagery of hollowness, a loss of the core that used to be embodied in ancient beliefs.

"Heart of Darkness" contains references to mythical journeys including the *Odyssey*, and to the descent into the underworld in Dante's *Inferno* and in the *Aeneid*, in which, symbolically, the helmsman dies like Marlow's (Karl 290). The two women at the company's office in Brussels, the 'sepulchral city', appear to guard the entrance to the "Inferno" ("Heart" 20) to which Marlow likens the "grove of death" (22). The jumble of dying humans and rusting machinery in Matadi (the company's station and start of the march) can be seen as the first chamber of a modern realm of darkness, followed by a river (Styx) journey to rescue a soul from Hades (Sherry 350). Marlow's journey also echoes the quest for the grail, or for "an enchanted princess sleeping in a fabulous castle" ("Heart" 44) of fairy tales.

While Freud searched for individual unconscious messages and motivations, C. G. Jung (1875-1961) studied archetypes: timeless recurrent basic types, situations or motifs of human life that are firmly anchored in the collective unconscious, and are often found in ancient religions, myths and folklore. Most symbolist writing predates Jung's work, but it is best analysed in Jungian terms. Conrad was attracted to the symbolist

aspiration to elevate the specific by making it evoke the general, the archetypal. Kurtz may embody the archetype of a person who is “hollow at the core” (“Heart” 58), who has no ethical backbone or no strong Freudian ego (Baines 227; Watt 234). As soon as he is released from the restraints of society, he ‘goes under’ to a ‘wilderness’, in his case either by getting too close to the sinister psychological forces symbolised by the Congolese, or by giving in to the powerful position that enables him to satisfy his lusts. Marlow’s journey follows the timeless motif of a quest and an initiation. Guerard read it as a Jungian night journey into the unconscious (15).

Kurtz also echoes the more recent myth of Faust, an extremely complex and intelligent man who makes a “bargain for his soul with the devil” (“Heart” 50) in exchange for knowledge and power. Goethe’s Faust is an epitome of the romantic era, a man who puts his individualism and self-fulfilment above moral and social duty. At a time when religious beliefs are on the wane, Faust tries to take over the now-vacant position of God himself, because he believes in his own potential more than in anything else. Kurtz begins his report “with the argument that we whites, from the point of development we had arrived at, ‘must necessarily appear to them [savages] (sic) in the nature of supernatural beings — we approach them with the might as of a deity’” (50). His attempt to transcend his human state ends with his relapse into an ‘animal’ state of “gratification of his various lusts” (57). Marlow ultimately stays inside his limits and is able to emerge from his vicarious participation in Kurtz’s experience.

The cynical description of the colonial project as a “merry dance of death and trade” (17), and the statuesque appearance of Kurtz as an “animated image of death carved out of old ivory [...] shaking its hand with menaces at a motionless crowd of men made of dark and glittering bronze” (59) evoke a European medieval allegory: in the dance of death, a symbolic image, corpses and skeletons lead the living to the grave.

Like the impressionist technique, the symbolist approach in “Heart of Darkness” is introduced by the frame narrator, whose geometric image makes it clear that the meaning (the “halo”) is larger than the vehicle that transports it (the “glow”). Watt (180-200) begins with this image to describe a form of symbolism radically different from that discussed above. An existing and ‘closed’ myth such as that of Ulysses or Faust would be a “kernel” inside a “nut”, and thus the opposite of what has been announced (“Heart” 9). Moreover, “Heart of Darkness” does not fully or exclusively evoke any single myth. Each symbol points not to one myth, but to several meanings. To take the example of Marlow’s visit to the company office in Brussels, the knitters evoke two of the three mythical Fates, but they may also embody the callous knitters at the guillotine, the Roman spectators greeted by the doomed gladiators, or the emotionally deadened, machine-like employees

of a large bureaucracy. The highly selective choice of details gives weight to each such detail. The reader feels that this weight is there, but is not helped to find out why this detail has been selected for a description. This creates a gap between the overt fact and the feeling that it must mean something more to warrant its inclusion. The reader is prompted to fill this semantic gap according to his or her personal imagination. Around the impressionist whole that denies one final and objective meaning, a whole range of symbolic meanings can thus be produced. Fragmentary and open, they remain suggestive even after the reader's decoding effort. Watt also states that "Heart of Darkness" is the only one of Conrad's texts to belong to a specifically symbolist tradition of fiction (188).

In this context, one can argue that the omission of names and specifics from "Heart of Darkness" helps the reader think about highly selective symbolic details, rather than about the details of down-to-earth real life. It emphasises that Marlow's attention is focussed on internal and moral questions, not on historical fact.

1.5 Victorian ideas and the *fin de siècle*

The Victorian world order was collapsing in the 1890s. Among the few ideas of the late Victorian era that still ease Marlow's life (while Kurtz disregards them, contributing to his downfall) are the Carlylean values of "work, duty and renunciation [...] except that Marlow's word for renunciation is 'restraint', and for duty, 'fidelity'" (Watt 151). In this view, work contributes to self-knowledge and to emotional stability. Together with the renunciation of a purely egoistic search for gratification, work saves a person from self-centredness and therefore from navel-gazing despair. Duty takes the place of the declining Christian devotion to a higher cause, an aim in life. Marlow tries to hold out against his difficulties with the aid of this value system. Even here, the decline of Victorian values is visible, as work ethics are effective only for Marlow. The 'pilgrims' are lazy and rapacious. The efficient accountant in Matadi is a horror, and his work ethics help insulate him from all perception of his surroundings. Kurtz with all his recent history keeps on thinking that he has the "duty" of "writing for the papers" ("Heart" 68) to promote his ideas.

The pervading atmosphere of the 1890s, the *fin de siècle*, was one of melancholy or even despair, of perceived decadence and agonizing pointlessness and disillusionment.

Science contributed its share to this gloom. The law of entropy, discovered in 1851, made people think that the sun would "go out suddenly, stricken to death by the touch of that gloom [the cold parts of the universe]" ("Heart" 8) practically tomorrow, leaving the earth cold and dead. Moreover, in the wake of new astronomical results, this generation was making a difficult forced transition from a universe that God had made expressly

for humans, to an indifferent universe dominated by laws of chance. Ideas resulted that resembled what is now called Existentialism, seeing life as a “mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose” (69). Evolution theorists reminded people of the persistent presence of the animal in humans, questioning the possibility of ethics founded on sheer will power, and intensifying the contrast between nature and culture (Najder 249-50).

The belief in the social benefits of material progress had been fostered with increasing industrialisation, sometimes to the extent of thinking that technical progress and free commercial competition would solve all problems of humankind. By the end of the century, people were severely disillusioned. “Heart of Darkness” shows that technology supports a conquest that dehumanises both the conqueror and the victim. Kurtz’s command of “thunder and lightning” (56) facilitates his dangerous hubris. Moreover, technology is beginning to take its toll on nature, leading to an “inhabited devastation” (18).

The competition between the European powers over colonies was growing, leading to the formal adoption of an imperialist programme as British government policy in 1894. Jingoism was flourishing in Britain when Conrad wrote “Heart of Darkness”.

An important movement in literature was that of aestheticism, which claimed that the main aim of art was to evoke feeling and beauty, not to be descriptive, didactic or to have a moral purpose. In reaction to the prevailing utilitarianism of the industrial age, aestheticists wanted art to be separate from all inquiry into specific historical, political or scientific circumstances, and to follow its own laws. They expressed this in the claim that art should exist for art’s sake. Aestheticism was closely related to symbolism, trying to purify language from the everyday communication of facts in order to evoke an abstract, universal essence reminiscent of Platonic ideas in the (inevitable but incidental) specific experience. Authors achieved this by sensuality, an intense use of symbols, synaesthetic effects, and suggestion rather than statement. They saw common subject matter and ease of understanding as signs of compromise with vulgar taste (Stokes). Conrad did not consider himself a member of this movement, but he admired some writers, such as Baudelaire, who belonged to it (Karl 268-70). His proclaimed desire to shine “the light of magic suggestiveness [. . .] over the commonplace surface of words” (Preface to *Narcissus* 224-25) is an aestheticist concern.

Possibly, Conrad felt that leaving out the names of persons and places would make his narrative more universally applicable and less specific to a Congo journey. Marlow’s persistent use of the words ‘fact’ and ‘reality’ does not (necessarily) refer to historical fact but to what he considers the opposite of his “dream-sensation” (“Heart” 30) inside the world of the book. His main interest is in the feelings inspired by his journey.

1.6 Ethics, philosophy and religion

Watts (47) argues that "Heart of Darkness" presents a number of ethical paradoxes, an approach that abounded in the 1890s. Among others, he names the following paradoxes: "Civilization can be barbaric. It is both a hypocritical veneer and a valuable achievement to be vigilantly guarded." "Society saves us from corruption, yet society is corrupt." "Imperialism may be redeemed by 'an idea at the back of it', but imperialism, irredeemably, is 'robbery with violence'." "A person who sells his soul does at least have a soul to sell, and may gain a significance denied to the mediocre." Moreover, images of good and bad, especially light and darkness, are used in contradictory ways in "Heart of Darkness". Attempts to find straightforward ethical statements in the novella are foiled by such contradictions.

Another paradox is created around the question of work ethics. Marlow does not question colonialism as such, but only Leopold's methods. He insists that in the British colonies, "some real work" is done (13). By this, he strives to show that his captaincy is not immoral because he undertakes it in the 'good British spirit' of work and service. On the other hand, when his aunt calls him "one of the Workers" (15), this does align him with Leopold's colonial project in a way he feels uncomfortable with.

The question of work ethics is paralleled by a similar contradiction involving altruism: Marlow feels that colonialism can be redeemed by embracing an 'idea' unselfishly. This 'idea' can be compared to Kipling's "white man's burden", a self-righteous sense of mission and duty, and especially to religious zeal. The 'idea' (or illusion) of inspired and necessary service can easily turn into fantasies of unlimited power and superiority, as with Kurtz. An altruistic devotion to an abstract idea also makes people vulnerable to someone like King Leopold who abuses their idealism for his own purposes, as with Marlow. Shrewd people with less moral purity but more intense, concrete goals can easily manipulate and exploit 'pure' altruists. Altruism is thus both a positive and a negative personality trait.

Outside such paradoxes, Conrad studies ethical questions for instance in the context of Darwinism. The alleged cannibals prove themselves moral beings too, when out of "primitive honour" ("Heart" 43) they do not eat anyone on board. This raises the question whether ethics are really a concern of white civilisation, or a basic human concern.

"Heart of Darkness" contains numerous philosophical allusions, such as to Hegel's dialectics (between progress and atavism), and also raises the philosophical question of language and social communication. Marlow is concerned with the inadequacy of language, which he sees both in his own inability to convey the dream-like sensation of his journey and in the possibility of atrocious deeds hiding under a cloak of philanthropic rhetoric.

Watt argues that, on a far more literal level than that of interpretations as a demon, Lucifer or Faust, Marlow yearns to meet Kurtz as a person with whom a dialogue will finally be possible, someone who may be able to offer a convincing idea and a fruitful direction to colonisation. All others do not communicate and are so unaware of the problems of civilisation that they do not feel a need to talk about them. Therefore, Marlow hopes that Kurtz will provide meaning, only to find that Kurtz is so absorbed in his rhetoric that he produces nothing more than high-flown monologues (194-95, 223, 234, 240).

Lies, too, bring up issues of language and philosophy. Philosophers question whether there is an absolute truth; and even if there is a definite truth about individual facts, whether this truth is of any value or whether the “saving illusion” (“Heart” 74), which helps humans live, is preferable. All of Marlow’s lies are protective and arise out of the same moral preoccupations that make him hate lies: Marlow lets the brickmaker believe he has power in Europe so he can help Kurtz, promises the Russian to protect Kurtz’s reputation, promises Kurtz success in Europe, tears the postscript off, and lies to the Intended.

Marlow does not present religion as a valid system in itself, as he does not believe the existence of a God. Like myth, religion serves as a source of traditional images and of reminders of the values of old. The ironic appellation of ‘pilgrims’ emphasises that nobody in the novella is faithful to any redeeming idea, arguably not even Marlow, whose only ‘idea’ in a senseless, confusing world is to do his captain’s work. The comparison of the Congo River to a snake evokes Paradise after the Fall, and contributes to the idea that Africa attracts the quester and seduces or destroys him — or gives him knowledge that will be very hard to live with. Most other religious references are ironic. Some evoke disillusionment, such as the bitter echo of Bunyan’s optimistic *The Pilgrim’s Progress* in the word ‘pilgrims’. Others expose the questionable value system of society, with quotations like “whited sepulchre[s]”, which is originally an image for hypocritical Pharisees (“Heart” 13; Matthew 23.27), or the labourer “worthy of his hire”, an ironic allusion to the religious rationale that is seamlessly linked with other motives for imperialism (“Heart” 16; Luke 10.7).

If religion is no longer an authority, then a comparison of Congolese drums to “bells in a Christian country” (“Heart” 23) can only equate the beloved superstitions of one people with those of another, ultimately showing both to be common delusions of humanity. Comparisons between quasi-religious superstitions are even more cynical — the young man in the ‘grove of death’ appears to believe in the power of “a bit of white worsted” (20), while near the grove, the accountant believes in the power of book-keeping to ensure a feeling of safety; and Marlow’s fireman believes in his “impromptu charm” (39) of rags just as Marlow believes in the bandages he ties to his chimney.

Far worse than what Marlow perceives as simple superstitions is the destructive "praying to [ivory]" (26). This prayer to Mammon is one of the dangers of an 'existentialist' world, for which a completely new set of moral standards would have to be found to replace old religious norms. While Marlow is not optimistic that this will happen, he asserts the psychological need for some belief. He insists that Kurtz's final judgement redeems him, because it expresses "some sort of belief" (69), some ability to judge when everything is relative.

1.7 Politics and economy

"Heart of Darkness" is often seen as the work that comments most clearly on the history of wars and genocides in the 19th and, prophetically, in the 20th century (Lindqvist; Watts 50). It shows the depravity of persons who are backed by a powerful system that carries them along and diminishes their sense of personal responsibility, both in the rather pedestrian greed of the 'pilgrims', who resemble the soldiers of a colonial power or of Hitler, and in the charismatic absolutist power of Mr. Kurtz, the dictator himself. Both kinds of power have emotional and material aspects.

Marxist critics typically set out to analyse the material conditions of the production and consumption of a literary text, and its economic subtext. They describe how the characters' lives are determined by the underlying system of ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange. From this point of view, Marlow is partly a victim of his economic needs. His search for a dependent employment leads to his involuntary complicity in Leopold's project, which in turn harms the Congolese. This problematic complicity is partly, but not wholly, within the individual's power to enter or to eschew. Marlow looks at the map of the snaking Congo River in a shop window. This location makes the link between the symbolic and the material level explicit: colonial discourse about Africa is used to rationalise exploitation. Marlow himself arrives at an analysis of Leopold's economic system. He realises that, contrary to Leopold's rhetoric, the new colonising class in the Congo acquires "a precious trickle of ivory" for "a stream of [...] rubbishy cottons, beads, and brass-wire" ("Heart" 21). The Russian later reveals that it is in fact a stream of guns and ammunition, since Kurtz has cartridges but no wares left.

By keeping Kurtz's exemplary debasement secret (lying to the Intended and tearing the postscript off Kurtz's report), Marlow refuses to participate in the political process, which would begin with the divulgation of information. However, silence looks like consent, and thus this refusal is a contribution to the political process in spite of its passivity.

1.8 Darwinism

Until well into Victorian times, Westerners thought that the world contained the species God had made at creation, all of them and no others. At the top of creation they saw a single human race, comprising peoples with positively or negatively evaluated cultural, religious and visual characteristics, but all made in God's image. New research that culminated in Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859) replaced this reassuring world by one of evolution and of survival of the fittest. Some biologists and doctors set up evolutionary hierarchies of animals, then of what they called human races, an assumed biological distinction. Political and economic ideologies of Social Darwinism soon followed, endorsing imperialism as a philanthropic, necessary domination by those whom mental efforts and inherited qualities best qualified for it.

These new concepts merged with the effects of the European arms race that led to ever more efficient weapons during the 19th century. When peoples were wiped out, theorists soon said that they would have gone under anyway, that helping them on their natural, inevitable way out actually meant a humane mercy killing, or that they had instinctively given up at the contact with a human race at a higher stage of evolution, proving the scientific theory. In *The Descent of Man* (1871), Darwin concluded that "the civilised races of man will almost certainly exterminate[!] and replace throughout the world the savage races" (ch. 6, qtd. in Lindqvist 107). Conrad did not subscribe to these theories, but he was heavily influenced by the argumentation that ultimately led to such conclusions.

At the European end of the (Social) Darwinist scale some people saw an overcivilised society in a process of descent down the evolutionary ladder, a decay through oversoftening and through a lack of individual struggle, where the worthy were no longer the winners. They feared that the light of civilisation was only a periodic, momentary "flash of lightning" ("Heart" 9) between relapses into darkness, and artificial compared to the primal, shapeless wilderness.⁵

Here may lie another reason why "Heart of Darkness" leaves out African achievements and personalities — and the 'Arabs' at Stanley Falls. This omission makes it possible to portray an encounter between the two extremes on the Darwinist scale, between the "utter savagery" ("Heart" 10) that is an extension of the natural world of a past when "the big trees were kings" (35) and the weaklings who become monstrously disoriented as soon as they step away from the "civilized crowds" ("Outpost" 250) and from their secure place "between the butcher and the policeman" ("Heart" 49). Conrad continued a recent tradition of degenerate white characters 'going under' in colonial fiction (Boehmer, *Literature* 34).

⁵On Darwinist discourse see Lindqvist 75-88, 97-107, 115, 117, 119-20.

Darwinist theory was to be at the basis of later racist fascism. Kurtz with his "Nietzschean will to power" (Orr 72) can be seen as an early disciple of the Social Darwinist superman ideology that was to become embodied in Western dictators of the 20th century.

I will use the word *race* without inverted commas where it refers to the old pseudo-scientific categories, whose power actually hinges on the possibility of confusing sociological, political and imagined biological distinctions with reality and with each other. For instance, Hueffer & Conrad's *The Inheritors* studiously exploits this confusion. Where the word *race* refers to today's categories, which are recognised to be socially constructed rather than biological distinctions, I will set it in inverted commas.

1.9 Influence on modernist writers

One of the reasons for the fame of "Heart of Darkness" is its proleptic nature. Batchelor states that "[w]ith historical hindsight we can see Conrad as one of the founding fathers of modernism, but that is not a view that he himself would have welcomed or understood" (269). The core of the modernist movement in Britain and the US lay between 1908 and 1914, embodied by a new generation of writers including Yeats, Pound, Lawrence, the Woolfs and Joyce. They retained the features described as the impressionism and symbolism of "Heart of Darkness". Like Conrad, they were stimulated by new ideas in anthropology, psychology, philosophy, political theory and psychoanalysis. The encounter with cultures whose aesthetics and ways of life were radically different from European ones led to new questions in the European view of self and of artistic self-expression, as foreshadowed in Marlow's reflections on shared humanity and on the narrative act. Modernist writers have in common with Conrad an emphasis on the ambiguity and relativity of perception, an ironic or satirical approach, as well as layered and dense narrations. They use a multiplicity of symbolic suggestions, mythological references and other allusions with an ambition of synthesis. With the help of a radical paradoxicality and intentional opacities, they express a sceptical stance towards religion, civilisation and human nature. Modernism also continues Conrad's sense of absurdity or meaninglessness, of human isolation and of the problematic nature of communication.⁶ Conrad's delayed decoding was a precursor of the stream-of-consciousness technique used notably by Virginia Woolf.

⁶Cf. Knowles & Moore 124; Watts 49, 51-52.

1.10 Racism and imperialism

A protest movement against King Leopold's methods in the Congo began in Britain in 1904.⁷ One of its founders called "Heart of Darkness" "the most powerful thing ever written on the subject"⁸, written even long before the Congo atrocities were widely discussed in newspapers and organised protest started. Although Conrad felt that he did not have enough time and energy to spare to become an active participant of the movement, he contributed an open letter in which he again denounced Leopold's regime of terror and forced labour in the Congo. In this letter as in the novella, Conrad does not describe the Congolese as equal to whites. This did not pose a problem for the Congo Reform Association, which was not claiming that the Congolese were as intelligent as whites or able to rule themselves. In keeping with the progressive discourse of its time, the Association was asking for a better colonial treatment of the Congolese, but retained the idea that good colonialism would be in their own best interest.

"Heart of Darkness" is to this day considered a powerful anti-imperialist text for the intensity with which it describes the crimes of Leopold's rule. Until 1975, racism was never much of an issue. People apparently made no clear distinction between anti-imperialist and anti-racist qualities, assuming that a text that had one would also have the other.

In 1975, Chinua Achebe, Nigerian novelist and professor of African Literature, gave a lecture at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst that exploded this belief and was soon known all over the world. Achebe called Joseph Conrad a "bloody racist" (Knowles & Moore 299), which he moderated in later printed versions to a "thoroughgoing racist" ("Image" 257). "Conrad saw and condemned the evil of imperial exploitation", Achebe conceded, "but was strangely unaware of the racism on which it sharpened its iron tooth" (262). "Heart of Darkness", he argued, projects an image of Africa as the antithesis or negation of Europe, as the foil against which the achievements of European civilisation are made to stand out. Marlow represents Africans as a part of the wilderness. He reduces them to fragmented body parts, "limbs or rolling eyes" (254). On the other hand, Marlow finds that an African who does something more than materialise out of the 'evil jungle' to scare him resembles "a dog in a parody of breeches" ("Heart" 38; "Image" 254). Where he describe the suffering of Africans sympathetically, he does so in a spirit of contemporary liberalism, which conceded that it was bad for colonial subjects to suffer horribly, but which never claimed equality for them. Marlow does not even say

⁷On the Congo Reform Association cf. Hawkins, "Reform Movement".

⁸Letter from Edmund Dene Morel to A. Conan Doyle, October 7, 1909. Qtd. in Hawkins, "Reform Movement" 80.

that the dying helmsman has a "distant kinship" with whites ("Heart" 51), but that he lays a claim to it; and Marlow finds this claim to a common humanity frightening and "ugly" ("Heart" 38; "Image" 254).

Africans are denied the faculty of speech, communicating even among themselves with "short grunting phrases" ("Heart" 42; "Image" 255), unless to proclaim themselves cannibals or to fittingly announce the death of Mr. Kurtz, whom Africa has corrupted. Marlow views Africans in a positive light only when they stay "in their place" ("Heart" 36; "Image" 254), such as the offshore paddlers at the beginning of the novella and Kurtz's woman friend, who stays behind when he leaves. Similarly, he warns Europeans to stay where they belong lest they be corrupted by "triumphant bestiality" ("Image" 252).

Readers and scholars of "Heart of Darkness", in Achebe's experience, often argue that the unsympathetic representation of Africans is no real problem because the novella is not about Africans but about Marlow and Kurtz. In fact, Achebe finds this as bad or worse a problem than Conrad's descriptions of the Congolese as 'niggers', yelling crowds and prehistoric men. He argues that Africa is far too important to be reduced "to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind" (257).

Referring to the model of layers of meaning, one can say that Achebe objects to the way the basic layer, African reality, is superseded by the layers of European ethical theory, ageless myth, psychology and so on, and Africa is re-interpreted to be part of these layers, with a simple rainforest acquiring the evil power of Faust's devil, or real living persons being equated with unconscious fears. "Heart of Darkness" can be read an experience that could happen to anybody and anywhere. Until then, critics had seen this as a token of the high quality of the novella, arguing that it elevated a simple individual journey into the realm of the dateless and ubiquitous; and they had therefore, for instance, praised the dropping of African points of reference with its concomitant dark-tunnel effect as a stroke of genius (Sherry 350). Achebe was the first to argue that it is not good writing to sacrifice other people's individual lives to artistic methods, intellectual traditions or personal truths. Africans, he points out, have their own languages, cultures and history — and they have names, too. Colonisers imposed their desire for power and wealth on what they saw of Africa and Africans, Conrad imposed his desire for literary art and genius on what he saw.

For Achebe, one of the problems surrounding "Heart of Darkness" is that "white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely unremarked" (257). With most other topics, readers and critics would notice that characters are being depersonalised and that their country is being fogged over by the 'Conradian' adjectives. With Africa, it is just what they expect. Readers who defend "Heart of Darkness" arguing that it is a limited or unreliable narrator who is speaking, not Conrad himself, do not meet with Achebe's approval either. In spite of two

narrators and of relentless irony, he argues, Conrad fails to even hint at any alternative frame of reference in which the narrative could be interpreted, and he presents Marlow as trustworthy, liberal and resembling himself in career.

Invariably, allegations of racism come with questions of guilt in tow. European racism is a lot older than anybody living, Achebe argues, and this should “relieve us all of considerable responsibility and perhaps make us even willing to look at this phenomenon dispassionately” (252). More vicious, however, is the tenacious reproduction of dehumanising images of Africa, either intentionally or as a “reflex action” (261), which among many other things comprises the inclusion of “Heart of Darkness” in school canons. White people now have access to resources that would allow them to know better — for instance, the opportunity to encounter Africans or to read more accurate representations of their lives. The highly necessary ability to “look at Africa not through a haze of distortions and cheap mystifications but quite simply as a continent of people — not angels, but not rudimentary souls either — just people” will be “its own [...] reward” (261).

A debate ensued that has become known as the ‘Achebe controversy’. Some Western Conradians defended “Heart of Darkness” with as much emotional vigour as he attacked it. Many of them argue that Marlow’s views on ‘race’ are of their time while its anti-imperialism is ahead of its time, or that it is not permissible to judge a literary work according to political ideas.⁹

Several writers and critics from formerly colonised countries have given particularly interesting responses to Achebe’s lecture. Some of them take up variations on Achebe’s stance, while others, including Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (*Writers in Politics* 19, 76-78) and Wilson Harris (“Frontier”), find some grounds of defending “Heart of Darkness”, especially on account of its critical and satiric treatment of the colonisers. The following two readings will prove especially fruitful in the context of rewritings.

The Guyanese author Wilson Harris calls “Heart of Darkness” “a frontier novel” (“Frontier” 263) in the sense that Conrad, by means of irony, shows the discourse of colonisation to be biased and insufficient, but does not offer a new discourse. According to Harris, Conrad spent all his energy in exposing the illusions of imperialist rhetoric and subsequently suffered from “an exhaustion of spirit that froze [his] genius and made it impossible for him to cross the frontier upon which his intuitive imagination had arrived” (266). Conrad’s distorted depiction of Africans is a parodic exaggeration of normal representation by complacent Europeans, and Kurtz’s postscript a parody of “the notion of moral light that devours all in its path” (265), the way a homogenous society finds it a moral duty to conquer and subject everyone who is different. Conrad’s

⁹Cf. Watt 158-59; Watts 55-58. Firchow also goes to great lengths to reject accusations of racism against “Heart of Darkness”.

scepticism, however, keeps him from offering any new perspectives. Such new material, Harris argues, has been forthcoming in more recent literature, including a search for spiritual meaning and for the value of words, as well as models of multicultural and individualist (postcolonial) societies.

Frances B. Singh from India argues that while "Heart of Darkness" should not "be removed from the canon of works indicting colonialism", the novella mainly shows "the problem [Conrad] ran into when he attempted to indict colonialism" (280). According to Singh, the problem is that "the historical and the psychological levels of the metaphor [of darkness, horror etc.] work against each other" (271). At the historical level, Marlow shows the horrors of colonialism. At the psychological level, however, he reassociates the horror with the Congolese. Marlow implies that they let all the vile unconscious desires run free that civilisation has been able to suppress in Europeans. According to Singh, Marlow finds that Kurtz has been infected and corrupted by the Africans' "unspeakable rites" ("Heart" 50) rather than by his unchecked power, and Conrad sides with Marlow in every respect. So Conrad, being a man of his time, actually succumbed to the ideology that said Africans were "evil [and therefore] must be conquered and put under white man's rule for their own good" (272). However, Singh sees some light on the horizon for a new frame of reference. She finds that Kurtz's African friends are presented as simple, selfless and protective at least in part of the text. This suggests that Kurtz does not go so native that he becomes depraved, but he actually does "not go native enough" (277). If only he blended in with his friends enough to stop getting ivory for the company and for his European career, he could become part of their civilisation like an anthropologist studying a culture, and he could learn to value their way of living instead of getting them to help shoot other people for their ivory. For Singh, 'the horror' refers to what Kurtz has done to Africans, and it also refers "to men like Marlow who seemed to hate colonialism but really lived by its values and associated the practices of the blacks with the road to perdition" (277). "Exterminate all the brutes" ("Heart" 51) shows Kurtz's wish to get rid of the brute colonisers who represent his link with greedy Western culture, and the Russian is closer to a truly intercultural encounter than Kurtz.

Another important observation is that the idea of a "sordid farce acted in front of a sinister back-cloth" ("Heart" 17) is programmatic for the whole story. Marlow criticises everyone. One may argue that anti-African statements are not to be seen as hurtful because there are as many or more anti-European statements. This argument does not take into account that power in representation is not symmetric. Negative representation of Europeans is a criticism of their power, negative representation of Congolese supports that power (van den Broek 68).

What is perhaps the most confusing feature of “Heart of Darkness” is Marlow’s Protean ability to switch between positive and negative stereotypes, or, rarely, between a stereotypical and a personal view of an African (Fincham, “Sign”). Marlow feels that to appreciate the common humanity of black and white, the European traveller “must at least be as much of a man as these on the shore”, while a few sentences earlier he has stated that they belong to “the night of the first ages” (38). When the helmsman is dead, Marlow regards him with affection, but he also disavows this affection instantly to make the man a mere tool: “I missed my late helmsman awfully [...], don’t you see, he had done something, he had steered [...] — a help — an instrument. It was a kind of partnership” (51). With the African woman, contradicting stereotypes alternate within one and the same sentence: “a wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman [...] treading the earth proudly with a slight jingle and flash of barbarous ornaments. [...] She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent” (60). Images of savagery and barbarism coexist with the fantasy of a natural, authentic and honest life, of masculine strength untainted by civilised flabbiness, of feminine pride unweakened by the Victorian paleness of the Intended. Conrad exploits the deep response of readers to racialist fantasies, of which many readers (as Achebe criticises) are not aware. In addition, he keeps the reader’s unconscious need to find a closed order or principle alive by giving it no satisfaction, by switching rapidly between contradictory fantasies. Conrad takes this switching to a bewildering limit, creating a tension that may partially explain the intensity of “Heart of Darkness” — and the difficulties critics have had in tackling his treatment of ‘race’.

1.11 Gender

In the wake of the Achebe controversy, feminist readings of “Heart of Darkness” have been offered. Nina Pelikan Straus, Bette London, Johanna M. Smith and Elaine Showalter were among those who claimed that “Heart of Darkness” was not only racist but also sexist. Feminists argue that the Othering and silencing of women by men is comparable to the representation of the colonised Other that helps uphold white dominance. Marlow depicts Africans as a voiceless backcloth, women as “out of it” (“Heart” 49). He feminises Africa itself as a prostrate body that white men enter and plunder. ‘Race’ and gender stereotypes collude to represent Kurtz’s African woman friend as a part of nature, melting her into the “fecund and mysterious”, “immense wilderness” (60).

Like Africa and Africans, female characters are depersonalised into symbols, mythical figures or similar abstractions. For instance, the Intended can be seen as an incarnation of naive Europe at home that supported the men in the colonies with a belief in their moral purity and their necessary service, while at the same time desiring the money those men were making there (Parry 37-39).