

**Contemporary Criticism
And a Classic English Novel**

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要約

現代批評と一冊のイギリス古典小説

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イギリス、アメリカ両国における最近の批評の動向には、文学のいかなる芸術的価値をも否定する傾向がある。現代の批評家達は横柄にも「作者の死」を宣言し、彼ら自身の著述が創造的であると主張した。大まかに言って、彼らは伝統的な文学観や文学的な反応を打ち壊すために現代言語学を用いたり、あるいは文学を政治的な分析へと隷属させ、その結果、文学作品がその政治的な内容によって賞賛されたり非難されたりしている。そのような批評方法の甚だしい不適切さを暴くために、ナイジェリアの小説家 Achebe による、コンラッド『闇の奥』の批評をとりあげてみた。Achebe がコンラッドを人種差別主義作家であったと証明しようとすることによって、物語にみられる象徴性や芸術的価値を見落としている事実を示そうと試みた。

There is a growing feeling among academics that English studies, in our times, is in a state of crisis, and this is attributed largely to the recent developments in contemporary literary criticism. Helen Gardner, of Oxford, was perhaps the first among distinguished critics to denounce the new critical tendencies in her Charles Eliot Norton Lectures (1979–80), which were subsequently published under the title, *In Defence of the Imagination*. Gardner felt that the ‘New Criticism’ was motivated by “an underlying destructive urge” (4) and feared that it marked “a real loss of belief in the value of literature and of literary study” (23). And now, in less than ten years since Gardner’s forebodings, we have Alvin Kernan, Emeritus Professor at Princeton, announcing “the death of literature”:

Phenomenology, structuralism, deconstruction, Freudianism, Marxism, Feminism have been the most clamorous voices announcing the death of the old literature in recent years. (7)

When, a few years earlier, Allan Bloom wrote a devastating critique of liberal arts education in America in the post-war years, he identified the symptoms of the general malaise in the humanities department as follows:

I do not deny that at least some professors love the works they study and teach. But there is a furious effort to make them up-to-date, largely by treating them as the matter formed by some contemporary theory—cultural, historical, economic or psychological. The effort to read books as their writers intended them to be read has been made into a crime, ever since ‘the intentional fallacy’ was instituted. There are endless debates about methods—among them Freudian criticism, Marxist criticism, New Criticism, Structuralism and Deconstructionism, and many others, all of which have in common the premise that what Plato or Dante had to say about reality is unimportant. These schools of criticism make the writers plants in a garden planned by a modern scholar, while their own garden-planning is denied them. (375)

Contemporary critics seek to exalt criticism above creative writing: they gleefully announce ‘the death of the author,’ and they go on to invite the readers to appreciate their own cleverness and skill as ‘critics.’ But in the past, indeed until the recent past, it was regarded as a truism to say that criticism was dependent on the creative work. As T S Eliot had remarked in his essay “The Function of Criticism”:

I have assumed as axiomatic that a creation, a work of art, is autotelic; and that criticism, by definition is *about* something other than itself. (30)

Apparently, contemporary criticism spurns such a secondary role.

This *avant-grade* criticism has been formulated into elaborate ‘critical theories’ by American and English critics with liberal help from the European practitioners of the genre. These ‘critical theories’ broadly concentrate on linguistic and political

approaches to literature. Structuralism, for example, was started as a 'critical theory' by the French social anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss who had patterned his ideas about the use of language after the analysis of language demonstrated by the Swiss linguistics scholar, Ferdinand de Saussure, the author of *Course in General Linguistics*. The Structuralists believe that all linguistic experience is relative, and they argue against authorial authority which they feel inhibits the freedom of the reader to respond to literary texts according to his or her own experience and personal make-up. Thus, in the manner of New Criticism, Structuralism separates the literary text from the author or his intentions, but it goes beyond and claims that the consciousness of the linguistic relativism leaves the reader free to respond to literary works any way he chooses to do so. It sounds absurd, but the basic premise behind Structuralism is that a reader can make whatever he wants to do of a work written by an author. Helen Gardner felt that such ideas about criticism were not only frivolous but also destructive:

Persons, like myself, who had thought when reading a poem that through the medium of the printed page a man, although long dead, was speaking to them, are misguided. We had not learnt how to distinguish between *parole* and *écriture*, speech, which we hear and the writing, which we read. A written text is merely black marks on a white ground, emitting an infinite play of significances in which the critic may sport like a dolphin. He is the real artist, responding to the play of significances, liberated from 'the obligation to be right (a standard that simply drops out)' and concerned only to be 'interesting (a standard that can be met without any reference at all to an illusory objectivity).' The critic from whom I am quoting, Stanley Fish, goes on: 'Rather than restoring or recovering text, I am in the business of making texts and of teaching others to make them by adding to their repertoire of strategies.' This makes the study of literature sound like a highly sophisticated war-game with the object of annihilating the author on the field of battle of the text. (3)

Post-Structuralism, based on Jacques Derrida's conception of Deconstructionism, goes a demented step further and challenges the notion of language as a means of communication: it believes that language, because of its fluidity, seeks to express what soon becomes absent. The language that a writer uses to convey a meaning already undergoes changes by the time the reader handles it. According to this theory, criticism itself becomes literature in that it is open to endless interpretations.

However, critics who hold such views must face the fact that they are not only pretentiously directing readers' attention towards themselves rather than the authors but also that this way of thinking leaves a reader (however ill-informed, bigoted, prejudiced he or she may be) free to make of literature whatever may suit his fancy, thus making a travesty of all literary endeavours. They arrogantly disregard the care and pain which go with the author's attempt to find the *mot juste* for the delicate shades of

meanings and feelings that he seeks to communicate to the reader. In his poem 'Adam's Curse,' Yeats contemptuously spoke of "the noisy set/Of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen," who, he felt, were insensitive to the poet's labour—"stitching and unstitching"—in the articulation of "sweet sounds." If he had written the poem now, he would perhaps have added "contemporary critics" to the infamous list. Such critics not only seem to be unable to respond to the artist's sensitive use of the language but they also betray their own inability to use language in a meaningful way: most of them write in a style which can be best described as jargon-ridden incomprehensible verbiage or in manner that is semi-literate 'colloquese.' No wonder, Alvin Kernan sees such ideas about criticism as a death-knell to literature and criticism as we have known them through centuries:

Deconstruction, the covering term increasingly used for a broad range of literary criticism that discredited the old literature, turned on literature with the strange ferocity that so bewildered Trilling and charged it with having been mystifying, illogical, and harmful rather than beneficial. (69)

Kernan goes on to make his central point that such 'critical theories' are basically the products of political/social rebellion. He believes that such 'theories' have been espoused and popularized by members of universities who hold radical views on political and social matters: "For them literature, like the universities, appeared the aesthetic arm of capitalist ideology, a cultural instrument of a corrupt and repressive order." As a result, the courses they teach seek to "demonstrate how meaningless, or paradoxically, how wicked and antiprogressive, the old literature has been, how meaningless its language, how badly it has treated those who are not white, how regularly it has voiced an aristocratic jack-booted ethos or propagandized for a brutally materialistic capitalism" (70). In all this, Kernan does not fail to notice the pathetic irony in the fact that old literature is "deconstructed by those who owe their living to teaching and writing about it"(70). Such an irony had already been seized on by Roger Kimball who titled his book *Tenured Radicals*, in which he pointed out the fact that academics have been enjoying the luxury of being radicals from their safe tenured positions in the universities. Kimball's finding is that the politicization of literature is a microcosm of the larger picture of contemporary life as a whole:

The issues raised by the politicization of the humanities have application far beyond the ivy-covered walls of academy. The denunciations of the 'hegemony' of Western culture and liberal institutions that are sounded so insistently within our colleges these days are not idle chatter, but represent a concerted effort to attack the very foundations of the society that generates the independence of cultural and artistic life—including the independence of higher education.

(Quoted by Epstein 23)

I think Kimball's point that in our times "the very foundations of the society" have been

under attack is crucial to an understanding of what has been happening in the field of English Studies. In his book, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (1987), Gerald Graff has shown how there have always been conflicts and dissensions within English departments about how literature should be read and taught. In the field of literary criticism, there have been, as there should be, different points of view about, for example, the relationship between literature and language/philology/society/philosophy/history, but the aesthetic value of literature was never in doubt. Now, literary criticism tends to look down upon the very concept of aesthetic or literary value or artistic vision that might rise above the topical concerns of the day. Instead, it seeks to promote political or social ideologies or obsessions—depending on the personal proclivities of the critics concerned. And in the processes, it ‘deconstructs’ or distorts what has been acknowledged as good literature and elevates works which traditional literary judgement would find of little or no literary merit.

Feminist criticism is a case in point. It is born of feminism which, as a social or political programme is, of course, laudable. But when feminism becomes the very foundation of a critical approach, it is both limited and limiting. Feminist criticism has devoted its energies to describing how women have been (mis)represented in the literary works of men, and it has argued that literary texts have been written as well as read from a male perspective that has always been dominant in the society. Within Feminist criticism there are different approaches but its principal thrust is common to all:

It is a radical criticism which seeks not merely to describe the way things are but to challenge the *status quo*. Feminist critics claim that traditional criticism has silenced or suppressed the debate about gender because it is in its own interest to do so. One aspect of this is that there are many novels by and about women, such as those published by Virago, which male critics have all but ignored, as if they are not worth discussing as literature. Once the critical premises are changed, however, and it is argued that male and female identity have always been central issues in our society, such books become interesting and worth discussing.

(Peck and Coyle 152)

Obviously, Feminist criticism seeks to enlarge the concept of literature itself: once “the critical premises are changed,” the works which had been previously rejected as “not worth discussing as literature” gain admittance and “become interesting and worth discussing” if they concern themselves with “male and female identity [which] have always been central issues in *our* society” [*Italics added*]. But the traditional view of literature has been that it is concerned with the fundamental human experience (which of course includes both male and female) and that it is not confined to the topical debates of *the* society of any specific period, which by definition is temporary and transient. The possibility that feminism of our times may prove to be as transient as all social/political issues have always been in the past is becoming more and more a reality. There is reason to believe that feminism is now beginning to falter in the face of the human

reality. Sally Quinn, a novelist and a writer, wrote an article recently in which she declared that “feminism as we have known it is dead” because it has “failed to acknowledge and address the basic question—‘the human factor.’” Quinn believes that though feminism has achieved political, economic rights for women, it has done grievous harm to their personal and social life:

For most women, equality and justice top any agenda. What most women do not want, though, is to be told how to live. Indeed, many women believe that they are better understood by the Helen Gurley Browns rather than the Germaine Greers.

They feel betrayed and lied to because trying to live a politically correct personal life does not work, as Ms Steinam, Ms Fonda, Ms Streisand, Ms Kelly and others have demonstrated. . . .

The hypocrisy of feminist leaders turned off the mainstream; women began rejecting the notion that they had to think and feel in a way that was unnatural. (9)

In the light of this, one might begin to wonder whether Feminist criticism has not also lost sight of “the human factor” in judging literature. Some writers and critics feel that they have. There is no means of knowing how the acknowledged great novelists of the past like Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot or Virginia Woolf would have reacted to their being labelled ‘feminist writers’—it seems to me that such a categorization would restrict their achievement which is securely based on their awareness of the ‘human’ rather than the ‘gender’ factor—but we do know that some of the serious contemporary women writers have pointedly detached themselves from the feminist embrace. Iris Murdoch has always seen herself as a philosophical rather than a feminist writer, and Doris Lessing has been blunt on this issue:

“I have never been a feminist writer,” [Lessing] says sharply. “I have never written as a woman. There is a great difference between saying ‘Now I’m going to write as a woman,’ and being a woman writer, because if you start writing to prescription, you’re never going to write well.” (7)

Admittedly, there are some novelists who professedly write as women and Feminist critics have hailed them as remarkable writers. But whether such critics can be trusted on matters of literary judgement is another matter. One is forewarned by the announcement, made in an article that bears the aggressive title, “Why Feminist Critics are Angry with George Eliot,” that “Feminist critics uniformly resist making judgements about literature on the basis of style, structure, or mimesis” (Austen 554). What is left? *Only* “correctness” in matters of gender and sex? If the answer to this question is in the affirmative, then many many literary works, including those written by women writers, will fail the test, and one will have to be content with only a few of the contemporary literary luminaries of the right shade.

The distinguished critic of modern poetry at Harvard, Helen Vendler, has written a scathing review-article on some of the latest feminist critical works, in which she starts

by saying that she “felt disquiet in reading what used to be called ‘feminist criticism’ or ‘feminist literary theory,’ and is now sometimes called ‘feminist cultural analysis’” and she goes on to explain how the books under review are variously deficient as literary criticism, how they unjustly seek to deflate or inflate their merits or demerits on the basis of their ideological “correctness” or otherwise on matters of “sex, race and class” (19). I will just take, for illustration, Vendler’s criticism of the much-acclaimed feminist literary history of the twentieth-century women writers, *No Man’s Land* by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. Vendler starts by attacking what she calls “the vulgarity of some of the recent literary criticism by feminists,” and feels that the “prose style of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gilbert... is the most serious obstacle to taking them seriously as writers on literature”(23). She finds their book(s) unsatisfactory because the “authors have no idea what literary history can do, what it should do, how it should be written”; they have inserted “mini-books” on presumably what they consider to be ‘good’ feminist writers and they have attempted to “gobble up entire eras in a single indigestible paragraph” (24). Vendler similarly takes the authors to task for attempting to salvage second-rate women writers who had previously been rejected not only by ‘male’ critics but also by “women writers of talent”: Vendler points out that Gilbert and Gubar have misrepresented “the well-documented fact that women-writers of talent tend to dislike second-rate works” (24) even if they happened to have been written by women. She concludes her review of Gilbert and Gubar’s work with serious doubts about their critical abilities:

... Gilbert and Gubar exhibit the depressing refusal of judgement or incapacity for judgement, that marks most political criticism when it turns its glance on its own partisans. Feminist critics have disparaged male critics for their ‘exclusions;’ it is possible to blame feminist literary historians for their inclusions, and their misogyny towards women writers who recognize twaddle as twaddle and are not afraid to say so. (24)

I think Vendler herself deserves to be praised for having the courage to “recognize twaddle as twaddle” in the field of literary criticism and also for not having been “afraid to say so.”

A similar “incapacity for judgement” and inability to discriminate between the good and the bad are to be found among the practitioners of trendy ‘critical theories’ like New Historicism or Multiculturalism—which unfortunately is “supercharged by its animus against what it characterizes as white male culture,” though its belief that “every culture has worth and therefore deserves expression of support” (Epstein 29) is commendable and quite unexceptional—and Marxist Criticism. Proponents of these ‘critical theories’ believe that language as well as literature have been used in the past for the preservation of the elitist or aristocratic interests and the oppression of the proletariat and the disadvantaged. As Kernan has remarked,

The traditional canon, largely the work of white, Western men, is examined for its support of imperialism and racism. Writings by blacks and authors of various ethnic origins, not previously consid-

ered significant enough to be included in the official literary canon, become the substance of courses in Black Literature, Women's Literature, and, by way of one example, Literature by Italian-Americans. Jane Tompkins has legitimized this extra-canonical literature not on an aesthetic basis but solely on the grounds of the social influence they have had. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by this standard becomes the great American novel of the nineteenth century. (86)

A more lamentable fact is that such critical approaches to literature distort and misinterpret great works of art in order to further political/social causes. I will try to explain and illustrate this by examining a recent critique of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. This novel has traditionally been seen as a remarkable work when judged by any sane literary standards, but an African novelist refuses to grant it any artistic merit because he thinks that Conrad is a racist.

* * * * *

In his Chancellor's Lecture at the University of Massachusetts in 1974, the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe spoke on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and described it as the work of "a bloody racist" because he felt that the Africans in it were dehumanized and depersonalized. Achebe went on to ask whether such a book could be called "a great work of art," and then provided the answer: "No."

The Lecture was first published in *Chant of Saints: A Collection of Afro-American Literature, Art and Scholarship**, and Achebe subsequently published it in his collection of essays, *Hopes and Impediments* (Doubleday, 1989). In the Author's Preface, he claims that the diverse essays in his book achieve "roundness" by their discussion of racism, "for while Conrad casually wrote words that continue to give morale to the barricades of racism, Baldwin [on whom Achebe has written a piece at the end of the book] spent his talent subverting them. Impediments and hopes!"

It is extraordinary that a reader, and a practising novelist at that, should claim that Conrad's "casually" written "words continue to give morale to the barricades of racism." Or perhaps it is not so in the context of the modern critical climate as I have outlined it above. Now, while it is true that Achebe is not in the tradition of artist-critics like Wordsworth, Arnold and Eliot, one might still expect from him at least the ability to offer viable critical opinions about the tale's artistic features. Instead what he gives is his (mistaken) belief that Conrad was a "racist," and in his attempt to support his allegation he loses sight of the author's artistic modes and vision.

Achebe's piece is riddled with inconsistencies, contradictions and even distorted quotations. He starts with the proposition that there is "the desire—one might indeed say the need—in Western psychology to set up Africa as a foil to Europe, a place of

* All quotations from Achebe's critique will be cited from this source.

negations at once remote and vaguely familiar in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest." Achebe is quick to recognize that his proposition is of a political/sociological/biological nature, but he confesses that he cannot treat it along those lines: "I have neither the desire nor, indeed the competence, to do so with the tools of the social and biological sciences." Instead, he turns his guns, professedly "as a novelist", to "one famous book of European fiction, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, which better than any other work I know displays that Western desire and need..." (314).

But, strangely, Achebe starts by claiming, rightly as it happens, that the tale "projects the image of Africa as 'the other world', the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence is mocked by triumphant bestiality ['primitivism' would have been a more appropriate word.]" But Achebe does not seem to be aware of the contradiction involved in what he has been saying: if the western need is to portray Africa as "a place of negations," in order to reveal by contrast Europe's own state as one of "spiritual grace," then clearly *Heart of Darkness* does not fit the bill because in it Conrad presents, according to Achebe himself, an image in which European man's "vaunted intelligence" is mocked by the "triumphant bestiality" (314) (mark the "triumphant") of the Africans. The roles are in fact reversed: Africa is good and Europe is bad. But Achebe refuses to see this as well as Conrad's artistic intention in his determination to prove Conrad's racism.

Similarly, Achebe arbitrarily announces that while the Thames in the tale is "good," the "Congo River" (oblivious of the fact that Conrad does not give the African river that or any other name) is "bad" (314). Conrad does not make any such distinction between the rivers: the rivers, especially the African one, have a symbolic significance which enhances the tale's central theme. Achebe stubbornly refuses to appreciate Conrad's contention that the European civilization has so corrupted man's mind that he cannot (or is afraid to) respond to the vitality that the Africans in their 'uncivilized' state display:

The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled monster, but there—there you could look at a thing, monstrous and free. It was unearthly, and the men were—No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces: 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 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 first ages—could comprehend. (36-37)*

* All subsequent quotations from the novel will be cited from Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, New York: Norton, 1971.

Achebe quotes this passage but misses its central point. Instead, he seizes on what he regards as a racist word “Ugly”, and he actually distorts the quotation in his zeal to argue his point against the author. Achebe’s comment on this passage is:

Herein lies the meaning of *Heart of Darkness* and the fascination it holds over the Western mind: “What thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours [sic] …… Ugly”. (316)

Not only does Achebe selectively quote Conrad, and hence misrepresent him, he does not even proceed to take into account the last sentences in the passage which he himself has cited: “Yes, it was ugly enough,” but if one “were man enough,” one would notice some “meaning” in the scene which got lost in the process of man’s civilization, an idea which is the crucial point of the passage as a whole. A bit of good old principles of practical criticism, with its insistence on a concentration on the text, free from extraneous considerations and personal obsessions, would have helped Achebe to comprehend the literary import of the passage.

Achebe’s search for signs of racism in the tale leads him to miss the ironical-satirical overtones in another passage which he cites to show Conrad’s “dehumanization” of the Africans: Marlow speaks of the African boy who had been ‘trained’ by his European masters to operate a boiler:

A few months of training had done for that really fine chap. He squinted at the steam-gauge and at the water-gauge with an evident effort of intrepidity—and he had filed teeth too, the poor devil, and the wool on 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. (37)

Achebe mistakenly thinks that in this passage Marlow/Conrad is making fun of the African boy who misguidedly aspires to achieve western skills and efficiency, thereby suggesting that the Africans should stay in the jungle where they belong, in which case, in Achebe’s words, they will “have at least the merit of being in their place, unlike this dog in a parody of breeches” (316). On the contrary, as the context makes abundantly clear, Marlow/Conrad is criticizing the intrusion of western ideas and modes which are incongruous in the African context: the African boy indeed would have been better off if he had been left to follow his own kind of life “on the bank,” rather than becoming a “thrall” to modern machinery in his effort to acquire “improving knowledge.” Marlow/Conrad had made a similar point earlier when on arriving in Africa, Marlow noticed a group of black men, including convicts, who had been forcibly enlisted in the workforce for building a railway. Many of them had been brought over from their homelands and were exposed to alien food and surroundings, unhealthy working-conditions and diseases:

They were dying slowly—it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now—

nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. Brought from all the recesses of coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest. (17)

Achebe correctly sees in this Marlow/Conrad's pity for and anger over the plight of the Africans which was brought about by their European exploiters who, as Conrad had previously pointed out in a different context, had been guilty of "the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience"(118). But Achebe quickly dismisses this as "bleeding-heart sentiments," meant to pander to the sentimental feelings of the liberal "best minds of the age in England, Europe and America." He feels that Marlow/Conrad is being sentimental rather than facing "the ultimate question of the equality between white people and black people"(318). This he attributes to Marlow/Conrad's feelings of racial superiority which would not allow him to "use the word 'brother' however qualified, the farthest he would go was 'kinship'" (319). Achebe does take into account the historical consideration that in Conrad's time "the reputation of the black man was particularly at a low level," and grants Conrad the benefit of being among the "liberals" of his generation. Nevertheless, he is convinced that "there still remains in Conrad's attitude a residue of antipathy to black people which his peculiar psychology can explain" (320). But, alas! the 'western' psychologist is in collusion against the black man: Dr Bernard Mayer, whose book *Joseph Conrad: A Psychoanalytic Biography* Achebe cites, does not go into questions about Conrad's "racist" feelings against the blacks, which leads Achebe to "surmise that Western psychoanalysts must regard the kind of racism displayed by Conrad as absolutely normal" (321).

This being so, Achebe finds *Heart of Darkness* to be "an offensive and totally deplorable book" which cannot be regarded as "great art or even good art" (321). But it is apparent that he completely distorts Conrad's portrait of Africa and the Africans in the tale in order to castigate western racism. What is worse, and unforgivable in a practising novelist and critic, is that he loses sight of the artistic vision that Conrad projects. Achebe's opinion, therefore, about the artistic merit of the work is unreliable and dubious, if not perverse.

Achebe's critique is a flagrant illustration of the dangers inherent in many of the new critical approaches that are in fashion now. Critics of Achebe's suspect that his own works have suffered as a result of his sympathetic response to the new political—critical climate. When Achebe came to critical limelight with the publication of *Things Fall Apart* (1958), he had acknowledged his literary debts to writers like George Eliot and Joseph Conrad. But in the subsequent decades he has moved to more overtly political themes. This is not the place to evaluate his own performance as a novelist but perhaps it is sufficient to note that he has not produced in his later years anything of the range and depth of his earlier novels. But what needs to be affirmed here is that when he attempts to see *Heart of Darkness* from a political/social standpoint, he is completely mistaken.

If he had approached it with Arnoldian *disinterestedness* as a critic, he would have seen *Heart of Darkness* as a symbolic work, and would have also realized that it yields its meaning and significance only if it is viewed as such. Conrad's 'heart of darkness' is the evil which destroys all good and pious intentions that it comes in contact with. He traces this inherent evil in man back to his primitive ancestors—hence the symbolism of the journey into the African jungle among African people. For the modern European man this evil is hidden beneath the cloak of civilization, its many skills, its efficiencies and pretensions. Marlow recognizes a superficial and vulgar manifestation of this evil when he encounters the greed of the European traders for ivory, their senseless shootings at imaginary enemies in the bush etc. at the start of his journey. But this kind of evil is not the object of his quest—though theses and books can be, indeed have been, written on Conrad's anti-imperialism. The frightening evil which destroys all good intentions is symbolized in the nature of Kurtz and Marlow's encounter with this character, and this evil is at the centre of the tale. Achebe completely misunderstands and misrepresents Conrad's artistic intention when he fulminates against Conrad for "reducing Africa to the role of props for the breakup of one petty European mind." In the first place, Kurtz was by no means "petty". He was clearly miles ahead of the other European 'ivory-grabbers' whom he despised and who could not understand Kurtz or his "methods." Kurtz was a cosmopolitan man, his "mother was half-English, his father was half-French. All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz" (50). He was a poet, a painter and a musician and he had also in him the makings of a politician. He was also a very successful businessman and above all he was an idealist.

However, *Heart of Darkness* is, as J Guerard (whom Achebe quotes) has pointed out, "not primarily about Kurtz or about the brutality of the Belgian officials but about Marlow, the narrator." The story is about Marlow, his education, his self discovery, his understanding of the nature of evil, the perception of which leads Kurtz to cry out "The horror! The horror!" When he first arrived in Africa and learnt about Kurtz, Marlow became "curious to see whether this man, who had come out equipped with moral ideas of some sort, would climb to the top after all, and how he would set about his work when there" (31). And at the end of his journey he was both sobered and elated by what he had experienced: "I affirm that Kurtz was a remarkable man. He said it. . . . [Kurtz's cry "The horror!"] was an affirmation, a moral victory, paid for by innumerable defeats, by abominable terrors, by abominable satisfactions. But it was a victory! (72). That was why when he returned to his native "sepulchral city," Marlow was repelled by "the sight of people hurrying through the streets to filch a little money from each other, to devour their infamous cookery, to gulp their unwholesome beer, to dream their insignificant silly dreams"(72). So much for Achebe's description of the white man's notion of "Europe's own state of spiritual grace"!

Achebe's blindness to Conrad's use of symbolical modes also prevents him from recognizing the fact that the characters in the tale are not 'realistic' in the conventional sense of the term. Almost all the Europeans as well as the Africans are flat—one of the agents is called "this papier-mache Mephistopheles" (26)— and as it happens, compared

to the vitality and “restraint” that the Africans display the Europeans seem to have only one dimension, the greed which leads them to senseless cruelty. So if the Africans are “dehumanized,” so are the Europeans—for purposes that are clearly artistic. As a matter of fact, when the Africans do appear really dehumanized, as in the description of the dying conscript labourers, it is the Europeans who are held responsible for their plight, and hence condemned. Otherwise, as I have pointed out, the Africans seem to display energy and vitality. When Marlow sees the first group of Africans on a boat, he is struck by these qualities:

You could see from afar the white of their eyeballs. They shouted, sang; their bodies streamed with perspiration: they had faces like grotesque masks—these chaps: but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement, that was as natural and true as the surf along the coast. They wanted no excuse for being there. They were a great comfort to look at. (13–14)

Similarly, the cannibals whom Marlow had enlisted for his crew were “[f]ine fellows—cannibals—in their place. They were men one could work with, and I am grateful to them.” Marlow soon notices another quality in them for which he was not at all prepared. He suddenly became aware of the fact that the cannibals must be hungry because “the pilgrims” on board had overthrown their food, rotten hippo meat, because of its stink. In compensation, the cannibals had been given “every week three pieces of wire, each about nine inches long; and the theory was they were to buy their provisions with that currency in riverside villages.” But either there were no villages on the way or the director and other passengers (who themselves were well fed out of tins) did not wish to stop the steamer. As a result, the cannibals went hungry. What intrigued as well as fascinated Marlow about the cannibals in their present state was the fact that they did not eat up the white passengers on board but went hungry instead: they could “have a good tuck in for once.” What prevents them from taking such a course of action is, Marlow feels, their “restraint”: “And I saw that something restraining, one of those human secrets that baffle human probability had come into play.” He grants that it was almost an incredible phenomenon, “I would just as soon have expected restraint from a hyena prowling among the corpses of a battlefield.” But then, there it was, “the fact facing [him]” (41–43).

Such a discovery of positive traits in these representatives of the primeaval man is also a part of Marlow’s education. It enables him to have a better understanding of the fundamental nature of evil in man. Modern ‘civilization,’ with all its progress and pretensions, has not only deprived man of [in Marlow’s words] the “knowledge of life” (72) but it has also taken him away from some of the innate good qualities which his ancestors had possessed: Marlow felt that the *hamartia* in Kurtz as a tragic figure was that he “lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts, that there was something wanting in him—some small matter which when the pressing need arose, could not be found under his magnificent eloquence” (58). That Conrad had hinted at the *kinship* rather than *brotherhood* between the Europeans and the Africans is just right in the

context of his concern with primal matters. Achebe apparently feels that Conrad's description of Africans as primitive people with rolling eyes and horrid faces shows his racism. There is no denying that in this tale the Africans symbolize the uncivilized savages. But since 'civilization' itself is savagely satirized and condemned, man in his uncivilized states with all his grotesqueries, both in looks and behaviour, is surely to be preferred? But I do not think that Conrad wants us to see the tale in these terms either, the noble savage and the corrupt civilized man. It is, as I have argued, a complex work in which man is enjoined to look deeper into his own self and to recognize the truth of human existence.

All this can, of course, be regarded as 'standard' interpretation of *Heart of Darkness* and, I think, a valid one. On the other hand, Achebe's political-social approach does nothing to enhance our literary appreciation of the tale. Instead, it makes unwarranted accusations against Conrad and in the process misses his artistry and profoundly human vision.

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The recent debate about the state of English Studies is likely to return the critic and teacher to a basic recognition that literature is an aesthetic representation of human life in its manifold representations, and that the "critical activity finds its highest, its true fulfilment in a kind of union with creation in the labour of the artist" (Eliot 31). There are already signs that the plot to turn criticism into a "war-game with the object of annihilating the author on the field of battle of the text" (Gardner 3) is beginning to backfire. In the latest issue of *PMLA*, Jeffrey Nealon starts his defensive essay on Deconstructionism by admitting that "Deconstruction, it seems, is dead in the literary departments" (1266). It would appear that the likes of Stanley Fish who had proclaimed their new vocational interests—"I am in the business of making texts and of teaching others to make texts"—will soon discover that their business venture has failed. (It is interesting, perhaps symptomatic, that Stanley Fish's title is "Professor of English *and Law*, Duke University.") What about those critics who have tried to overtly politicize literature? Since they are, according to Claude Rawson, the "persons who wouldn't be given house room in a department of political science" (11), they will perhaps learn to

lie down where all the ladders start

In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart.

(Yeats, 'The Circus Animals' Desertion')

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