



We penetrated deeper and deeper
into the heart of darkness

— *Joseph Conrad* —

AZ QUOTES

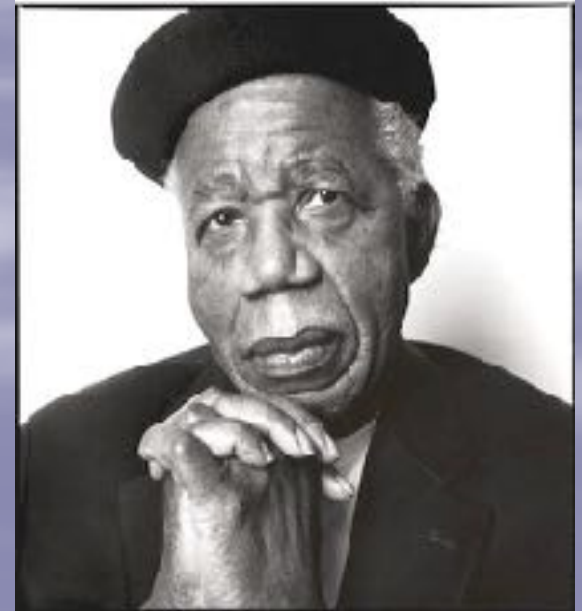
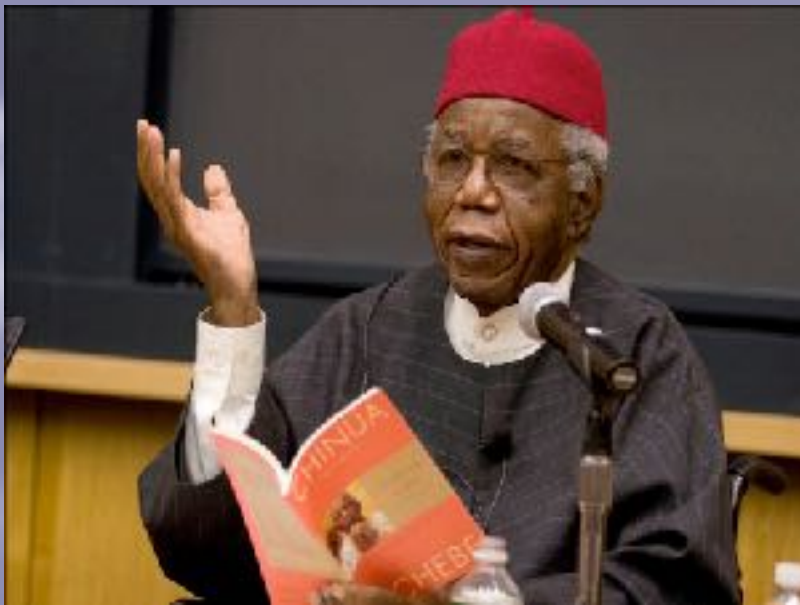
- Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is considered one of the great works of English literature



- In 1977 Chinua Achebe criticized it for being racist.

Chinua Achebe

- Born in Nigeria in 1930
- Worked as a radio producer
- Awarded over 25 honorary doctorates from Universities throughout the world.



Chinua Achebe

He is best known for his 1958 novel *Things Fall Apart*, which is regarded as a classic of world literature.

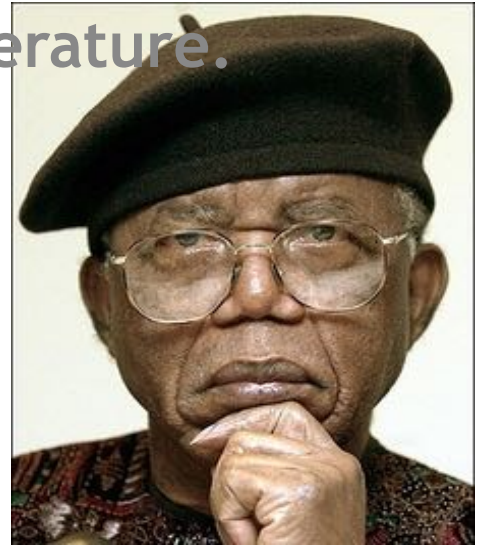
Other works include

Arrow of God(1964),

A Man of the People(1966)

Beware, Soul Brother(1971),

The Trouble with Nigeria(1984),



Chinua Achebe

Anthills of the Savanna(1987),
Another Africa, with R. Lyons (1998),
Africans People(1998),
and Home and Exile (2000).

Achebe has received more than twenty honorary
doctorates and several international literary
prizes.



Western Africa



West African History

- 1800's: European scramble for Africa
- Reasons:
 - Wanted to “civilize” the savages
 - Natural resources
 - Expose the Africans to Christianity.
- Lasted until late 1800's when countries started to gain independence

Early Exploration

- Nations claiming ownership: Portugal, Spain, Dutch, France, Netherlands, England and others soon followed...
- Main commodities: slaves, gold, ivory, rubber plants, diamonds and spices

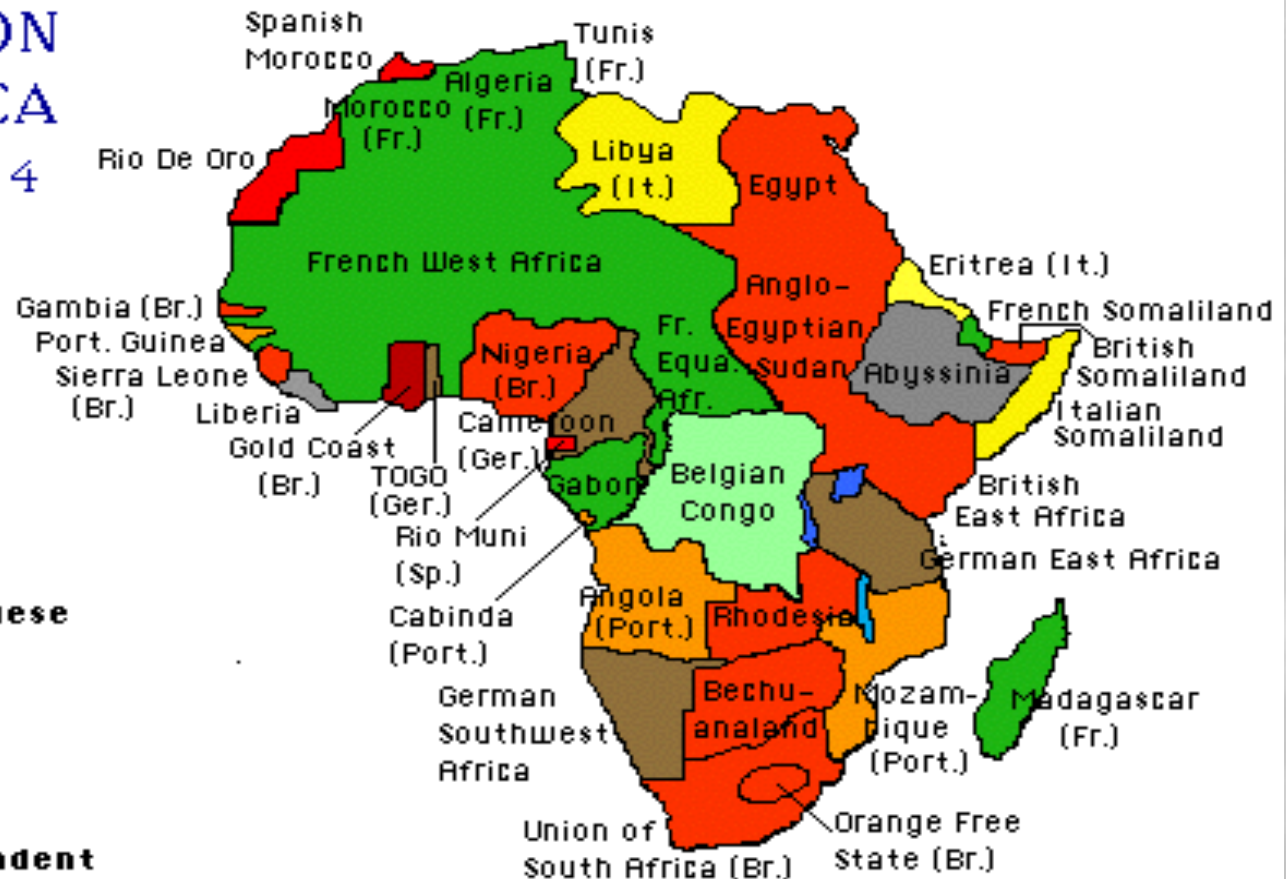
Africa Divided

PARTITION OF AFRICA

1885 - 1914

Colonial Powers

-  **British**
-  **French**
-  **German**
-  **Portuguese**
-  **Italian**
-  **Belgian**
-  **Spanish**
-  **Independent**



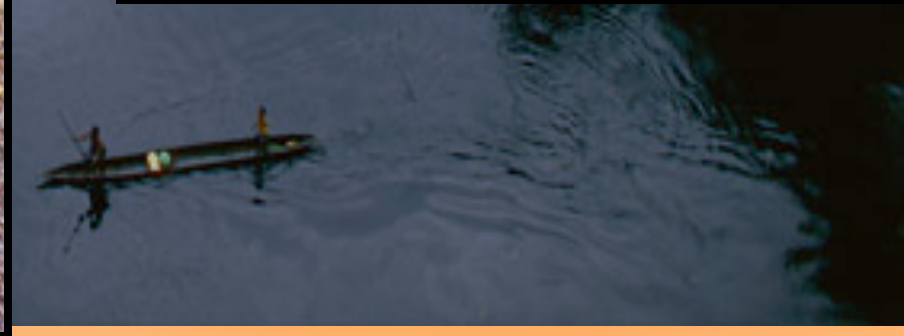


The Dark Continent

- Considered Dark for several reasons:
 - The skin color of the people
 - Dark in jungle areas (due to overgrowth, trees, etc.
 - Dark because customs seemed barbaric.
 - Dark because lack of Christianity (Showing them the “light” of God”



The Ivory Trade



Dark Continent

- Conrad spends a lot of time
- discussing how dark the Africans
-
- how dark their customs
- the barbarism of the African ways
- May be because they are not Christians.

Dark Continent



Belgian Atrocities in the Congo

- The Belgian traders committed many acts of atrocity against the African natives, including the severing of hands and heads.



- As a response to Achebe's critique,
Edward Said defended Conrad in 1993-
“Two Visions in Heart of Darkness”

- number of critics have entered into the debate concerning Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.
- *Albert Guerard*
- *Chinua Achebe*
- Ian Watt
- Hunt Hawkins
- Peter Brooks
- Patrick Brantlinger
- Marianna Torgovnick
- Jeremy Hawthorn
- Wilson Harris
- Edward W. Said and J. Hiller Millis.

- *Early responses to the novella in 1902:*
- The early critics commented on how the novella was **one of the events of the literary year** and a masterpiece
- (Armstrong, Paul B. *Heart of Darkness: A Norton Critical Edition*. 4th ed. New York: W. Norton, 2006. 307-308).

- *Early responses to the novella in 1902:*
- One critic called the novella a **destructive experience**
- not against **colonization, expansion or Imperialism.**
-
- **adventure experience** - signifying just how far the reader has travelled (ibid. 309).

Heart of Darkness does more than just deal with movement and adventure

- *offers a* characterization of the human mind

Conrad has both motives, **adventure and a philosophic presentation, of the human character** (ibid. 311).

- According to one critic the novella cannot be understood with one eyed closed and Conrad demands the full attention from his readers (ibid. 312).

- A number of critics found the **prose beautiful and the novella atmospheric**
- but one critic thought the **narrative was unconvincing and felt that it too often lost its spontaneity and became too rhetorical (ibid. 313)**
- another critic mentions that there is **no prejudice in the novella (ibid. 308).**

- the most striking point to a 21st century reader about the early responses-
- **RACE** aspect is almost completely left out

- one early critic Does bring up the race aspect.
- **Edward Garnett** ends his review by stating that Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* offers an “analysis of the deterioration of the white man's morale, when he is let loose from European restraint, and to make trade profits out of the subject races”

(Murfin, Ross C. *Heart of Darkness*. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's. 1996)

- Conrad responded to this in a letter and wrote-

“your brave attempt to grapple with the foggishness of *Heart of Darkness*, to explain what I myself tried to shape blindfold, as it were, touched me profoundly” (ibid. 99).

- What does it mean?
- immorality of whites in Africa.

- Conrad had written to Blackwood - his idea behind the novella
- “the criminality of inefficiency and pure selfishness when tackling the civilizing work in Africa” (ibid. 100).

- The race aspect is mostly ignored by early critics

-

A historical background of how race and racism was looked upon in 1902 -

- In “An Image of Africa”, Achebe assumes-
-
- the concept of racism has changed over time.
- the word *racism did not exist when Conrad wrote his novella.*

- people thought about the subject of race very differently than we do nowadays.

- When Conrad wrote his novella, race-thinking was considered so normal that a word like *racism was not needed* (Firchow 234)
- The first time a word was used with these negative connotations was in 1907.

- It was the word *racialism* which is defined as the
- “*belief in the superiority of a particular race leading to prejudice and antagonism towards people of other races, esp. those in close proximity who may be felt as a threat to one's cultural and racial integrity or economic well-being*” (Firchow 234).

- The first use of the word *racism* was in 1936, over 10 years after Conrad's death.
- Also the definition of *racialism* does not seem to fit in with the racist attitudes towards the Africans, since they did not feel that their culture was threatened or that the African rivals could harm their economic status (ibid. 234).

- In short-
- In the early responses to the novella
- critics focus on the form of the novella.
- the adventure experience
- philosophic presentation of the human character
-

- one even commented that there is no prejudice in it
- ‘race-thinking’ was seen as something so normal that no one even noticed it in the novella.

- In his famous critique, “An Image of Africa”-
- Chinua Achebe takes a strong stand against Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.
- *He claims that Conrad was a racist and that a novella which*
so depersonalizes a portion of the human race should not be considered a great work of art (Achebe 9).

- The following quote:
- “The point of my observations should be quite clear by now, namely that Joseph Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist. That this simple truth is glossed over in criticisms of his work is due to the fact that white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely unremarked” (Achebe 9).

- According to Achebe, Conrad has an obsession with skin colour: he describes a man as
- being black, having long black legs and long black arms (A 10, Conrad 39)

- Achebe mentions a scene in the novella where after Kurtz' death, the manager's boy is described as putting his “insolent black head in the doorway” (Conrad 43, Achebe 7).

- He further rejects the idea that Conrad is not
- racist because he is merely describing what Marlow thinks and sees;
- this idea is ridiculous because there is no alternative reference and the readers have to take what the characters say as the truth since no one is disputing them.
- If Conrad wanted to add another layer to the novella he would have done so...

- A central point in Achebe's criticism is that Conrad thinks everything should be in their right place and how tragedy happens when fine Europeans travel into the heart of darkness.
- Cannibals are fine people when they are in their place.
- Africans are described as savages with wild eyes using an unrefined language consisting of grunts and short phrases sounding like a violent babble.

- Africa is shown as the **other world** with bestiality **contrasting the intelligence and refinement of Europe**.
- The **Africans** are sometimes referred to as **specimens**, Marlow comments on how one African is an improved specimen because he can fire up a vertical boiler (Conrad13).

- the two rivers in *Heart of Darkness*.
- *How travelling on the Congo river is like going back in time to the “earliest beginnings of the world” (Conrad 11, A 3)*

- Thames has also once been a dark place but is now in light and peace.
- The description of Africa include it being a prehistoric earth with prehistoric men acting in a “black and incomprehensible frenzy” (ibid. 12-13).

- The Africans are howling and leaping and are described as not inhuman, meaning he did find them inhuman at one point.

It is probably at this point Marlow realizes that the tribesmen are in fact human, even if he still consider them as brute savages.

He mentions how they have faces like grotesque masks, strong muscles, energy and a wild vitality (C 34).

According to Achebe, this is Conrad describing things in their place

- **Reasons for Achebe's stand against Conrad** – look at what happened in Africa around this time.
- In the mid-60s most of the former European colonies in Africa gained their independence–marked an end to the European colonial era.
- The waning of the **negritude movement** also took place in the 1960s and 70s (Agatucci).

- The aim of the negritude movement was to “unite peoples living in different nations through their shared ancestry and common ancestry and common origins” (McLeod 77).
- It was criticized for putting focus on the skin colour and blackness and upholding separatist binary oppositions.
- It was also criticised for not questioning the negative associations with
- 'blackness' (ibid. 81-82).
- More than ever it seemed important to create an African identity.

- Achebe was also part of the Pan-Africanism movement which aim was to unify native Africans and eliminate colonialism (Appiah 73).

- Often in his life he has been asked the question “are you from Africa”, and has found that Africa seems to mean something to people.
- “Each of these tags has a meaning, and a penalty and a responsibility. All these tags, unfortunately for the black man, are tags of disability” (Appiah 74).

- Achebe asks the question “When you see an African what does it mean to a white man?” (ibid. 71). The European gaze is what created the African identity (ibid. 71).
- Achebe thinks that identity is something we must continue to reshape (ibid. 177).

- Achebe has claimed that:
- I'm an Ibo writer, because this is my basic culture; Nigerian, Africa and writer . . . no, black first, then a writer. (...) I must see what it is to be black - and this means being sufficiently intelligent to know how the world is moving and how the black people fare in the world. This is what it means to be black. Or an African - the same (Appiah 73).

- Clearly, identity is an important aspect here. Contemporary African cultural life has been highly influenced by colonialism.
- Achebe wants to move past this situation and create a strong African identity.
- What Achebe seems to miss is the fact that he just like Conrad is highly influenced by the political influences, social and cultural norms of his time.

- This point brings us to the next critic Edward Said.
- Said's analysis was published in 1993 and is in many ways a response to Chinua Achebe's "An Image of Africa".
- Said begins his critique "Two Visions in *Heart of Darkness*" by stating that we must not blame the Europeans for the misfortunes of the present.

- We should instead look at the events of imperialism “as a network of interdependent histories that would be inaccurate and senseless to repress, useful and interesting to understand.” (Said 19).
- We live in a global environment and racial hatred can lead to destruction (ibid. 19-20).

- Conclusion
- The early responses mainly focus on the aesthetic aspects of *Heart of Darkness*.
- *They* discuss how atmospheric and beautiful the language is. The ‘race’ aspect is completely ignored.
- This is not so surprising considering that racism was not even a word and ‘**race thinking**’ was seen as something so natural, that they were completely blind to it.

- In 1977 Achebe condemns Conrad and calls him a racist.
- He also claims that a novella that depersonalizes a portion of the human race should not be considered a great work of art.
-
- There are a number of reasons for this. In the mid-60s most of the former European colonies gained their Independence.
-

- After this, it was seen as important to create a strong African identity from an African standpoint.
- Achebe was also part of the Pan-Africanism movement whose aim was to unify native Africans.
- He has also claimed that creating an African identity is one of his most important roles as a writer.

- In 1993 Said defended Conrad.
- Said - Conrad is a creature of his time and historicizes and contextualizes him as someone who could see the evils of imperialism but not offer an alternative view.

- each critique of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is highly influenced by the time-period in which it was written.



- Achebe begins his critique with a story -
Personal experience
- One day as he was on his way home from
the University of Massachusetts.

- the story of a student who sent him a letter saying how he was "particularly happy to learn about the customs and superstitions of an African tribe,"
- not realizing that "the life of his own tribesmen in Yonkers, New York, is full of odd customs and superstitions" as well
(p2)

- This is obviously something Achebe feels very strongly against.
- Achebe wants to change the way Western psychology has “set Africa up as a foil to Europe” (Achebe 2).
- Creating an African identity is important to Achebe and he finds it to be one of his most important roles as a writer.

- Western thought perceives African culture and religion as customs and superstitions rather than just an alternative form of culture and religion.
- Calling them superstitions is not merely using alternative vocabulary, but is a conscious degradation of the practices.