

The Unracing of Whiteness in *Heart of Darkness*

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English

Countless scholars have examined how Joseph Conrad portrays Blackness in *Heart of Darkness*, and rightly so. The text's depictions of Black characters are inarguably vile. There are ongoing, heated debates among Conrad scholars about whether Conrad himself endorsed these descriptions or used them to critique imperialism, and much of these conversations surround the broader question of whether this text, with all its racism, should continue to be taught, and if so, how? My foremost intention is not to throw my hat into this already overcrowded ring, but entirely avoiding the pedagogical topic would be ignorant of its significance to the study of the novella at large. Rather, the purpose of this essay is to analyze Conrad's depictions of whiteness in *Heart of Darkness*, an aspect of the text that has perhaps been overshadowed by the shocking nature of his portrayal of Africans. Predicated upon this analysis, I will argue that in *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad upholds notions of white supremacy not only by dehumanizing Africans but by unracing his white characters. In doing so, Conrad problematically allows whiteness to become the objective perspective of humanity within the text.

The idea that someone can be unraced is based on the concept that race is something that is performed. It is more common to colloquially use race as a noun than a verb, but the latter must be employed to understand Conrad's use of race. The notion of racial construction is not groundbreaking theory, yet unracing may appear to complicate understandings of racialization. To understand more thoroughly the stakes of unracing, I will turn to the essay "Darkness Made Visible: Law, Metaphor, and the Racial Self," where D. Marvin Jones eloquently states that

“[r]acial categories are neither objective nor natural, but ideological and constructed. In these terms race is not so much a category but a practice: *people are raced*” (67). If people can be raced, it follows that they can also be unraced, and according to the inverse of Jones’s statement on racialization, unracing would make a racial category appear both “objective” and “natural.” Therefore, the unconsciousness of whiteness’s position as a racial category unraces whiteness and gives it the position of an intrinsic source of power.

As an essay meant to call attention to the dangers of unracing texts and their whiteness, it would be hypocritical to leave this paper to speak objectively on the matter. In Richard Dyer’s book, *White*, he personalizes a portion of the opening chapter and calls attention to his own whiteness to ask the question: “Why was I [as a white man] trying to write about whiteness?” (5) This decision to personalize his book prevents him from falling victim to his own argument, which claims there are problems with the fact that “being white is not an issue for most white people, not a conscious or reflected on part of their sense of who they are” (5). Therefore, it is important to note that I am writing this essay as a white man, and my own life experiences will thusly inform my perspectives. Taking this into account, I intend to engage with *Heart of Darkness* and the material cited as I would any other essay, but following Dyer’s lead and personalizing this particular paper is necessary because it is impossible to emphasize the importance of white racialization without calling attention to my personal experience with whiteness.

To return to the text in question, I chose *Heart of Darkness* to demonstrate the dangers of unracing whiteness not just to fill a knowledge gap within the area of race studies but because the novella’s racial politics are remarkably prominent. The text has also been incredibly impactful throughout the history of literary studies. As a book that is canonical in English

departments across the globe, I found the lack of research regarding Conrad's depictions of whiteness startling. Perhaps the answer to the heated debate over whether this text should continue to be taught lies within the uncharted territory of Conrad's whiteness. But before embarking upon close readings of *Heart of Darkness* regarding Conrad's portrayal of whiteness, it is necessary to establish a foundation of contemporary critical white studies.

The primary text I will use as a basis for my research on white studies is the aforementioned book *White*. This text has proven itself to be forward thinking, where his early descriptions of acknowledgements of privilege foreshadowed current racial thought that emphasizes the importance of "checking one's privilege" rather than forcing marginalized communities to carry the burden of acknowledgment of their own marginalization. Additionally, his explanations of *why* it is important to study whiteness gives this essay drive. Dyer writes that because "white people are systematically privileged in Western society...[their] privilege and dominance is at stake in analyzing white racial imagery" (9). To this point, as white racial imagery is often neglected analysis, Dyer theorizes that white people are not conscious of their whiteness, giving credence to the racist idea that white is neutral and can therefore speak for all of humanity.

The phenomenon of whiteness being treated as objective or raceless is also perpetuated by academia. As stated earlier, while conducting research for this essay, I quickly discovered that the amount of material regarding whiteness in *Heart of Darkness* is far outnumbered by the amount of work studying Blackness. This is not necessarily a detrimental thing. Of course, this canonical text includes and is based upon terribly racist depictions of Africans, so it stands to reason that scholars would want to respond to that aspect of the text. Although there truly is so little research on *Heart of Darkness's* whiteness for such a popular text that it perpetuates Dyer's

idea that “to say that one is interested in race has come to mean that one is interested in any racial imagery other than that of white people” (1). By not including whiteness in its research regarding *Heart of Darkness*, academia upholds the notion that whiteness is not a race itself and is therefore raceless or of a different class than all other races.

It is also important to note why treating whiteness as raceless places whiteness in a position of power. It may seem that the field of white studies is simply whiteness attempting to occupy even more space within the broader field of race studies, an area meant to support people of color, but Dyer’s book refutes this idea by describing the dangers of unracing whiteness. Toward the beginning of his text, Dyer claims that “[t]here is no more powerful position than being ‘just’ human. The claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity. Raced people can’t do that – they can only speak for their race” (2). Therefore, by locating where whiteness is unraced in canonical texts, scholars can work to level the field of race studies and remove whiteness from its raceless pedestal. Where is there a better place to begin this endeavor than within Conrad’s quintessential novella?

Concerning this text, *Heart of Darkness* has a long and tumultuous history of literary criticism. From its conception at the very end of the 19th century until the 1970s, the text was generally accepted as a flawed but important work that criticized the dangers of imperialism, but Chinua Achebe’s claims in *An Image of Africa* framed Conrad and his novella as explicitly racist and dramatically altered the critical conversation, opening the floodgates for critics who would continue to treat this canonical story as increasingly problematic. Much of the critiques that followed Achebe focused on how Conrad depicts women in the text, arguing that women are demeaned in a similar vein as Africans are, as is also criticized by Achebe. Before long, this “text that had so often been praised for its political radicalism now looked politically

reactionary” (Watts 54). Taking the mercurial nature of scholarship concerning this text into account, it stands to reason that *Heart of Darkness* is especially receptive to a diverse array of academic critiques.

The foundation of Achebe’s revolutionary claims is based upon the idea that Conrad’s novella makes real “the desire...in Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe, a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar in comparison with which Europe’s own state of spiritual grace will manifest” (2). Achebe goes on to confront a critic, a student of his whose response to Achebe’s argument is to claim, “Africa is merely a setting for the disintegration of the mind of Mr. Kurtz” (9). According to the student, the fact that *Heart of Darkness* takes place in Africa is merely a coincidence, but regardless of authorial intention, Achebe responds to the student by saying that *Heart of Darkness* using Africa as nothing more than a setting “is partly the point [of his critique]. Africa as setting and backdrop... eliminates the African as human factor” (9). In brief, according to Achebe, Conrad’s use of Africans and Africa itself as props cause the novella to endorse a Eurocentric worldview and uphold notions of white supremacy.

Achebe’s concept of the African foil works in unison with Ambereen Dadabhoy’s claim that another canonical writer, William Shakespeare, treats whiteness as neutral. Both scholars, Achebe and Dadabhoy, work to reveal the literary basis for the establishment of whiteness as superior and point to how Blackness is weaponized by their respective texts to do so. According to Dadabhoy, “the perceived raceless-ness of white people” (231) establishes a foundation for white supremacy, and she references the avoidance of race in productions of Shakespeare plays to support her claim. By reading Dadabhoy and Achebe’s work together, it becomes clear that the Shakespearean “raceless-ness” Dadabhoy describes is applied to white characters not only by

early modern writers like Shakespeare, but by modernist writers such as Joseph Conrad as well. This phenomenon shows how the unracing of white people is a lasting rhetorical strategy used to validate claims of white supremacy.

In her study of whiteness in the early modern era, Dadabhoy's findings specifically compliment Achebe's claims that *Heart of Darkness* uses Africa as a "foil to Europe" (Achebe 2). Regarding Shakespeare's "race plays", she states that "those colorful Others set off, enrich, and enhance the normative ground of whiteness" (231). In the following quotation from *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad explicitly others Africans in a moment where Marlow contrasts whiteness and Blackness against each other. The text reads: "The *whites*...had besides a curious look of being painfully shocked by such an outrageous row. The *others* had an alert, naturally interested expression" (49; Italics added). Paradoxically in this instance, Conrad unraces whiteness by acknowledging its existence, yet, according to the text, there are white people, and there is everyone else. Just as Achebe and Dadabhoy assert, Blackness is used to define white as objective. Conrad's mention of whiteness and not Blackness in this section could be seen as him racing whiteness, but by treating white as the standard in contrast to the other, Conrad upholds its position as objective. And regarding this other, "[a]s Chinua Achebe has noted, the European view of the Other has never been innocent" (White 169). Yet, merely mentioning color is not racialization, especially when Black characters are explicitly marginalized and othered in the following sentence.

Curiously, this scene that differentiates white characters from Black characters takes place within a blinding fog. In a moment where everyone's sense of visual perception is impaired, Conrad focuses on what is inherently visual, the color of skin. To return to Jones's essay, he provides an example of a racist act of violence that resonates with this moment of

visual impairment when describing the assault of Rodney Glenn King by several California Highway Patrol officers. Jones makes a point to include the fact that Rodney was beaten near midnight in the dark. He notes that “[b]rutality against blacks by police officers in urban areas is generally not exposed to the light of day. It generally occurs in darkness... Within the shadow of race and class and attendant matters such as criminal records, a black person becomes invisible” (68). Considering this observation, Conrad’s inclusion of fog into this moment appears to be an intentional tool of racial representation. Conrad’s emphasis on racial differences in a moment when skin color is imperceivable mirrors Jones’s described violence in darkness that similarly un-races all parties involved. In this moment where even Black characters are un-raced, Conrad feels threatened because it levels Black Africans with its white characters. As a result, Conrad must explicitly describe physical, racial differences to assure Black characters remain raced and white characters remain purely human despite the lack of diegetic visual perception.

The idea that whiteness is treated as simply or ‘just’ human shows that it is just as important to look for where race is not mentioned as where it is in forming an idea of racial construction within a text. It is not only Conrad’s explicit depictions of whiteness that inform readers of his understanding of race, but his obsession with Blackness also shows how Conrad un-races white people. For example, Conrad describes the movements of the native Africans as “a whirl of black limbs” (43), and there are countless similar mentions of Black body parts to an excessive extent throughout the novella. Chinua Achebe responds to Conrad’s obsession with Blackness by stating, “Conrad is a dream for psychoanalytic critics” (10). His obsession with Blackness is a window into his psyche. Achebe goes on to point out that surprisingly, psychoanalytic analysis of Conrad has not focused on his obsession with color, so therefore critics must conclude that his text’s racism must be seen as normal to the European

psychoanalysts (Achebe 11). Because Conrad goes out of his way to mention Blackness so often, critics can deduce that he is working to differentiate it from whiteness, which is meant to be objective and superior. The repetitive specificity directed toward Blackness in the text is therefore representative of Conrad's desire to dislodge whiteness from any sort of unrelation to humanity overall.

It may be argued that Joseph Conrad's depictions of whiteness could not be objective because of the differences he emphasizes between white characters. For example, there are "Swedes" and "Brits" in the text, and they are described differently. Additionally, Conrad himself is both Polish and British, and he speaks several European languages, so he is certainly familiar with different white cultures. Taking Conrad's white cultural depictions and biographical information into account, how could his whiteness be seen as an overarching symbol? Even though whiteness is not monolithic to Conrad, his differentiations between the cultures of white characters do not remove whiteness from its pedestal. Rather, Conrad's descriptions of British and Swedish citizens are merely "variations on white ethnicity...and the examination of them tends to lead away from a consideration of whiteness itself" (Dyer 4). In other words, Conrad's acknowledgement of different forms of whiteness are not indicative of any sort of pressure against whiteness as a disembodied race. In fact, such differentiations show Conrad's familiarity with white Europeans, highlighting his ignorance of African culture. It follows that specific white ethnicities in the text would be pitted against a monolithic, Black other, but this contrast reveals a hypocritical duality.

Conrad's contradictions can continue to be read through the essay "White Images of Black Slaves (Is What We See In Others Sometimes a Reflection of What We Find in Ourselves?)," where George Fredrickson discusses how stereotypes of enslaved Black

Americans were born of the desires of white slave owners. To rationalize slavery, slave owners would depict enslaved people as either unruly and in need of discipline or docile and content with their conditions depending on the narrative slave owners wanted to weaponize. Such white racial depictions of enslaved people became more prevalent when “a slaveholding group found itself the object of sustained and uncompromising criticism and hence had a particularly strong need to defend or justify its labor system” (Fredrickson 41). This projection of white desire onto depictions of Blackness resonates with Conrad’s descriptions of Africans in *Heart of Darkness*. There is a distinct duality in his representations that conveniently fit his ideological needs. To uphold the guise of an anti-imperialist novel, Marlow famously recoils at the idea that Africans are human just like him when he states “No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it – this suspicion of their not being inhuman” (Conrad 44). Yet, the text is rife with descriptions of Black Africans as inhuman. For example, the text reads: “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” (Conrad 20). To show the supposed supremacy of the novel’s white characters while briefly describing the effects of imperialism imposed upon Africans as evil, Conrad must contradict himself. This is due to the conflicting and nonsensical desires of the white, Eurocentric state Conrad represents.

It is precisely Marlow’s fear of African humanity that leads him to rationalize their subjugation, because the moment he recognizes the humanity of the story’s Black characters, they become a threat. Fredrickson writes that “a relatively benign group stereotype is likely to be recast or reinterpreted when a dominant group perceives a genuine and immediate threat,” (43) and Conrad’s descriptions of Black characters hold true to this idea. For example, when Marlow describes an African who, while laboring for him, is starving and therefore non-

threatening, he describes the African to be looking “out into the fog in a dignified and profoundly pensive attitude” (Conrad 50). Describing a Black character as “dignified” seems out of character for Conrad considering his history of derogatory racial descriptions, and it is. Yet, Conrad gets away with this description because in the moment, Marlow is in a position of insuperable power. Contrarily, when the native Africans are shooting arrows at Marlow and his crew, he reduces Africans hiding in a bush to fragmented beings: “[D]eep in the tangled gloom, naked breasts, arms, legs, glaring eye, – the bush was swarming with human limbs in movement” (Conrad 55). Here, when Blackness becomes an immediate threat, Marlow returns to his inhuman descriptions of Africans as groups who travel in “swarms” and may be constituted of the same parts as humans but are not wholly human as him and his white counterparts are. The contradictory nature of Marlow’s descriptions of Black characters shows how his fears and desires as a white man are projected onto Black characters, proving that an understanding of whiteness is essential to deciphering Conrad’s depictions of Blackness in *Heart of Darkness*.

Conrad’s descriptions of white characters also attempt to transcend the human. By doing so, Conrad places whiteness into a position that can avoid the inherent racism humans are subject to. An example of such an instance occurs when Marlow describes how he “met a white man, in such an unexpected elegance of get-up that in the first moment [he] took him for a sort of vision” (Conrad 21). This description takes place immediately after Marlow describes the inhuman nature of the text’s Africans. In contrast to what Marlow claims to be decrepit and diseased Africans, the appearance of a white man seems too good to be true. As a juxtaposition to Blackness, whiteness is something so refreshing and elegant that Marlow cannot believe his eyes. This indulgent description of a white man not only makes Marlow’s impression of Africans appear even more disgusting in comparison, but his framing of a white character as akin

to an apparition of sorts shows how whiteness is granted the ability to subvert racialization and transcend to an unearthly yet higher form of being. If the Africans in *Heart of Darkness* are reluctantly to be understood by Conrad as earthly beings, white people must not be of the same sort.

Similarly, the text's main narrator, Marlow himself, is framed as a deity, a being who transcends racial depiction in the same way as the aforementioned "vision" does. The most notable instance of Marlow's deification occurs at the very beginning of the text. Here Marlow is described to have sat with "a straight back, an ascetic aspect, and, with his arms dropped, the palms of hands outwards, [he] resembled an idol" (Conrad 4). By framing him as a God-like figure, Conrad simultaneously unraces Marlow by transforming him to the most objective and all-knowing form of being possible, a God, lending credence to the text's framing of Africa as a land without history through Marlow's status as narrator. Such descriptions of the story's Black characters' native lands as empty are accentuated by Marlow's unraced and deified position as narrator.

There are several moments throughout the text that unhistoricize Africa. One such description of Africa occurs when Marlow and his crew are described as "wanderers on prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet" (Conrad 43). By claiming Africa to be "prehistoric," the land seems to not only be lacking in technological evolution, but it also is literally framed as existing in a time before history began. Such a description ignores African culture and resiliency by using Marlow's position as deified figure to support the claim. Marlow's God-like qualities also allow him to remove himself from temporal limits and pass value judgement on others, but he escapes history while Africa is excluded from it. The subsequent deification and unracing of Marlow therefore make his narrative power even

more potent, giving him authority to make broad and derogatory historical claims about Africa and its people.

The unhistoricization of Africa is so prevalent in the text that it explicitly translates to Francis Ford Coppola's adaptation of *Heart of Darkness*, titled *Apocalypse Now*. Although an adaptation cannot translate every aspect of a piece of source material to the new medium, Coppola saw the minimization of Africa's history prominent enough to include in his film. Gene D. Phillips's text, *Conrad and Cinema* outlines the parallels between *Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now* by describing how in the Mekong River from the film, rather than the Congo River in the text, as the film takes place in Vietnam during the Vietnam War, the protagonist "Willard has equivalently stepped back into a lawless, prehistoric age where barbarism holds sway. The compound, then, becomes a graphic visual metaphor which reflects Kurtz's gradual descent into primitive barbarism" (139). Although the film does not seem to critique this aspect of the text, an indication of Coppola's awareness of Conrad's intentions, its presence is further evidence of how the raceless yet white narrator is set up as a harmful contrast to both Africa as a whole and the Black characters within the story.

Moreover, in the text, *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison provides an example of the attempted unracialization of literature, whose dangers are comparable to the risks of unhistoricizing Africa and unracializing whiteness in *Heart of Darkness*. Morrison claims that "[a] criticism that needs to insist that literature is not only 'universal' but also 'race-free' risks lobotomizing that literature, and diminishes both the art and the artist" (12). Morrison writes this as a response to the common critique that argues writing about race is too political and should be dismissed. The idea that literature is universal gives texts the same powers as an unracialized notion of whiteness would. It is also worth noting that most literary canon, especially when Morrison

wrote this piece, is markedly white, male, and heterosexual. Therefore, universalizing any concept of race or art would only benefit white people, as they are the only group that benefits from economic, social, and political systems in the West.

Interestingly, Dadabhoy cites the Morrison quote from above in the epigraph to her own essay. As an essay concerned with pedagogy, taking Dadabhoy's work into consideration is helpful in debating whether this text should continue to be taught as canon. Dadabhoy cites her own experience in putting on a performance of Shakespeare's play *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with a cast of racially diverse students as evidence of whiteness being seen as objective and raceless by the public. In her anecdote, the students' choice to cut a line that mentions race, to the dismay of Dadabhoy, shows how "[t]hey believed that the late stage 'introduction' of race to the proceedings would suggest to [their] audience that [they] were doing 'something political' with Shakespeare, especially since [they] had a mixed race cast. By not calling attention to that, [they] could just do Shakespeare right (white)" (Dadabhoy 233). The students' reaction to race in the play shows how they are simultaneously conscious of their own non-white races but unaware of race's presence in the play due to the traditional whiteness of Shakespeare.

This event is applicable to *Heart of Darkness* because of the text's position among literary discourse. Unlike *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, readers have always been critical of race's presence in *Heart of Darkness*. However, it is Conrad's apparent distaste for imperialism that overshadows his racist depictions of Blackness. Until Chinua Achebe's definitive claim that Conrad and his writing is racist, scholars generally viewed his racial imagery as evidence of the dangers of imperialism, and Conrad himself remained safe from critique because of the narrative distance between himself and his story. By bringing whiteness into the critical conversation and highlighting the harmful effects of unracial whiteness in the text, it becomes possible to recenter

racial discourse and conclude that racism is central to *Heart of Darkness*, rather than economic and imperial critique.

Even if Conrad is critiquing the treatment of Black Africans in *Heart of Darkness* by imperialist entities, his manner of doing so is dependent upon whiteness. The position of whiteness as of greater importance in the text is made clear through woeful depictions of Black characters, as even when their harsh treatment is described as unnecessary, the negative effects of such treatment is measured by its impression upon white people, and such effects are only deemed detrimental if they are harmful to whites. Emphasis upon Marlow's repulsion to the conditions of Africans seem to beg for sympathy not for Black characters but for Marlow, and such descriptions are alluded to in the beginning of the text when a woman talks to him about "weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways" (Conrad 14) with regard to her desire for imperialism in Africa. Marlow subsequently states: "...upon my word, she made me quite uncomfortable" (14). Despite the atrocities occurring around him, Marlow alludes to a need for sympathy for himself by describing how colonization hurts him rather than the people who are being colonized, showing how the dehumanization of Blackness in the text is based upon its relationship to whiteness.

Taking the text's deracialization into account, although it is productive to acknowledge the dangers of unracing whiteness, it remains unclear as to whether *Heart of Darkness* should continue to be taught as canonical. The harmful language used and the similarities between the narrative and Conrad's own life make a convincing case that the text was especially racist even for its time. Furthermore, Achebe's argument that the text teaches readers to see Africa only in contrast to Europe presents clear risks in continuing to teach Conrad. It is worth asking if what is gained from teaching *Heart of Darkness* could be gained through any other text. Not to

mention the flaws in Conrad's prose. F.R. Leavis makes note of Conrad's "adjectival and worse than supererogatory insistence on...making a virtue out of not knowing what he means," (Quoted in Watts 60) so is there another story, with better stylistic applications, that could take the place of Conrad's text? Such definitive decisions on the value of controversial yet culturally impactful texts like *Heart of Darkness* are difficult to agree upon, but asking these questions at least brings new light to the pedagogical conversation.

Altogether, *Heart of Darkness*'s relationship with race is unavoidable, so its depictions of whiteness must be interrogated alongside its harmful depictions of Blackness. Richard Dyer's research on the unracing of whiteness lays a foundation in critical white studies that functions as a basis for the idea that *Heart of Darkness* marginalizes Black characters through its treatment of whiteness as default. Chinua Achebe's analysis of the text's racism informs this reading of whiteness as raceless in the text, and his essay also aligns with Dadabhoy's reading of Shakespeare as unraced. Based upon this premise of racialization as action, the unracing of whiteness gives white characters the power to speak for all of humanity rather than just their own race, as all other races are forced to do. D. Marvin Jones's description of racialization and subsequent example of police brutality in darkness inform a reading of Conrad's text that is conscious of this objective placement of whiteness. Furthermore, in spite of Conrad's own awareness of different white ethnicities, his lack of understanding of non-white ethnicities and broad mentions of the "Other" are indicative of his treatment of white characters as raceless. Unracing also occurs when a white narrator within the text, Marlow, is described as God-like, giving him the position of a higher-being who is not subject to the racial categories that all other humans are. His position as deified, white, objective narrator gives him the ability to subsequently unhistoricize Africa, proving the far-reaching, detrimental effects of Conrad's

unraced whiteness. By reading Conrad's whiteness as raceless, scholars are invited to analyze other white racial representations in canonical texts, as by examining whiteness and Blackness together, one can begin to racialize the concept of whiteness and remove it from its literary and social pedestal.

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