***Heart of Darkness* and *Postcolonialism***

Joseph Conrad is a master craftsman with words. He has placed gems of sarcastic humor in his rather dark tale *Heart of Darkness*, enhancing the reader’s enjoyment as well as intellectual interest in the book. His descriptions, character creations, and plot management enthrall word lovers. Beneath the surface beauty of his book, though, Conrad has placed observations meant to raise questions. Robert J. C. Young’s book *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* provides an interesting perspective when considering the questions Conrad raises in *Heart of Darkness.* Young writes that postcolonialism is “concerned with developing the driving ideas of a political practice morally committed to transforming the conditions of exploitation and poverty in which large sections of the population live out their daily lives,” (6). He says that “It asserts the not just the right of African, Asian, and Latin-American peoples to access resources and material well-being, but also the dynamic power of their cultures, cultures that are now intervening in and transforming the societies of the west,” (4). Postcolonialism attempts to take the part of the underprivileged peoples and cultures in third-world countries, and Conrad tries to present a thought provoking account of Belgian colonialism in the Congo in in the late 19th century.

Conrad tells the main body of *Heart of Darkness* through Marlow, a man who has sailed into the heart of the Belgian Congo – a place Conrad constantly describes with adjectives such as “dark,” “prehistoric,” and “ominous.” The tail, then, is infused with Marlow’s biases and prejudices which are both similar to and different from those held by most Europeans at the time. One of the first instances of prejudice in the book is found in when Marlow says, “Its queer how out of touch with truth women are. They live in a world of their own, and there has never been anything like it, and never can be,” (786). If Marlow thinks women are out of touch with the truth about life what is he going to think about people so different from him as native tribesmen in the Congo? Marlow certainly reveals racial prejudice when he, speaking of his helmsman, says, “Perhaps you will think it passing strange this regret for a savage who was no more account than a grain of sand in a black Sahara,” (816) – if Marlow had thought the “savage” had been a full and complete human man, Marlow would not have thought he was of no account for human life is never of no account. In another passage our narrator shows a mixture of liberal ideas – for race relations during the time period – and ingrained prejudice: “Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the tress, leaning around the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair. . .this was the place where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die. . .They were not enemies, they were not criminals. . .I saw a face near my hand. The black bones reclined at full length with one shoulder against the tree, and slowly the eyelids rose and the sunken eyes looked up at me, enormous ad vacant, a kind of blind, white flicker in the depths of the orbs, which died out slowly. . .I found nothing else to do but to offer him one of my good Swede’s ship’s biscuits I had in my pocket,” (789-790). Though Marlow had more sympathies for the men with a differently shaded skin than many other Europeans had, he still had a colonial outlook. He would not have recognized the “dynamic power of their [African] cultures, cultures that are now intervening in and transforming the societies of the west,” (Young 4). Conrad depicts the native culture in the Congo as being inferior to the culture of the West, as being “other” and of need of improving and refining.

People do not like having prejudice cast up into their faces. They do not like being looked down upon for any reason, most especially one that they can’t change such as lack of inherited title or difference of race. Someone from Africa would look at *Heart of Darkness* with curiosity just as we would look at one of their native tales. They would also, though, feel at least a slight resentment at the way their culture is portrayed as crude and base and their ancestors are depicted as despicable savages. Yet if they had a historical understanding of the time period in which the book was written – the people who have had the opportunity of education would quickly comprehend the historical setting while it would need to be explained to a village herdsman – they would also warm to the sentiments Conrad expresses of their humanity; they would appreciate how Conrad strayed far enough from his 19th century European prejudices to have Marlow sometimes internally condemn the brutal treatment and outright slaughter he saw.

Joseph Conrad published *Heart of Darkness* in 1899, a time when white Europeans viewed the African cultures as simple and beneath their own culture. Europeans also thought that the people of these new continents – Africa, Asia – had less worth as humans. This prejudice is visible in *Heart of Darkness.* Yet Conrad makes Marlow less racially prejudiced than many colonialists in the late 19th century were. Yes, Marlow sees the natives as savages and sometimes as being animalistic, but he also expresses sympathy for the natives’ plight and subjugation at the hand of their colonizers. *Heart of Darkness* is extremely prejudicedfrom a postcolonial perspective and expresses ideas and values that need to be radically changed, but the story is liberal minded compared to the institutionalized views of the late 19th century in Europe.

Works Cited:

Conrad, Joseph. “Heart of Darkness.” *The Norton Anthology: World Literature, Volume 2.* Ed. Peter Simon and Katie Hannah. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2009. 777-838. Print.

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