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The Value of Teaching From a Racist Classic

By LENNARD J. DAVIS

Recently an African-American graduate student approached me at the end of class, in the middle of the semester, carrying a small, paperback edition of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, a text in a course I was teaching on obsession. She placed the book on my desk and said: "Professor Davis, you keep it. I'm not going to be reading this anymore." The student had declared in class that the work was racist and that its portrayals of Africans were stereotyped. I wasn't surprised: The book *is* racist, in addition to anti-imperialist — not an unusual combination in books written at the turn of the 20th century.

I had welcomed her comments in class and proceeded to "teach the conflicts" she had raised. In ensuing classes, we discussed the value of reading works that are racist or sexist. I delivered my arguments about the value of freedom of the press and the problems with censorship. I noted that *Heart of Darkness* is clearly anti-imperialist in its attack on the idea of colonization, embodied in the Belgians' ruthless quest for ivory in the Congo. Yet I acknowledged that the work is racist at the same time. I asked the students: How do we handle the intersection of progressive and regressive themes in a single work? Do we expect writers of the past to have the same values we do now? And so on.

I'd made these points before, but something different was happening now. In fact, I'd taught *Heart of Darkness* in my undergraduate course the same semester, and an African woman in the class had had a similar response: At first she had remained silent, and then she expressed her impatience with the book. She was from Africa by way of England and spoke with some personal authority. The attitude of these students of color was not one of anger or outrage, but rather of sadness and weariness. They wondered why this book was assigned so often — they had read it before, in other classes — when it so clearly depicted Africans as nameless, faceless, miserable people without any individual identities. (In the one case of an identifiable African, "The Helmsman," as Conrad calls him, the character is admirable in some abstract sense but is without a personal name or an individual life.) As the African author and critic Chinua Achebe notes, the natives are routinely depicted as dark, writhing bodies with lolling eyes and primitive chants assembled on the shore of the river up which Marlow, a fully developed character, journeys on his quest for Kurtz. You've got your basic B movie, with pith-helmeted white protagonists set against your black (or black-faced) extras doing an imagined primitive dance and uttering a made-up language.

That critique is not new. But the reactions of my students, whose opinions I respected — their refusal to even read the work and their sadness over the book's prevalence in their courses — caused me to rethink my position.

One stance I had taken in the past about works like this one, or, say, the work of Ezra Pound, who was anti-Semitic, or Ernest Hemingway, a notorious male chauvinist, was that the authors were simply reflecting the prejudices of their time. I had always argued that Conrad's use of the N-word, which he has Marlow say more than a few times, is typical of a man of his period. Indeed, Conrad chose to call one of his short novels *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, in which the eponymous character lies tragically dying in a boat, a symbol of prejudice and futility. So, obviously, his use of the term was acceptable enough to be stamped on the cover of a book at that time. But when I did some research into this issue, I found an article that claimed, with some authority, that Conrad used the N-word long after it had become a term avoided by sensitive people in British culture. If that was the case, perhaps he wanted to make Marlow himself a racist. Shouldn't a writer have the freedom to do that? But I wondered whether I was just rationalizing an author's egregious racism.

How would I, a Jew — albeit a secular one — feel if one of the books that was regularly studied in general literature courses used words "kike" and "sheeny" routinely, depicting all Jews as money grubbers with hooked noses and shifty eyes? Even if people told me that the work was actually an attack on capitalism and exploitation of workers, despite its unfortunate stereotypes, I might have trouble with the fact that the work was being widely read and taught. I might feel weary at having to read an anti-Semitic book repeatedly in courses on culture in the Western world.

I found myself moving toward the decision not to teach *Heart of Darkness* anymore. Why should I inflict this painful work on my students? If any ethnic group announces that a word, phrase, or book is offensive to them, should I not honor their unique subjectivity? But the thought of giving up the book also created a kind of anxiety for me. Was I just giving in to the voice of censorship? Were my students' sensibilities simply a new form of the old thought police?

I've been teaching *Heart of Darkness* for nearly 30 years. My original paperback — which I still use — now yellowed and heavily underlined, is the Signet edition with a picture of a neurasthenic-looking bald man on the cover and the price of 50 cents stamped in the corner. I first read the book in the 1960s, in high school, where we studied it as a kind of existential journey depicting man's (sic) struggle to find truth and his inevitable confrontation with meaninglessness ("the horror, the horror"). My beatnik English teacher in my huge, working-class, multicultural public high school in the Bronx taught us how to wade slowly and carefully through every image, learning how to read closely and carefully, so that we could gain the skills that would allow us to continue our own personal journeys up the river from lower to higher education. I began underlining. Conrad was to me some kind of mysterious sage who had put experience and truth, matters of life and death, into this slim but powerful work. This was the same learning experience, perhaps, that seared Francis Ford Coppola's brain, no doubt in his own

immigrant-filled high school, and left the residue that was reborn out of the fire of Vietnam into *Apocalypse Now*, one of the great films of the 20th century.

I read the book again at Columbia University, in a course on 19th-century fiction taught by Edward Said. Moving with the times, he opened my eyes to the book's anti-imperialist theme, which had somehow been overlooked by my Jewish beatnik high-school teacher. What my high-school teacher had used as a guidebook to existential angst became under Said's gaze a stinging indictment of the callous and genocidal treatment of the Africans, and other nationals, at the hands of the British and the European imperial powers. I continued underlining.

When I took a course with Carolyn Heilbrun, a noted feminist, the work turned into an indictment of a male world that kept women in the dark about the nefarious practices performed to "improve" their lives. Other feminists noted that the ivory the Belgians collected was destined to become, along with African ebony, the keys for the pianofortes that cultured women in 19th-century Europe played in their drawing rooms. What a metaphor — the brutality of colonialism transmuted into the music of Beethoven and Chopin. The characters of Marlow's aunt and Kurtz's fiancée both believed that their men were engaged in a noble purpose rather than the tainted exploitation that was the reality. I kept underlining.

Then it came my turn to teach the work. I had grown up in a building in upper Manhattan that was predominantly African-American, and had been involved in the civil-rights movement in college, so, in the City University of New York's City College, where I taught my first classes, I steered the work toward issues of race as well as the existential and imperialistic. I emphasized the enslavement of the Africans, the way that the natives fulfilled the colonists' stereotypical fantasies, and the lure of the ideology of the primitive.

In addition I was beginning to think about my own dissertation on the history of the novel, so I looked with care at the book's storytelling techniques, the layers of narrative piled on each other like inlays and laminates of wood. An unnamed narrator sits on a yawl on the Thames River listening to Marlow telling his yarn to three other people on the boat. Then we get the story itself of the journey and the quest for Kurtz, and finally Kurtz's own enigmatic story of illusion, delusion, and despair. This all builds up to "the horror, the horror"; and then Marlow retells the story to Kurtz's betrothed, with the addition of a lie — that Kurtz said her name when he died instead of emitting his devastating, annihilating cry. Finally Marlow retells the story to the people on the Thames, and through the narrator the tale reaches us. For me, teaching that complexity of structure against the eccentricity of Conrad's style and the strangely allusive yet opaque language was beyond pleasure. Students usually felt the book to be either great or impossible. And they would underline.

By the time *Heart of Darkness* was taught in the 1990s, it was being published with Chinua Achebe's critique of the work as racist. We all learned to teach the book not as an existential tract or anti-imperialist critique but with the reassuringly familiar debate about

whether the book is racist. Achebe taught us the obvious message that lay buried in the text all along — that its depiction of Africa and Africans is hopelessly Eurocentric. My students, well schooled in race and racism, had much to say. And we all underlined some more.

My original paperback is so underlined and marked up that it resembles a Talmudic commentary. The cover with the bald man has fallen off and is secured with a rubber band, and the less-than-a-dollar price makes the book worthy of historic preservation. Every decade has taught me something about this work, something worth underlining. But my latest learning experience has taught me that this text, which has been mined for so much meaning and inspiration, perhaps needs to be discarded. I can't underline that point, because the lesson isn't on the page but in the brain and heart.

As a culture, we have granted certain books immortality and permit them to teach us new lessons across the ages. We've given that privilege to the works of Homer, Shakespeare, Shelley (Mary), Defoe, Swift, Austen, Dickens, Flaubert, and more recently Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, Maxine Hong Kingston, Leslie Silko, and others. But we can rescind that immortality and consign certain books to the back shelves of our consciousness.

I asked some teacher friends if they have withdrawn their sympathies from certain books because of racism, sexism, homophobia, or ableism of the texts. One person told me she had stopped teaching Hemingway, Ovid, and Boccaccio because their works disgusted her with their overt misogyny. Another insists that he will never stop teaching books just because students want a book to be a particular way or portray a particular reality. And another said some books had dropped out of her teaching, but only because she herself had become disillusioned with the writer.

I've learned a lot from rereading *Heart of Darkness* all these years. It's given back to me the efforts of my own curiosity, and it hasn't necessarily defended itself as a moral or ethical text. It has opened up lines of inquiry, indictments not only of itself but also of the various eras through which it has lived. For my graduate student at the beginning of her career, her rereading of that book has ended. This text will give her nothing back, but other texts will. For me, there is no way I can forget what the book has taught me. But when I reread it next time, I will do so with the face of my student before me. My student will have nothing to do with the book, but the book — at least when next I read it or teach it — will have much to do with her.

Lennard J. Davis is a professor of English, disability and human development, and medical education at the University of Illinois at Chicago. He is the editor of the revised edition of The Disability Studies Reader, to be published this summer by Routledge.