

Is literature always a force for good?

To answer the question ‘is literature always a force for good?’, it’s important to establish what merits being described as ‘good’. For the purposes of this essay, ‘good’ can be interpreted as anything that promotes equality and a greater understanding of the world. My own argument is that literature’s ‘force’ is determined by the nature of its reception and digestion. Whether or not its force is a ‘good’ one relies on the mind of the reader acting in a critical, educated and open manner.

An example of a text riddled with “bad” ideas, in this case ones of blatant racism, is Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Published in 1902, the novella focuses on the narrator Charles Marlow’s account of his voyage to the Congo which he recounts to a group of sailors aboard a boat moored on the Thames. It’s worth examining the barrage of racist ideas and language in the novel to understand what a reader might absorb whilst reading it. Throughout *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad arguably portrays Africa as a foil to the West’s sophistication. Marlow muses that Europe, at times, ‘has [also] been one of the dark places of the earth’¹, devoid of civilisation due to its occupation by what Marlow calls the ‘incomprehensible’². But the use of the word ‘has’ denotes a time past - now, Marlow claims, ‘devotion to efficiency’³ prevails.

In contrast, Marlow describes his journey on the River Congo and how ‘the steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy’⁴. The word used to describe England ‘nineteen hundred years ago’⁵ describes the Congo as it existed in Marlow’s recent memory. It is described as ‘prehistoric’⁶, like a scientific specimen, and with disdain - it is ‘incomprehensible’ and seemingly not worth being understood, reduced only to being ‘black’ and ‘frenzied’. These ideas reinforce racist and two-dimensional perceptions of Africa as uncivilised.

Furthermore, *Heart of Darkness*’s descriptions of black people are infused with a sense of perverted fascination and disgust. ‘Black fellows’ paddling a boat have ‘white... eyeballs glistening’ and ‘shouted, sang’ whilst ‘their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks’⁷. The reduction of people to caricatured body parts in-keeping with what is stereotypically “black” is unsettling. Marlow compares black people to animals; men’s loincloths at one point ‘wagging to and fro like tails’⁸ and a black fireman is later described as ‘a dog in a parody of breeches... walking on his hind-legs’⁹. A skilled “native” is an unthinkable concept in *Heart of Darkness* – instead, black people are demeaned and given equal status to dogs. Black people are compared to patients in a ‘madhouse’¹⁰, and referred to as

¹ This (page 5) and all subsequent references taken from the W. W. Norton fifth edition of *Heart of Darkness* edited by Paul B. Armstrong, 2017

² ‘In the midst of the incomprehensible’, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 6

³ ‘What saves us... is devotion to efficiency’, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 6

⁴ ‘The steamer... frenzy’, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 35

⁵ ‘Nineteen hundred years ago – the other day’, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 5

⁶ ‘A prehistoric earth’, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 35

⁷ All here from ‘it...masks’, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 14

⁸ ‘Black... tails’ *Heart of Darkness*, p. 16

⁹ ‘Dog... hind legs’ *Heart of Darkness*, p. 37

¹⁰ ‘Madhouse’ *Heart of Darkness*, p. 36

‘creatures’¹¹, ‘ugly’¹², ‘brutes’¹³ and ‘unhappy savages’¹⁴. Racial epithets are frequently used against them.

This barrage of racist language portrays black people as incapable of speech and thought. All they do is ‘shout’ and ‘sing’. They are more animal than human: the only important part of them is their bodies, which are objects of horror. They possess no skills and are belittled relentlessly throughout the novel. It is evident, that *Heart of Darkness* contains racist ideas. Racism does not promote equality and a greater understanding of the world. Its purpose is to divide people on the basis of inequality, and it ignores the narratives of entire races of people. It is difficult to imagine literature such as *Heart of Darkness* as being ‘a force for good’ when it is packed full of discriminatory language and ideas which reinforce racist tropes.

But the novel is not always racist. “Bad” literature can contain ‘good’ ideas. *Heart of Darkness* is at times firmly anti-Imperialist and criticises Western supremacy, which are traditionally anti-racist (and therefore ‘good’) positions. Joseph Conrad was, in the words of the critic Hunt Hawkins, ‘a staunch... opponent of European expansion’¹⁵. Conrad wrote in a letter to his publisher of the ‘pure selfishness when tackling the civilising work in Africa’¹⁶, and the portrayal of black people in *Heart of Darkness* as savages could be seen as a direct result of colonialism.

European cruelty is by no means glorified. Take the black man beaten on suspicion of starting a fire at the Central Station – his punisher is ‘indefatigable’ and believes that ‘transgression – punishment – bang! ... [is] the only way’¹⁷. This fervour for inhumane treatment is shocking and Conrad does not endorse it. He even sees it as characteristically Western. Marlow at one point says that ‘all Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz’¹⁸, the book’s notoriously racist station master. Marlow describes members of the Company as ‘bewitched pilgrims’¹⁹, as if brainwashed by what Rudyard Kipling called ‘the white man’s burden’²⁰ (the duty to colonise). Conrad seems to oppose this idea: Marlow says that ‘the conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter nosers than ourselves, is not a pretty thing’²¹. This insightful observation seems to deconstruct colonialism and show racism to be rooted purely in aesthetics. Perhaps, then, the book is a ‘force for good’, as it contains accurate ideas of the hypocrisy of a “civilising mission” and portrays Western morality as flawed.

¹¹ E.g., ‘creatures’, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 18

¹² ‘Ugly’, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 36

¹³ E.g., ‘brutes’, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 26

¹⁴ ‘Unhappy savages’, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 16

¹⁵ Original version published as Hunt Hawkins, “The Issue of Racism in *Heart of Darkness*,” *Conradiana* 14.3 (1982): 163-71: updated and extensively revised by author for Norton Critical Edition of *Heart of Darkness* (2017). All quotes taken from said edition. Quote here ‘a staunch... expansion’ taken from page 335 of said book.

¹⁶ *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, eds. Frederick Karl and Laurence Davies (Cambridge UP, 1988) 2:139-40

¹⁷ ‘Indefatigable... way’, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 26

¹⁸ ‘All... Kurtz’, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 49

¹⁹ ‘Bewitched pilgrims’, *Heart of Darkness*, p.27

²⁰ Easterly, William, *The White Man’s Burden* (2007), London, England: Oxford University Press

²¹ ‘The... thing’, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 7

Heart of Darkness is anti-Imperialist, but that doesn't absolve its racism. Hunt Hawkins argues that at times Conrad 'praises the Africans for their energy, vitality and dignity'²², but it's important to remember other language with which Conrad chooses to describe black people. The praise of black people's 'energy' and 'vitality' is rooted in physicality, which is in itself racist (it places value solely in the capabilities of the black body, which becomes an object of fascination and is subjected to visual ownership). Despite Marlow's observation that the subjugation of other races doesn't have much basis in logic, black people are continually subjugated throughout the novel. The contrasting ideas of anti-Imperialism and racism within *Heart of Darkness* suggest that the novel has multiple 'forces' pulling in different directions, though I would argue that one is far stronger than the other.

The writer Chinua Achebe argues in his essay 'An Image of Africa' that 'Joseph Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist'²³, citing Conrad's account of his first encounter with a black man, in which he describes him as 'enormous', 'furious' and possessing 'rage as manifested in the human animal'²⁴. Ideas of black people as bestial are rooted in Conrad's consciousness. Achebe writes that Conrad does not separate himself from his narrator's opinions and language because 'he neglects to hint... at an alternative frame of reference by which we may judge the actions and opinions of his characters'.²⁵ Achebe is right – though ideas about colonialism and racism seemingly contradict each other throughout the novel, ideas criticising whiteness are far more subtle than those criticising blackness. For example, Marlow only 'ventured to hint that the Company was run for profit'²⁶, twofold in its timidity ('ventured to hint'), compared to the novel's abundance of racist language. There is no equivalent of 'exterminate all the brutes!'²⁷ for the Company. Instead, its structure is questioned but ultimately accepted.

Some argue that we shouldn't read works containing such volumes of racism. But I believe that using *Heart of Darkness* as an example, it is possible to read literature that can be seen as 'bad' and repurpose it to educate ourselves. The idea of an active dialogue between author and reader is one which determined in part by an author's intentions. In Wolfgang Iser's words, literature has 'two poles: the artistic and the aesthetic – the artistic refers to the text created by the author, and the aesthetic to the realisation accomplished by the reader.'²⁸ It is 'the convergence of text and reader' which 'brings the literary work into existence'²⁹. By pursuing what J. Hillis Miller calls 'an active, responsible response'³⁰, a reader can heavily determine the 'force' of a text during the 'realisation'³¹ of a novel. Although Joseph Conrad and *Heart of*

²² 'Praises... dignity', *Heart of Darkness*, p. 339

²³ This and one other: Achebe, Chinua. "An Image of Africa". *The Massachusetts Review*, vol. 18, no. 4, 1977, p. 788

²⁴ All here from Joseph Conrad, "Author's Note", *Victory* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1915) p. xiv [editor]

²⁵ 'Neglects... characters', "An Image of Africa", p. 787

²⁶ 'Ventured... profit', *Heart of Darkness*, p. 12

²⁷ 'Exterminate... brutes!' *Heart of Darkness*, p. 50

²⁸ 'Two... reader' and all others specified as being by Iser from Iser, Wolfgang's "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach", *New Literary History*, vol. 3 no. 2, 1972, in this case p. 279

²⁹ 'The... existence', "The Reading Process", p. 279

³⁰ 'An... response' from J. Hillis Miller, "Should We Read 'Heart of Darkness'?" in *Conrad in Africa: New Essays on "Heart of Darkness"*, ed. Attie de Lange and Gail Fincham with Wiesław Krajka (New York: Columbia UP, 2002) p. 39.

³¹ 'Realisation', "The Reading Process", p. 279

Darkness have been shown to be racist, the effect that attitudes expressed in the text has on the reader is one driven by the extent to which they think critically about the work. To read *Heart of Darkness* at face value would be harmful, but by considering the ideas with which they are presented, the reader can ‘accept or reject the thesis forced upon [them]’³². As a result, the response of a reader invested in promoting ‘good’ can repurpose the ‘force’ of even the most prejudiced of literature. They would not accept racism and Eurocentrism, or the idea that Africa is a foil to the West, but by being aware of the issues with the presentations of such ideas in that they dehumanise and homogenise an entire race, instead analyse the way in which the author presents them and deconstruct their apparent validity within the novel. ‘Evil’ literature can start the most enlightened conversations about morality and human nature. *Heart of Darkness* is multi-dimensional and provides a model of the complexities worth considering in problematic literature. Such complexities include its assessment of Western supremacy and even the way in which it presents race, which invites productive discussion. To neglect to engage in such discussions would be a more harmful ‘force’, as we would be prevented from criticising ideas rooted in prejudice which would in turn prevent us from dismantling injustice. The ‘force’ of literature at large is therefore determined in the same way. Provided its reading is a critical, considered and responsible engagement, with an awareness of the problems it may present and an education around these problems, literature is always a force for good. In Joseph Conrad’s own words, a work’s ““final effect”” is determined by ‘the critic’s affair to bring to its contemplation his own honesty... sensibility and intelligence.’³³

³² ‘Accept... [them]’ from “The Reading Process”, p. 283

³³ ‘Final effect... intelligence’, from *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, 6:210. Clark, American editor and critic.