

ON THE POWER OF NARRATIVE. A PROJECT BY LENE GLINSKY

On The Power Of Narrative

A play about racism in J. Conrad's "Heart of
Darkness"

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WARNING:

! ALL THINGS READ SHOULD BE CONSIDERED CRITICALLY!

APPROACH

This is a play as well as it is an experiment trying to prove its own theory.

Since I work with the subject of literature, I chose this form as a creative approach to display the power structures which are inherent in every form of narration. A play- because it includes the staged orders for the actors and the scenery- may make these structures more visible to the reader.

Throughout this play, an accuse will be made, defended and discussed by fictional characters in a fictional space. On my first try on this project I planned to write a simple decolonial literature essay, but after examining so many positions and arguments, I felt the diversity of the discourse would best be portrayed in the staged conversation between these positions. My research produced 4 main characters; one is the author Joseph Conrad, who will find himself trying to explain his attitude to colonialism which led to the writing of "Heart of Darkness". He will be supported by the choir of critics, who try to speak in his favour and defend him against the accuse of racism. On the other side we have Chinua Achebe, Nigerian author and as well the person, who started the debate of racism in Heart of Darkness with his 1975 essay "An image of Africa". He will be supported by the leading figure of the Reader, which is very positively portrayed as a critical and reflected person who leads the discussion, asks questions and contributes impressions of reading as well as academic knowledge. The dialogues are featuring original quotes from literature essays or interviews and I tried to mark them with footnotes.¹ Statements which are not originally quoted or link to a whole essay or text, are linked with "cf."

BRIEF INTRO TO THE STORY

On the River Thames an unknown narrator meets the sailor Marlow. Marlow tells how he- from earliest age driven by a fascination for all the "blank spaces on the map"- once had been travelling up the River Congo into the jungle of Africa on a steamship to work for a French trading company. He is supposed to be working on the farthest outpost as an administrator. On the journey up the river, Marlow constantly faces the exploitation of the natives which are forced to build the railways. He sees them starving and dying under the inhuman working conditions, as well as seeing how his European workmates have already turned as mad as the jungle and the natives themselves. Triggered by these horrific impressions, he begins to question this "civilised" people as well as his own western ideology of civilisation and progress.

Heart Of Darkness is based on the author's own experience of working on a steamship in Africa.

¹ I decided to not quote in the traditional academical way, because in the role of a character, the quotes are already linked to the author, for example are quotes from Achebe fragments from his own essays. Most of the dialogues I have written myself, trying to reflect the characters position on the subject as well as his / her relation to the opponents.

CHARACTERS

JOSEPH CONRAD: British-polish author of the novella “Heart of Darkness”. Appears as a corpse, partly molded, wearing a monocle.

CHINUA ACHEBE: Nigerian author of “Things fall apart”, literary critic. Appears dressed in traditional Nigerian clothing. Looking fresh.

THE CRITIC: Old white man with a moustache. Missing one eye.

THE CHOIR OF CRITICS: Will appear as a choir of white men with glasses, wearing academic clothing such as cardigans with leather patches on the elbows.

THE READER: strange figure, surrounded by a fluorescent glow which changes its colour.

YOU

A ROUND TABLE IN A BRIGHT ROOM (THE DISCOURSE)

Achebe, Reader, The Critic, and You sit around the table. Behind the chair of the Critic stands the Choir of Critics, constantly murmuring and whispering into the Critics ear. One chair is empty.

READER Today we gathered at this place to have a discussion about the novella “Heart of Darkness” and to explore and discuss whether it inherits racist ideas.

CONRAD Oh horror! Oh horror!

crawls out of his grave. Sits on the empty chair.

ACHEBE This is actually rather a fact than a discussable question!

READER Since this opinion is not acknowledged everywhere in the literary world, it is still a very discussable question. It is as well the reason I invited you to this place: To let you speak here against and for each other. We will discuss 4 main themes which all concentrate on a critical approach of the story: racism, imperialism, colonialism and as well symbolism.

I have seen myself, as a reader, often under the influence of stories. Since my earliest childhood, stories were feeding my essential idea of the world, especially when they told me about people, cultures and spaces I have never known first hand and that seemed strange and alien to me. I remember how the stories of Ali Baba and Aladdin formed my idea of the far oriental world, just to learn later that both stories had been written by a French orientalist called Antoine Galland to please his French audience who found great pleasure in such readings of the “oriental style”.² I recognized how powerful narratives could affect my perception of the world and how I never came to the idea to call their claim of truth in question. Today we shall investigate upon this matter in “Heart of Darkness” and its racist notions: How are black and white people described which dualisms are produced, what “Image of Africa” is created here and which symbols are used.

CRITIC Well, first: How can you accuse him of racism when that attitude at his time was normal?

CONRAD Oh yes, it was! I was nothing different or worse than my literary companions!

CHOIR Yes! He is being a man of his time.³ How can he be racist?

READER That might be true. But should this be an excuse? It might be an *explanation* why the story consequently reproduces racist ideas, but it is not an excuse. In our present time (nearly 100 years after you have written your piece) we still struggle with normalised, structural and institutional racism. Following your logic anyone is allowed to be a racist

² cf. Ott, 1001 Nacht, p. 649

³ cf. Daniels, Questioning the empire, S. 64

because racism still exists? No, we want to do things better and be more critical and reflected about our art.

Achebe and You nod in silent approval.

CRITIC We defend the position that “Heart of Darkness” is moreover questioning the empire and imperialism. This can be seen when we hear Marlow, the narrator, speak: “The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much.”⁴...

CHOIR Do you hear? It is not a *pretty* thing! He can't be racist!

READER We have to be aware that having a critical attitude towards colonialism does not mean one cannot be racist. In a 1906 written essays, Conrad describes colonialism as a “sacred fire”⁵. To me, this sounds like he is quite much in favour of the colonising practices.

CRITIC I basically like to point out that we can recognize ambivalent emotions towards the process of colonising in Marlow which are certainly not continuously positive. Moreover we think that this is an impressionistic piece of art about the deterioration of one European mind caused by solitude and sickness, and not so much about Africa...

ACHEBE I agree its exploration of the minds of the *European* characters is often penetrating and full of insight. But all that has been more than fully discussed in the last seventy years! His obvious racism has, however, not been addressed. And it's high time it was!⁶

READER Actually, Mr. Achebe, there have been some people talking about that. Nearly 40 years passed since you wrote your essay and initiated a discussion on that matter. Although the book has become less important in the literary canon, a lot of critics seemed to disagree with your critique.

CRITIC Oh, yes! We disagree! One of us has said that he studies Heart of Darkness as an examination of the West itself and not as a comment on Africa.⁷ And he was Kenyan!

CHOIR Yes, so he was African too! And probably even black! It can't be racist when a black man himself says that it is not!

READER *sighs.*

⁴ Conrad, Heart of Darkness, S. 10

⁵ Conrad, The Weigh of the Burden, S. 19

⁶ Achebe, p. 9

⁷ Kibera, Leonard, quoted from Sarvan, p. 285

note: During my researches I was very confused to find this argument outlined in almost every essay: That they denied the accuse of racism by Achebe not by using good argumentation but moreover quoting a Kenyan professor and using his blackness as an argument against Achebes accuse. The strange use of arguments like “One black person said it was okay, so no other black person can accuse me of racism” appears almost in every discussion about racist structures and shows how black people's opinions tend to be homogenised and acted out against each other.

Well, to answer the further asked question how black and white people are described I made a small list of the words and phrases both are described with. Let's see. Black people are described as "old niggers", "criminals", "black shapes", "savages" and their physical appearance: "the white of their eyeballs glistening", they have "faces like grotesque masks", "bone, muscle, a wild vitality", "violently dilated nostrils", they "moved about like ants" and are merely "sixty pairs of eyes". The white characters are described as "civilised", "efficient", "gentle", "quiet", "supernatural being", "emissary of light", "unexpected elegance". And this was found only on the first 20 pages. Do we agree that the description of the characters is a lot more in favour of whites?

CONRAD *blushes. Then he stands up from the table starts gesticulating in a wild manner.*

You know, it is well known that curious men go prying into all sorts of places (where they have no business) and come out of them with all kinds of spoil. This story, and one other, is all the spoil I brought out from the centre of Africa, where, really, I had no sort of business!⁸ I wanted to show the immoral and brutal practices colonising did in the name of "progress" and what it did to the civilised European mind.

READER I am sorry, Mr. Conrad, but we are trying not to learn about your noble intentions but to learn about the impressions of the African world which your text offers.

ACHEBE *pointing his finger angry at Conrad*

You, Mr. Conrad, saw and condemned the evil of imperial exploitation but were strangely unaware of the racism on which it sharpened its iron tooth!⁹

Can nobody see the preposterous and perverse arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind? But that is not even the point. The real question is the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age long attitude has fostered and continues to foster the world.¹⁰ But further on, we will not try to analyse the effects which the surroundings had on the white characters (because this has been done already a thousand times) but concentrate on the impact the description of black "characters" could have.

Well. Let's start to talk about the use of "Africa" and what this stands for. Starting with Aristotle¹¹, Europeans have a long tradition of using the "other" for a better representation of themselves. Like the Greek used the "barbarians" to highlight their own cultural achievements and intellectual superiority, Conrad uses Africa as an antithesis to Europe. Africa is portrayed as the place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality.¹²

⁸ Conrad, HoD, Author's Note p. 4

⁹ Achebe, p. 13

¹⁰ Achebe, p. 8

¹¹ cf. Aristoteles, Nikomachische Ethik, Buch VII

¹² Achebe, p. 2

- CONRAD Relax, Achebe: This is NOT ME speaking, it is my narrator Marlow:
smiles winningly.
- READER Oh yes! I wanted to talk about that: The power of a narrative which comes through the power of the narrator. Marlow's voice is the voice of an experienced, well mannered Englishman which certainly sounds very credible to the audience.
- ACHEBE Marlow comes to us not only as a witness of *truth*, but one holding those advanced and humane views appropriate to the English liberal tradition.¹³ Because he is the only source of this story, his claim of truth is invulnerable. It becomes fictional reality in the moment he starts telling the story in the first-person perspective, therefore every Image of Africa he creates with his description of the natives and the so called "African atmosphere" is made from a position of power in the discourse and therefore very powerful.
- CONRAD But just ask ME how I wanted the story to be interpreted? I mean- I sit here. Why don't you just ask?
- READER The problem (or the best) about literature is, Mr. Conrad, that your intention is merely unimportant. Nowadays we learn in literature studies that "The author is dead".¹⁴
- ACHEBE Haha! This feels quite true in light of your look and... your smell, Mr. Conrad.
- CONRAD *angrily throws a piece of paper on Achebe.*
- READER Well, basically it follows a structuralistic idea that literature is not a direct communication from one well-meaning heart or one well-wrought urn to another but a form or code produced by the cultural institution of literature.¹⁵ The author therefore loses his power over the interpretation of the text and strengthens the power and the responsibility of the Reader to judge and interpret the text based on her present criteria. Also, the decolonial literature studies concentrate on marking colonial and racist structures which are inherited through narratives; when you make them visible and conscious to the Reader, they can probably one day be overcome. This is why we are so much more interested in Marlow than in you, Mr. Conrad. Would you be so kind and read out that scene where Marlow describes the ceremonial rites of the villagers?
- CONRAD *slightly uncomfortable.*
- "We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings, we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse... It was unearthly and the men were ... No, they

¹³ Achebe, p. 7

¹⁴ cf. R. Barthes, Der Tod des Autors

¹⁵ Daniels, Achebe: Revising History, S. 71

were not inhuman. Well, you know that was the worst of it- this suspicion of their not being inhuman [...] 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.”¹⁶

READER When Marlow sees the natives performing a rite, his impression is rather disgusted. He sees them as “madmen” and calls their humanity in question and comes to the conclusion, that they are yes, human, but must be from “the night of first ages”¹⁷ and are a primitive version of the white men. They portray an unconscious and wild part which is existent in the “civilised” western person, but is suppressed and only bursts out again, infected by the touch with the “black madness”. Through this narrative, physical blackness and psychical darkness are constantly linked¹⁸. The black man is everything the white man has successfully suppressed through “civilisation” and Marlow makes his feeling of superiority very clear.

CRITIC But this is a critic about the pseudo civilisation of the western community! The natives are merely unimportant, they are moreover a metaphor!

READER I agree with that notion that everything white men write always is about white men and their struggles, even if the story is set in an African country. But what we need to acknowledge is that every story, every anecdote, every letter which uses “Africa” as a metaphor, fills the discourse with something. And in a white dominated literature, it is shocking that the “knowledge” produced about “Africa” is mostly produced by Europeans! That is why we can’t only read Heart of Darkness as an examination of the West. Because it shows us symptoms of xenophobic thinking structures.

CRITIC But is he not also recognizing their kinship? And I would say we find Marlow sympathizing with the natives which are in his crew!

READER How far away is sympathizing from seeing them as equals? Quite far. His sympathy is only superficial: He feels sorry for them when he sees them dying, but when he sees them healthy, practising their customs, he feels nothing but abhorrence and loathing, like a good colonizer to whom such a feeling offers a perfect rationalization for his policies.¹⁹

Marlow might have been aware and disgusted by the effects of economic colonialism, and maybe he even sympathized with the exploited natives; but he has a great ignorance of their culture and has no desire to understand or appreciate any people of any culture than its own.²⁰ This is shown especially in the description of the “cannibals” which belong to his crew. Marlow portrays them as wildlings which will eat human flesh whenever they get the opportunity and shows here a big cultural ignorance. How

¹⁶ HoD, p. 37-38

¹⁷ HoD, p. 38

¹⁸ F.B. Singh, Colonialistic Bias in HoD, p. 275

¹⁹ Singh, p. 272

²⁰ cf. Singh, p. 273

foreign and strange the customs of a cannibalistic community may seem to a western eyes; anthropologist can assure that the consummation of human flesh is moreover a ritual, strictly bound to rules and conditions. The “victim” has to be defeated in a one to one combat without any weapons, because therefore the physical and mental strength of the defeated will go to the winner by consuming him. Compared to the impersonal violence and power the colonizers use through their rifles and firearms, this seems rather fair.

CRITIC Since we are talking about Marlow's perception of the story: Often you, Mr. Achebe, criticised the lack of speech in the portrayal of the natives, but I would say that we see everything through Marlow's eyes, and since he does not understand any African language, it was just “noise” for him. Everything else would be very unrealistic, don't you think?

CHOIR Yes! Because this story is SO realistic!

ACHEBE There is a difference between not understanding a foreign language or marking them as wordless, grunting, animal like noises. I feel myself so much affected by the power of these narratives, that the first time I read this novella, I identified with the colonizers. Just later I realized that I was supposed to identify with the colonised, with the victimized, wordless, primitives brutes, that here MY ancestors are described. ²¹ I was in shock as well as slowly realising that my mind was already colonised. I did never feel speechless or primitive or wild, but there is this British-Polish man, colonising my ancestors and denying them to have language or culture or rules, without even be able to communicate with them. This shows the ignorance of the white men: That he thinks he can appropriate and write about African history, culture and atmosphere without having a glimpse of that. And the ignorance of the world is that his words will always be heard as truth, even louder than African voices.

CRITIC But what do you suggest? That we toss out all that brilliant and beautifully written literature just because it is... a little bit racist?!

READER No, never would I say that these stories should not be told or read anymore. But they always should be placed in a critical context, with the conscious reflection of the status quo. Of course, Conrad has not created this Image of Africa and Africans as dehumanized, primitive and overly sexualised himself; it is hundreds of years old and still used in modern media.²² But exactly this refusal of this racist image to die- or the refusal of the people who still stick to this image- should make us more concerned

Like I said in the beginning, stories have great power over our perception of an alien or even our own world. What would have a young Nigerian girl felt if she had read Heart of Darkness and slowly recognised that the character she should identify are the victimized

²¹ cf. Achebe, Interview with Bill Moyers

²² cf. for example the media covering of the sexual assaults during new year's eve 2016, Cologne

and exploited black people, which are supposed to be her ancestors? And even worse; what if she started to believe that this was true?

Even though Heart of Darkness manages to criticise in subtle manner the practices of colonialism and imperialism, it only manages it through reproducing racist stereotypes, because the self realization of Marlow only functions through using the picture of the inferior and primitive black body. The story may be offering new crucial depths of the white “civilised” and “progressive” mind, but it does nothing good or new to the portrayal of black characters in literature. Also the critical essays show horribly how a lot of people still refuse to recognize the consolidation of racist stereotypes through literature, and as well are not willing to form a relation between these stereotypes and our still very existing racism. The most valuable notion the modern reader can learn from Heart of Darkness is that the real Heart of Darkness is not in the deep jungle around the Congo, but located in the white men’s chest.

We have to critically encounter these narratives. And this is where finally you can take your part in this discussion.

YOU Me? What should I do?

READER Be responsible.

YOU For what?

READER Your own thoughts. Overcome the power of the author through the power of the reader.

CLOSING NOTE

As you may have seen, this discussion was not completely objective to read. By using my power as the author of this discussion, I could easily form arguments the ways I wanted and make certain characters seem more ridiculous and less credible by letting them blush, stutter or shout out statements in idiotic manner. Especially the appearance of the characters shows very clear, how I decided to let Conrad and the Critic as well as the supporting choir seem noticeably more ridiculous than Achebe or the Reader.

As well as I can't deny the power of the author, I can't deny the power structures which are inherent in the very making of this project: I am still a white (female) European, which has never experienced racism towards my very self and live with the privilege of being born in a rich country with the access to education and the opportunity to make this project and to make my words heard. Writing a play in which I put words into the mouths of black characters and aim to criticise racism felt a little hypocritical to me because I can't deny that I use the power of my position.

I decided to never the less take advantage of this power to produce a product which (hopefully) does not reproduce colonial power structures, but moreover outlines them, shows them and makes them visible in a kind of ironic manner. My aim is not to paternalize people in their opinion, but moreover to inspire them to critical reading and to raise awareness. It is neither my business nor my right to speak for a black community; therefore this should be read as a critic of the white literature, expressed by a white literature/politics student.

But it is the whole business of literature to take the history of others and tell it, to put words into unknown mouths and to appropriate stories, which are obviously not the author's own, but still claim to be true.

As a person deeply devoted to literature, I always considered it a great gift of literature (how limited would this art be if everyone would only write about their own very existence and life?) but I hope to have successfully shown the dangers of this "gift". But I see another, much greater and more powerful gift in literature: That it has the ability to overcome temporal, cultural and geographical distance, that hearing the stories of "others" can give us insights of different individual life experiences and that it can give voice to the ones who have been unheard and it definitely has the power to change its own narratives.²³

This is not only dependent on the whole cultural and white dominated institution of literature²⁴, but also on ourselves as responsible readers in demanding a greater diversity of stories and also, always call their claim of truth in question. Closing with Grada Kilomba, we should not stop by the question: Is this racist? But moreover: How can we deconstruct its racism?²⁵

²³ This has, for example, happened with the famous book „The Stranger“ by Camus which is set in colonial Algeria. In the novella, a French man murders an unknown Algerian man by the beach, which is only called “the Arab”. 2014 the Algerian author Kamel Daoud wrote a book which aims to re-tell this famous story through the eyes of the brother of that unnamed and faceless “Arab” and criticises portrayal of the Algerian man as faceless and nameless.

²⁴ Studying at the one of the best literature institutes of Germany, the Peter-Szondi-Institut, I have to admit that we don't have a single professor teaching African literature. During my 3 years at the institute I only remember about 3-5 seminars, which featured South-East Asian or Latin American literature. It is also an institutional matter and responsibility to integrate non-European readings into the syllabus and as well to have non-European professors. Otherwise, the term of “comparatistic” literature studies seems unfitting to me.

²⁵ Grada Kilomba, Dealing with Racism in Europe (interview)

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Additionally to the sources I can name exactly, a lot of other experiences, discussions, conversations and readings have influenced the making of this project. Since I can't name them all, I would like to at least mention some of them. During the semester I visited a seminar called "Der / Die / Das Fremde" which gave an overview over the different ways of "telling" the foreign and how to deal with "it" in literature. Many of the discussions and texts from this seminar lead to the result of this project, such as Bernard Waldenfels ("Topographien des Fremden"), Julia Kristeva ("Die Griechen zwischen Barbaren, Schutzflehenden und Metöken"), Michel de Montaigne ("Des Cannibales") and a lot more.