The Use of a Stereotype to Involve the Reader: Marlow in the *Heart of Darkness*

Ian Jedlica

Abstract. Joseph Conrad’s work *Heart of Darkness* is seen as racist by many, most notably Chinua Achebe, and is either under the threat of or actually banned from some schools and libraries. This paper would like to demonstrate, with the help of the transactional reader-response theory, that rather than being racist, Conrad, with this unique travelogue into the depths of the Congo at the turn of the 20th century, uses a stereotype, a cliché of the era, in particular the main character Charles Marlow, to capture the reader of the time through their own communal schemata and knowledge. In so doing, he offers an opportunity for the readers to connect and follow the character and educate themselves in the evils and wrongdoings of their own norms and those of the society they lived in.

Key Words. stereotype, cliché, Conrad, Marlow, Reader-Response, schemata.


**Introduction**

One of the hardest things for a writer of fiction, whether in high literature or pulp, is to ‘capture’ the reader’s attention within those first few pages of their work in order for them to gain readership and acknowledgement within the field. Many writers grab their readers with the use of an alarming incident, one which brings many questions to the reader, opening up their curiosity as to how the story will untangle (Brown 2004: 17-20). Others use references from the everyday world, to bring the reader, who carries their own knowledge and schemata along with them, into the work and allow them to become comfortable within this new yet recognizable world unfolding before them before the developments in the story appear (Woolf 1992: 1-10). Joseph Conrad, in *Heart of Darkness*, used the latter, allowing the reader to feel comfortable reading the work by using stereotypes and clichés of the time. However, in so doing, both the work and the man have been considered by some as being racist (Achebe 1978: 10).

**The case for Conrad**

Among much criticism towards Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, racism and prejudice are perhaps the loudest and mostly widely known. It does not help that the work shows, through ambiguities and inconsistencies, that this novel does not include any ordinary seaman’s yarn or story about ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Hansson 1998: 5). The most infamous critic known to all those who have studied *Heart of Darkness* is the distinguished Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe (Miller 1998: 4), who stated that although Conrad is a great storyteller, he is “a bloody racist” (Achebe 1978: 10) with an obsession for the word “black”, and also a writer who sets Africa up as a “foil to Europe”, an antithesis of Europe and civilisation (3) by comparing one to the other. For example, Achebe mentions many comparisons in his scathing article, such as differences between Kurtz’s African mistress and his European intended, the language used by Europeans and Africans, the latter being only “incomprehensible grunts”, and the two rivers, the Thames and the Congo, the former of which had conquered its wild, savage darkness, while the latter had not. He also accuses Conrad of using Africa only as a mere backdrop, a setting where one man, Kurtz, loses his mind while Conrad ‘dehumanizes’ Africans to frivolous props or objects (10). In terms of writing style, what other critics call Conrad’s “stylistic flaw” of using similar adjectives throughout to create mystery about the African atmosphere and culture, Achebe calls it a process of inducing a “hypnotic stupor in
his readers” (4) therefore creating a malleable audience for the writer’s underlying attitudes towards Africa.

Many others have also followed Achebe’s initial assault on Conrad and see the language used as racist, and with the force of this opinion and the numbers who believe it, the book is banned in many traditionally black colleges in the USA and in schools and libraries, for example in Brooklyn, for the use of the ‘n-word’ (Bradley 1996: 4). In the 21st century, our comfort level of the use of this derogatory slur is context-dependent, and although some critics say it was “a relatively neutral word without racist overtones” in Conrad’s time, it has been found that this was not the case, as it had already fallen into disrepute by the 1880s and was used derogatorily in both the USA and Britain in the 18th century (ibid).

If we step aside from such criticism for the moment and look at the author himself, the Ukrainian-born Joseph Conrad, we may be able to glimpse what he himself wished to say and build a case against the aforementioned arguments. As for language, English was not Conrad’s first, nor his second, but his third language, one which he was introduced to at the age of eight due to his father’s translating of classic English works and the one he used in the British Navy for sixteen years (“Joseph Conrad” 2018). Conrad, becoming a British citizen in 1884, was in no way a typical ‘Englishman’. In 1878 at the age of twenty-one, Conrad went to England and began to learn the language, adding it to his knowledge of many others: Polish, French, and some German and Russian. Conrad stated that “both at sea and on land [his] point of view is English”, though that did not mean he had become an Englishman (Bär 2011: 4), with all its cultural trimmings of colonialism and xenophobia. Although he was one of many writers suffering from the then-fashionable exhaustion-disease neurasthenia (Strochlic 2016), Conrad stated that he thought by 1895 he had been “for years and years thinking in English” and that its idioms had “direct actions on [his] temperament” (Bär 2011: 5). Unfortunately for Conrad, his spoken English “immediately identified him as a foreigner” (7) and some critics claim they can see the difference between his written English and those of native writers, revealing traces of a continental linguistic background, but the differences are insignificant (Alsop 1931: 56). Linguistic and cultural influences of Polish and French also contributed to his perspective and cognitive development, creating an “exotic” use of English in terms of vocabulary, syntax and style (Bär 2011: 7), which makes him unique among those of his time and those of today. By using a colloquial language in his fictional work rather than his native tongue, Conrad also separates himself from the work, creating a dual consciousness and therefore separating himself from the main characters through language (Slobin 2013: 191). For example if we delve into the story itself, the book Marlow finds in the abandoned hut
while travelling up the Congo, a book filled with ‘code’, shows that Conrad wishes to
distance his main character’s knowledge from his own knowledge of Russian (Conrad 2006: 38) as the code seen by Marlow is clearly Russian. This all shows that Joseph Conrad should
not be confused with his character Charlie Marlow, in spite of all biographical similarities

Relating to his writing and mindset, Conrad, first and foremost, wanted to entertain his
readers, stating that “I write novels to amuse the English” (Lincoln 1972: 183), and this emphasis on the ‘English’ points directly to the main character in Heart of Darkness. Conrad
also stated later on in life that he himself was “no slave to prejudice” (“Selected Letters” 2006: 300), which gives the impression he was conscious of his characters’ inner prejudices
and turmoil and so would not create a character such as Marlow without purpose.

The relationship between the reader and the text

Hemingway's Iceberg Theory is well-known throughout the literary world, the writing style of omission which makes much of the story hidden, also making the story richer (Johnston 1984: 68). In this way, the reader has the opportunity to think, if they so wish, about those parts of
the literary work which are not given by the writer, and so enrich the work by using their own schemata as a reader, their own view of the world and objects around them. By using this theory in his work, Hemingway created a writing style of ‘schematic elicitation’, where the
work comes to life not only through his written words, or lack of them, but also more so from
the minds of his readers, their schemata of the world. This also creates a stronger bond
between the text and the reader, building a relationship between both.

Moving more into the theoretical aspect of the relationship between reader and text, all
literary work is comprised of words, and as Edmund Burke states, words affect us differently
than do natural objects, paintings or pieces of architecture, though they can affect us greatly. These words create an idea in the mind as to their meaning and so through habit the reader can recognise or use them later in life in similar circumstances (Burke 2005: 247). Compound abstract words do not create a representation in the mind as objects would, but create an effect, an ‘affection of the soul’. Burke mentions that simple compound words such as colours and states of being can also create the same effect (251). In fact, he concludes by saying that words “affect us often as strongly as the things they represent, and sometimes much more [so]” (263). Words are part of our language, and we observe the world through the categories defined by our language and consequently form unique worldviews (Duan 2012: 55).
Language is not only a means of solving problems of communication or reflection but also projects the view of the world on language habits of any given society (Kay et al. 1984: 65). For example, the word ‘peace’ has two basic meanings, non-war and a political relationship in which war is all but unthinkable. In 1938 it was asserted that Britain and Germany were at peace but in a seriously strained relationship, whereas in 2007 war between the countries was unthinkable (Gray 2007: 341). If “language is the mother of thought, not its handmaiden” (“Karl Kraus”), then language gives birth to thought (Bac 2016: 322).

From the same perspective, according to Wolfgang Iser, a literary work has two parts: the aesthetic and the artistic. The artistic pole is the author’s text, and the aesthetic is the perception of the text accomplished by the reader. Therefore the literary work can neither be only the text or the subjectivity of the reader but actually an interpretation or reality situated between the two (Iser 1972: 279). The transactional reader-response theory, which analyses the transaction between the text and reader, states we must read in the aesthetic mode, as mentioned by Iser, so that the reader can develop a personal relationship to the text to create any judgements, experiencing all kinds of emotions; anger, love, fear, greed, etc., which is described as the ‘language of emotions’, and defined as a way of perceiving or judging reality. These emotions help the readers gain a perspective of the text based on both their experience, their own schemata they bring to the text, and the words within the text (Beach 1993: 55). Readers’ experience and schemata raise the question that the meaning of a language depends on its usage in specific contexts within various social dimensions learnt from social interaction; others’ roles, status, motives, needs, and definitions of the situation (105). Stanley Eugene Fish, an American literary theorist, states that all individual subjective responses are products of the interpretive community to which they belong. A reader, defined by Fish as “informed”, a person who has knowledge of literary discourses, idioms and devices, as well as genres (called “educated” or “competent” by other critics [Murfin 1996: 120]) will actively create meaning from a text depending on who they are in terms of social backgrounds, life experiences, and intellectual communities. If readers are directed to the formal analysis without ‘I’, then they only take the stance of those naturalized, dominant scholars who gave the analysis (Roemer 1987: 915). Fish states that there is no such thing as an individual subjective response, as every reader’s response to a text is tied to the community to which they belong (Tyson 2006: 186), arguing that the meaning of a text is a product of one’s reading strategies operating in specific social contexts (Beach 1993: 106). Within intellectual institutions, students see that their ideas are not included in the literary analysis, being only fed and manipulated by their teachers with preset ideas (Roemer 1987: 916).
“Subjectivists” such as David Bleich, Norman Holland, and Robert Crosman state they “do not see the reader’s response as one “guided” by the text but rather as one motivated by their own ‘identity theme’” (Murfin 1996: 121). These critics say common identity themes do exist, for example with many interpreting *Hamlet* in the same way, which involves a common cultural identity (122). The critic Peter Rabinowitz stated that a society’s ideological assumptions about gender, race, and class determine the way in which artistic works are perceived and evaluated (124) and that we all belong to reading communities controlled by certain “interpretive conventions” which enforce a considerable degree of similarity between readings (125). In other words, readers respond to a text according to “subject positions” acquired from socialization by cultural institutions, and so acquire various cultural practices which express cultural identity or resist social and economic domination (Giroux et al. 1989: 227-228). Reading becomes the study of how we make sense of things, focusing on shared texts and what the individual and the group think of them (Roemer 1987: 919). For example, Achebe’s stature as one of Africa’s foremost novelists (Rabinowitz 1996: 131) may have some connection to the racist label he has given Conrad.

In addition to this, texts are also written within a cultural and social background. The question arises as to whether texts influence readers, or readers influence texts. David Buckingham’s analysis of viewers’ responses to the British soap opera, *Eastenders* found that viewers were not merely ‘positioned’ by television, but were also positioned in society and history, and will therefore bring different kinds of prior knowledge to the media/text, including social norms and stereotypes (Beach 1993: 129). Teresa Ebert also states that texts do not so much copy social practices as produce representations of social practices through which the reader lives those practices and brings them to life (54). Therefore, readers and writers of texts are participants in a process of continually negotiating knowledge and truth as “probable, local, and temporary” (128).

By using a stereotypical main character of a young middle-class Englishman, one which the reader of the time would know within their own schemata and collection of clichés, Conrad involves the reader and connects them to the text, and once their attention is caught, is able to use Marlow as an opportunistic tool to educate his readers in the xenophobic attitude within their society.
Marlow, the stereotypical upstart youth

In the Victorian era, young middle-class men were busy “[making] their fortunes and [testing] their metal” by managing factories, trading in stock, and generally being involved in financial or legal affairs (Hughes 2014). The middle-class understood well before Charles Darwin’s ideas on natural selection appeared that life was one long competition where you competed against others to gain a step up on the social ladder. Samuel Smiles, in 1859, published a best-seller entitled Self-Help, which promoted self-education and perseverance as a means to success. Soon after, Charles Dickens published Great Expectations, which tells the story of Philip Pirrip who rose from an apprentice position to Gentlemen with the help of an unknown benefactor and eventually is unsatisfied in life because he hadn’t worked to gain that stature within society, showing that Dickens himself believed that self-help and hard work were needed for overall well-being (2014). Conrad continues this theme by using a character that is both a young man from an upstanding family and one who is looking to make something of himself. Young men such as Marlow were able to use their connections in family and social circles to gain a job more easily than others of lower class (Loftus 2011).

The main character Marlow immediately presents himself to his audience as a narrator trying to entertain with his ‘absurd’ pieces based on work and work ethic, later keeping his audience’s attention with sombre stories of horror while adding light relief with exclamations of the absurd. It is as though Heart of Darkness is Conrad’s retired upper-middle-class Englishman’s version of a pointless, cliché-ridden ‘shaggy dog story’ set at the turn of the 20th century, which loses its direction due to the antagonist Kurtz dying (Brunvand 1963: 44) and Marlow realising his denial of ‘the horror!’ he has experienced. Marlow, however, has a much greater role to play than narrator to his audience. He is also a stereotypical ‘schematic sign post’ leading the reader towards a greater understanding of the injustices of their own society of the time.

Fincham and Hooper state that Conrad’s texts are “often seen as monuments to white privilege” (Fincham et al. 1996: xiii). Charles Marlow is “a product of an English-school education with all the baggage [it] implies” (Sewlall 2013: 11) and so he retreats into “the generic and culturally conditioned” and the “stock response” or cliché, especially when confronting and trying to understand people of a different culture to his own, called the ‘other’ (21).

Marlow, only using the derogatory ‘n-word’ when the African in question has already been dehumanized by another (Bradley 1996: 5), shows that he is merely repeating what is
culturally expected of him among his peers. Ian Watt sees that “the English may not exactly be xenophobes, but they do not take quickly and warmly to foreigners” (Watt 1979: 23), which gives an indication of Marlow’s mindset, showing that Conrad created him in the likeness of his fellow citizens. Added to this acceptance of the ‘other’, seeing the ironic acts that the white colonials inflict upon the Africans causes Marlow to express sympathy towards them, perhaps not enough (Torgovnik 2006: 402), though Marlow keeps close in character to what is expected from Conrad’s English readers of the time.

*Heart of Darkness* also participates and promotes a certain “gender ideology” of the Victorian era (Miller 1998: 4). The novel reflects the English or European “spirit” of male domination towards women at the turn of the 20th century, seeing them as property, with Marlow mentioning Kurtz listing his possessions as “‘My Intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my—’ everything belonged to him” (Conrad 2006: 48), degrading females as objects to own or objects for sexual pleasure, as Marlow describes Kurtz’s African mistress erotically across three whole pages (60-63). Earlier on, before he begins his journey, Marlow himself degrades women by stating that they are “out of touch” and “distasteful” (12). The novel allows for a biased male vision of women, with Marlow saying that “They—the women I mean—are out of it—should be out of it. We must help them to stay in that beautiful world of their own, lest ours gets worse” (48). Women are almost absent from the novel told by “a typical Englishman” capable of insensitive jokes, telling a story with the use of masculine language, such as the phrase “penetrated deeper and deeper” (35), and using ideology about a manly adventure, which silences women and keeps them oppressed (Oppermann 1994: 65). Marlow also believes that his aunt, who secured him the position of steamboat captain in the first place, is naïve, thinking that Imperialism works and brings civilisation to the savages (Anbaran 2017: 132). *Heart of Darkness* has been interpreted as a “groping, fumbling” story which penetrates and withdraws from the Congo (Guerard 2006: 331), physically ‘raping’ the river. Marlow’s view of women corresponds with the patriarchal view of the time (Barrett 2013: 6).

Marlow also admires those who ‘keep up appearances’, for example the accountant whom Marlow says, “had verily accomplished something” (Conrad 2006: 18), and those who know the expectations of their place (Sarvan 1980: 8). Over and over again Marlow returns to the concept of “restraint” and his feeling of the work ethic, for example saying “What saves us is efficiency—the devotion to efficiency” (Conrad 2006: 6), meaning a person should have faith and see value in work. “Hard work, duty and control are the positive values to counteract egotism and evil” (Hansson 1998: 8). There are also those with an “innate strength” (Conrad 2006: 6).
2006: 49) of faith, for example the Harlequin and the boiler maker. Marlow truly believes that man should absorb himself in his work and trade (29). When the restraints of civilisation are gone, work is a saving grace (Ridley 1963: 48). Marlow shows a strong contempt for people who have “abandoned all sense of morality in their pursuit of wealth” (Sewlall 2013: 13). As Marlow said, “I don’t like work—no man does—but I like what is in the work—the chance to find yourself. Your own reality—for yourself not for others—what no other man can ever know. They can only see the mere show, and never can tell what it really means” (Conrad 2006: 29).

At the time of writing *Heart of Darkness*, at the end of the 19th century, there was a popular faith in the value of work, a Victorian virtue Conrad grew up with and found in English society, and so his character Marlow, being a stereotypical middle-class Englishman of the time, believes a devotion to efficiency is the saving grace of civilization (Gaston 1974: 203). This brings us back to the then fashionable expectations found within Smiles’ *Self-Help* (1859).

Marlow’s strong inner work ethic which allows him to exclaim on the absurdities he observes, helps to maintain “a sense of defence against anxiety caused by interacting with another culture”, thus keeping his original worldview intact (Pieski 2011: 49) using the absurd as a defence. With a “criminality of inefficiency” (“Selected Letters” 2006: 293) he sees around him, Marlow understates the horror and emphasizes the absurdity he finds on his journey (McClure 1977: 315), saving himself from the madness that befell Kurtz. It is all due to this that Conrad, using Marlow as the stereotype that he is, can lull the reader into sympathizing with the observations and struggles of a character they recognise and in so doing allow them an opportunity to become enlightened and see the cracks which appear at the end of the story.

**Conclusion**

Critics of Conrad point to the fact that both the writer and his character Marlow are racist, though it has been shown that this may not be the case. Conrad was a writer who wished to entertain his readership, and in *Heart of Darkness* he created Marlow, the typical xenophobic though ‘liberal’ middle-class Englishman, a type of character known within the schemata of his target readers which encompassed their own clichés, xenophobic values and understanding of his time to draw them into the story and give them an opportunity to see and understand the wrongs being done in the name of their society.
Works Cited


https://doi.org/10.18052/www.scipress.com/ILSHS.66.129


https://doi.org/10.5901/mjss.2016.v7n6p319


ISSN 1786-7967


Received: 1 November 2021 Final version accepted: 30 December 2021

Ian Jedlica, originally from the United Kingdom, immigrated to Hungary and is an English teacher and proofreader, receiving a Philology Bachelor’s degree specialising in Pedagogy from Kodolányi János University in 2013, a Philology Master’s degree from Károli Gáspár University in 2019 and a Teacher’s Master’s degree from Debrecen University in 2020. After over a decade of teaching English in Budapest primary schools, he now works at Dunakeszi Radnóti Miklós High School. His proofreading experience includes working on EU reports, non-fiction publications, diploma work and fiction novels. He is also a published fiction author of some repute under the anagram pseudonym Dani J. Caile. jedlica@gmail.com