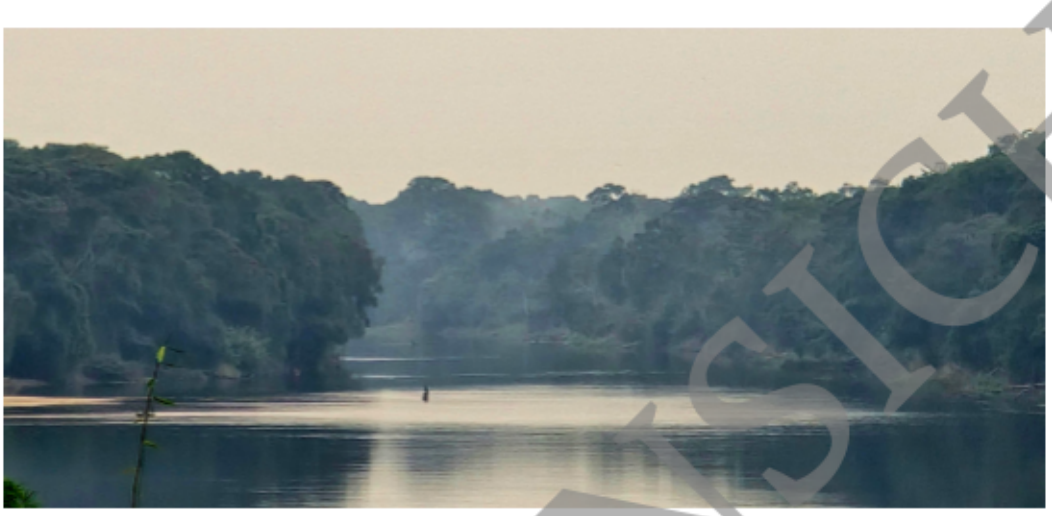
Joseph Conrads „Heart of Darkness“: Kolonialkritik oder rassistische Klischees? – Analysing key scenes of the short story

Jens-Peter Green und Jürgen Capitain



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Die Schülerinnen und Schüler untersuchen anhand ausgewählter Kernszenen, wie Joseph Conrads „Heart of Darkness“ (1899) seiner Zeit verhaftet ist, sie gleichzeitig aber transzendiert. Die Lernenden setzen sich mit europäischem Kolonialismus und Rassismus auseinander, interpretieren die Textauszüge in Hinblick auf sprachliche Mittel wie Bildsprache und Symbolismus und diskutieren die Angemessenheit der Lektüre für den Unterricht.

KOMPETENZPROFIL

Klassenstufe/Lernjahr:	11–13/7.–9. Lernjahr
Dauer:	3–10 Unterrichtsstunden + LEK
Inhalt:	Erzählung, Kolonialismus, Kolonialkritik, Rassismus, Diskriminierung, Klischees, europäische Selbstkonzepte

VORANSICHT

Auf einen Blick

1. Stunde

Thema:	The colonial mission
M 1	**Take up the white man’s burden – Analysing a poem /** ein Gedicht hinsichtlich kolonialer Rhetorik untersuchen
Hausaufgabe:	den ersten Textauszug aus „Heart of Darkness“ lesen und verstehen (M 2, *task 1*)
Benötigt:	• Whiteboard zur Projektion der Karikatur M 2 für die Hausaufgabe

2./3. Stunde

Thema:	“Heart of Darkness”: First impressions and reflections
M 2	**An iron collar on his neck … – Analysing critiques of colonialism /** die Kolonialkritik in einem Textauszug inhaltlich und sprachlich analysieren
Hausaufgabe:	vorbereitend den Text in M 3 lesen und währenddessen Unterstreichungen vornehmen
Benötigt:	• Whiteboard • M 3 für die Hausaufgabe

4./5. Stunde

Thema:	The colonial gaze
M 3	**Deeper into the heart of darkness – The colonial gaze /** die Afrikabilder hinterfragen
Hausaufgabe:	vorbereitend die Texte auf M 4 und M 5 lesen und Notizen machen
Benötigt:	• Whiteboard zur Projektion der Fotografie • M 4 und M 5 für die Hausaufgabe

6./7. Stunde

Thema:	Colonial temptations and moral and physical decay
M 4	**The making of Kurtz – A pan-European contribution /** europäische Selbstbilder infrage stellen
M 5	**Hollow at the core – The vengeance of the wilderness /** den Verfall zivilisatorischer Hemmschwellen nachzeichnen und reflektieren

VORANSICHT

M 1

Take up the white man’s burden – Analysing a poem

The following stanzas are from Rudyard Kipling’s “The White Man’s Burden”. The English author, who was born in British India, originally wrote the poem (but did not use it) for Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee in 1897. After the end of the Spanish-American War of 1898, he changed it to address the U.S. takeover of the Philippines, which was controversial in the United States. At the time, the Filipino revolutionaries were still fighting for independence.

Tasks

1. Explain how Kipling responds to the U.S. takeover of the Philippines.
2. Compare and discuss the way the native peoples are portrayed a) in the poem and b) in the cartoon.
3. Show how Kipling tries to drive his message home to his American audience.
4. Read the text “Not enemies, not criminals” and take notes on what the narrator sees and hears.

“The White Man’s Burden” by Rudyard Kipling

Take up the White Man’s burden –
Send forth the best ye[1] breed –
Go, bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives’ need;
To wait, in heavy harness[2],
On fluttered[3] folk and wild –
Your new-caught sullen[4] peoples,
Half devil and half child.
[...]
Take up the White Man’s burden –
The savage wars of peace –
Fill full the mouth of famine[5],
And bid the sickness cease;
And when your goal is nearest
(The end for others sought)
Watch sloth[6] and heathen[7] folly[8]
Bring all your hope to nought[9].
[...]



© “The White Man’s Burden (Apologies to Rudyard Kipling)” Judge, April 1, 1899

From: Kipling, Rudyard: The White Man’s Burden. McClure’s Magazine 4/1899, pp. 290–291. https://archive.org/details/sim_new-mcclures-magazine_1899-02_12_4/page/n3/mode/2up. [Last access: 19/10/2026]

1 **ye:** (archaic) you (plural) – 2 **harness:** set of straps and belt put on a horse – 3 **fluttered:** nervous, agitated, unsettled – 4 **sullen:** bad-tempered, non-responsive, uncommunicative – 5 **famine:** lack of food over a large area, causing death – 6 **sloth:** laziness – 7 **heathen:** (pejorative, dated) non-Christian – 8 **folly:** foolishness – 9 **nought:** nothing

Good to know

Person, people, peoples:
The plural of “person” is “people”, except in legal contexts where it is “persons”. “Peoples” refers to distinct ethnic groups.

VORANSICHT

The Horror! The Horror! – Kurtz's moral abyss

M 6



In spite of his weakness, Kurtz would like to remain in the jungle, together with his African followers who worship him as a kind of God. He tries to escape into the jungle but is brought back to the steamboat. As they travel downriver, Kurtz gets weaker. One day, the steamer breaks down. Marlow helps with the repair work but checks on Kurtz when he finds time.

Tasks

1. Read the text "Supreme moment of complete knowledge". Explain what happens "one evening" (l. 14).
2. Find and explain at least three examples of symbolism in this passage.
3. Examine how the narrator's point of view and language influence the reader's understanding of this passage.
4. Based on the abstracts you have studied, make notes on whether you think "Heart of Darkness" is racist and offensive.

Supreme moment of complete knowledge

He was lying on his back with closed eyes, and I withdrew quietly, but I heard him mutter, 'Live rightly, die, die ...' I listened. There was nothing more. Was he rehearsing some speech in his sleep, or was it a fragment of a phrase from some newspaper article? He had been writing for the papers and meant to do so again, 'for the furthering of my ideas. It's a duty.'

"His was an impenetrable darkness. I looked at him as you peer down at a man who is lying at the bottom of a precipice[1] where the sun never shines. But I had not much time to give him, because I was helping the engine-driver to take to pieces the leaky cylinders, to straighten a bent connecting-rod, and in other such matters. I lived in an infernal mess of rust, filings, nuts[2], bolts[3], spanners[4], hammers, ratchet-drills[5] – things I abominate[6], because I don't get on with them. I tended the little forge[7] we fortunately had aboard; I toiled[8] wearily in a wretched scrap-heap[9] – unless I had the shakes[10] too bad to stand.

"One evening coming in with a candle I was startled to hear him say a little tremulously[11], 'I am lying here in the dark waiting for death.' The light was within a foot of his eyes. I forced myself to murmur, 'Oh, nonsense!' and stood over him as if transfixed[12].

"Anything approaching the change that came over his features I have never seen before, and hope never to see again. Oh, I wasn't touched. I was fascinated. It was as though a veil[13] had been rent[14]. I saw on that ivory face the expression of sombre pride, of ruthless power, of craven[15] terror – of an intense and hopeless despair. Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation[16], and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision – he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath –

"'The horror! The horror!'

"I blew the candle out and left the cabin.

From: Conrad, Joseph: Heart of Darkness. London: Penguin 2007, ISBN 978-0141-44167-2, pp. 86–87.

1 **precipice:** *der Abgrund* – 2 **nut:** *die (Schrauben-)Mutter* – 3 **bolt:** *die Schraube (ohne Spitze)* – 4 **spanner:** *der Schraubenschlüssel* – 5 **ratchet drill:** *die Bohrratsche* – 6 **(to) abominate:** (formal) (to) hate very much – 7 **forge:** *die Schmiede* – 8 **(to) toil:** (to) work hard and long – 9 **scrap heap:** pile of broken, useless things – 10 **(to) have the shakes:** (to) shiver – 11 **tremulous:** trembling with emotion, e.g., fear – 12 **transfixed:** unable to move because you are shocked, frightened etc. – 13 **veil:** *der Schleier* – 14 **(to) rend:** (formal) (to) tear to pieces – 15 **craven:** (dated) cowardly – 16 **temptation:** *die Versuchung*

VORANSICHT

M 7

“Heart of Darkness” – A racist classic?

Here are two comments on the description of Africans in Conrad’s “Heart of Darkness”.

Tasks

1. Based on the extracts you have studied, discuss whether “Heart of Darkness” a) is racist and offensive or b) should be studied by high school students in the 21st century.
2. Choose one of the passages studied in class and respond to it in the form of a short blackout poem. Be prepared to explain what you try to express through your poem. Here you find some examples of blackout poetry: https://raabe.click/blackout-poetry. [Last access: 19/10/2026]



© Stuart C. Shapiro https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chinua_Achebe_-_Buffalo_25Sep2008_crop.jpg

Chinua Achebe (1930–2013) is an influential Nigerian author. His criticism of Conrad’s “Heart of Darkness” was originally delivered in 1975 as a lecture at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.
It is widely regarded as a landmark in postcolonial discourse.

Dehumanising Africa and Africans by Chinua Achebe (1977)

[...] Joseph Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist. That this simple truth is glossed over[1] in criticisms of his work is due to the fact that white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely unremarked. Students of *Heart of Darkness* will often tell you that Conrad is concerned not so much with Africa as with the deterioration of one European mind caused by solitude and sickness. They 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. A Conrad student informed me in Scotland that Africa is merely a setting for the disintegration of the mind of Mr. Kurtz. Which is partly the point. Africa as setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor. Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril. Can nobody see the preposterous[2] and perverse arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one petty[3] European mind? But that is not even the point. The real question is the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world. And the question is whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art. My answer is: No, it cannot.

From: Achebe, Chinua: "An Image of Africa." The Massachusetts Review 18.4 (Winter 1977), pp. 782–794, https://web.cocc.edu/cagatucci/classes/eng109/achebeonconrad.htm [Last access: 19/10/2026]

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