**Achebe on Racism in Heart of Darkness**

The literal heart of darkness in Conrad's novel **Heart of Darkness** does not merely incorporate the Belgian Congo, the African savages, the journey to the innermost soul, and England as the corruptor in its attempted colonization of the African people for selfish and commercial purposes. In "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's **Heart of Darkness**," Achebe accuses Conrad of racism as the essential "heart of darkness."

**Heart of Darkness** projects the image of Africa as 'the other world,' the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality...it is not the differentness that worries Conrad but the lurking hint of kinship, of common ancestry. For the Thames too 'has been one of the dark places of the earth.' It conquered its darkness, of course, and is now in daylight and at peace. But if it were to visit its primordial relative, the Congo, it would run the terrible risk of hearing grotesque echoes of its own forgotten darkness, and falling victim to an avenging recrudescence of the mindless frenzy of the first beginnings. (4)

One might contend that this attitude toward the African in **Heart of Darkness** does not belong to Conrad, but rather to Marlow, and that far from endorsing it "Conrad might indeed be holding it up to irony and criticism." (9) According to Achebe "Conrad appears to go to considerable pains to set up layers of insulation between himself and the moral universe of his story." (9) For example, Conrad has a narrator behind a narrator -- he gives us Marlow's account through the filter of a second person. Achebe thus elucidates how "Conrad seems...to approve of Marlow, with only minor reservations -- a fact reinforced by the similarities between their two careers." (10)

Furthermore, Achebe views Conrad as espousing a kind of liberalism that "touched all the best minds of the age in England, Europe and America. It took different forms in the minds of different people but almost always managed to sidestep the ultimate question of equality between white people and black people...[Conrad] would not use the word 'brother' however qualified; the farthest he would go was 'kinship.'" (11) in **Heart of Darkness**. Recognizing this fundamental flaw in Conrad, Achebe thus labels the white European author a "thoroughgoing racist" (11).

Although many students "will point out to you that Conrad is, if anything, less charitable to the Europeans in the story than he is to the natives, that the point of the story is to ridicule Europe's civilizing mission in Africa" (12), and despite the fact that Achebe recognizes to a certain extent that Africa serves as a setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as a human factor, he challenges readers of **Heart of Darkness** to "see the preposterous and perverse arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind." (12) But Achebe does not see this as the real point. Instead, "the real question is the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world." (12). Questioning whether a novel which "celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art" (12), Achebe responds by doubting Conrad's talents as a writer.

Achebe accounts for Conrad's racism against black Africans because of his personal history-- "there remains still in Conrad's attitude a residue of antipathy to black people which his peculiar psychology alone can explain. His own account of his first encounter with a black man is very revealing:

A certain enormous buck nigger encountered in Haiti fixed my [Conrad's] conception of blind, furious, unreasoning rage, as manifested in the human animal to the end of my days. Of the nigger I used to dream for years afterwards.

Certainly Conrad had a problem with niggers." (13)

Thus, Achebe clearly sees **Heart of Darkness** as a racist text, one "which parades in the most vulgar fashion prejudices and insults from which a section of mankind has suffered untold agonies and atrocities in the past and continues to do so in many ways and many places today. [He is] talking about a story in which the very humanity of black people is called into question" (15) However, Achebe partly does save the reputation of Conrad when he concedes that "Conrad did not originate the image of Africa which we find in his book. It was and is the dominant image of Africa in the Western imagination...Conrad saw and condemned the evil of imperial exploitation but was strangely unaware of the racism on which it sharpened its iron tooth." (19)

1.      Does Conrad really "otherize," or impose racist ideology upon, the Africans in **Heart of Darkness**, or does Achebe merely see Conrad from the point of view of an African? Is it merely a matter of view point, or does there exist greater underlying meaning in the definition of racism?

2.      How does Achebe's personal history and the context in which he wrote "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's **Heart of Darkness**" reflect the manner in which he views Conrad's idea of racism in the novel?

3.      Taking into account Achebe's assumptions and analysis of racism in **Heart of Darkness**, how does this change Conrad's novel as a literary work, if it does at all?