Joseph Conrad’s
Heart of Darkness
Colonial Literature and Postcolonialism

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Conrad’s languages

- **Polish**—his native language
- Russian—learned some in early childhood but discounted it
- **French**—learned French at home and a French governess, later in school and during his travels; spoke it with native fluency
- German & Latin—in written form, in school
- some Spanish, Italian and Malay—during his travels
Conrad’s English

• Perhaps introduced to English by his father, who translated Shakespeare and Dickens
• Read Shakespeare, Carlyle, Twain, *The London Times* before he set foot in England in 1878
• 1878 sailed on an English ship
• 1884 wrote his earliest known letters in English from his trips
• 1889 began his first novel in English (*Almayer’s Folly* (1895)). (Conrad called the writing of the novel “a struggle to the death….I begrudge each minute I spend away from paper; I do not say from ‘pen’ because I write very little, but inspiration comes to me in looking at the paper.” (Letter to Poradowska 1894)
• 1890 wrote Congo diary (1899 finished *Heart of Darkness*)
Conrad explains why he wrote in English

“The truth of the matter is that my faculty to write in English is as natural as any other aptitude with which I might have been born. I have a strange and overpowering feeling that it had always been an inherent part of myself. English was for me neither a matter of choice or adoption....All I can claim after all those years of devoted practice, with the accumulated anguish of its doubts, imperfections, and falterings in my heart, is the right to be believed when I say that if I had not written in English, I would not have written at all.”

(“Author’s Note” to A Personal Record 1919)
Catherine II of Russia, Joseph II of Austria and Frederick the Great of Prussia dividing Poland
Partition of Poland
Partitions of Poland
(1772, 1793, 1795)
Polska pod obcym panowaniem
Africa in 1910 and 1870
Colonial ideology in 19th century

• Need for expansion: unclaimed territories to be made use of by industrializing Europe
• Europe as source of civilization
• White race superior and civilized
• Colonizing mission = historical destiny
• “Lesser, uncivilized people” were to be ruled or exterminated
Social Darwinism

• Alfred Russell Wallace:
  “...the higher—the more intellectual and moral—must displace the lower and more degraded races.”

(The Origin of Human Races” 1864)

• Charles Darwin:
  “At some future period, not very distant as measured by centuries, the civilized races of man will almost certainly exterminate and replace the savage races throughout the world.”

(The Descent of Man 1871)
Rudyard Kipling
“The White Man's Burden” 1899

Take up the White Man's burden--
Send forth the best ye breed--
Go bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives' need;
To wait in heavy harness,
On fluttered folk and wild--
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
Half-devil and half-child.
Take up the White Man's burden--
And reap his old reward:
The blame of those ye better,
The hate of those ye guard--
The cry of hosts ye humour
(Ah, slowly!) toward the light:--
"Why brought he us from bondage,
Our loved Egyptian night?"
Postcolonialism: **Against** the imperial attitude and ideology

- **Universalizing** (values and meanings are timeless, universal; human condition is universal)
- **Eurocentrism** (centrality of the West)
- **Orientalism** (the East as the Other, contrasting foil to the West; exotic, mysterious, immoral, seductive, irrational, unrestrained, etc.—everything the West doesn’t want to acknowledge in themselves)
- **Homogeneity** (anonymous masses, without history, driven by instinct, identified as race, “Arabs,” “Africans,” etc.)
Orientalism in 19th-century art

The Abduction of Rebecca, 1846
Eugène Delacroix (French, 1798–1863)
Orientalism in Art

Circe (1889)
by Wright Barker
English Painter,
1864-1941
Orientalism in art

The Natchez, 1835
Eugène Delacroix (French, 1798–1863)

Delacroix explained the scene: "Fleeing the massacre of their tribe, two young savages traveled up the Meschacébé (Mississippi River). During the voyage, the young woman was seized by labor pains. The moment is that when the father holds the newborn in his hands, and both regard him tenderly."
Major figures

• **Frantz FANON** (1925-1961)

  Martiniquan-Algerian, French-educated psychiatrist and revolutionary

  *Black Skin/White Masks* 1952, *The Wretched of the Earth* 1961

  Emphasized political independence from colonizing countries by:
  
  • reclaiming precolonial past
  
  • eroding colonialist ideology
  
  • revolutionary action
Major figures

• **Edward SAID** (1935-2003)
  Palestinian-American scholar
  • *Orientalism* 1978, *Culture and Imperialism* 1993
  • Introduced the notion of **Orientalism**—Western ideas (ideology and discourse) about the Orient and practices of power and domination that see the non-European as an abstraction that is inferior, backward, racially and culturally **Other**—in opposition to the West/Occident
Major figures

• **Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak** (b. 1942)
  Indian (-American) scholar, feminist
  "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988)

• **Subalterns**—the lowest within the colonized group (women, racial minorities, immigrants, working class) subjected to double-oppression

• Giving **voice to the voiceless**—studying texts of marginalized groups
Major figures

- **Homi BHABHA** (b. 1949)
  - Indian scholar *The Location of Culture* (1994)
- **Hybridity**—the notion that the cultures of the colonizer and the colonized are not separate but interdependent (not binary *either-or* but *both*)
  
  “the creation of new transcultural forms [linguistic, cultural, political] within the contact zone [“third space”] produced by colonization.”

(Ashcroft, B)
Some other major figures

- Aimé Césaire *Discourse on Colonialism* 1950
- Gloria Anzaldúa *Borderlands* 1987
- Edward Kamau Brathwaite
- Amrit Wilson *Finding a Voice* 1978
- Chinua Achebe
Postcolonialism

- examines the **discourse** of colonialism

  *Discourse “systems of thoughts composed of ideas, attitudes, courses of action, beliefs and practices that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak” (Foucault)*

- exposes the **ideology** of colonialism as racist, oppressive, profit-driven, inhumane, sexist, orientalizing

- examines representation of non-Western within Western culture/literature

- creates awareness of non-West as portrayed as **Other**

- **recovers** the cultures and histories of non-Western peoples

- studies **effects** of colonialism both on the colonized (incl. “subalterns”) and colonizer

- studies **non-Western** cultures/literatures
Heart of Darkness
Chinua Achebe

in “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*” (1975) called Conrad “a bloody/thoroughgoing racist”

- “savages”
- “faces like grotesque masks”
- the fireman as “an improved specimen...a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat walking on his hind legs....”
Conrad on common bond of humanity

“I am content to sympathize with common mortals, no matter where they live; in houses or in tents, in the streets under a fog, or in the forests behind the dark line of dismal mangroves....Their hearts — like ours — must endure the load of the gifts from Heaven: the curse of facts and the blessing of illusions, the bitterness of our wisdom and the deceptive consolation of our folly.”
Some English visitors to his home in Kent referred to Conrad as:

- “spectacularly a foreigner”
- “not of our race”
- “like a Polish Jew”
- “the conventional stage Hebrew”
- “simian”

- “very Oriental indeed”
- having “oriental mannerisms”, “an Oriental face”
- “semi-Mongolian”
- “like a monkey”

Hunt Hawkins 1982
Conrad as spokesman of the empire

BUT

British subject

Born and raised as Polish patriot in opposition to another empire

White European male

Not Western European, orientalized himself

Employee serving the colonizing project

Experienced the repression of empire himself
Conrad as spokesman of the empire (2)

English novelist

In *Heart of Darkness* complicates the typical narrative structure of a quest/journey narrative that allows for questioning prevailing notions.
Marlow on the colonizing project:

“The conquest of the earth, which mostly means taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only.” (Heart of Darkness)
The “redeeming idea” of colonialism:

- “the noble cause” “the cause of progress”
- “weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways”
- colonialist as “an emissary of light, something like a lower sort apostle”
- “By the simple exercise of our will we can exercise a power for good practically unbounded.” (Kurtz’s Report for the Int’l Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs)
- “the company’s business”
Unmasking the “redeeming idea” of colonialism:

• “the great saving illusion”
• “rot let loose in print and talk”
• “the merry dance of death and trade [that] goes on in a still and earthy atmosphere as of an overheated catacomb”
• the “raid[ing of] the country”
• a lie
Kurtz on the colonizing enterprise:

- “immense plans”
- “Each station should be like a beacon on the road towards better things, a center for trade of course but also for humanising, improving, instructing.” (Report for the Int’l Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs)

- “The horror! The horror!”