



PROJECT MUSE®

---

Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness": A Casebook (review)

Nic Panagopoulos

Conradiana, Volume 39, Number 1, Spring 2007, pp. 83-85 (Review)

Published by Texas Tech University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cnd.2007.0007>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/217061>

**Gene Moore, ed. *Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness":  
A Casebook*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. 279 pp.  
ISBN 0-19-515996-9**

Gene M. Moore's casebook on *Heart of Darkness* deftly navigates between the rocks of prejudiced readings and the banks of insufficiently informed responses to offer the reader its own critical journey into the heart of Conrad's controversial novella that is as stimulating as it is instructive. Indeed, what distinguishes this casebook from existing study aides is the way it respects the darkness and indeterminacy of *Heart of Darkness* while inviting us to reappraise its status as one of the grand narratives of high modernism as well as a scathing indictment of colonial practices—assumptions which are taken for granted by most Conrad scholars.

Characterized by its editor's attention to detail as well as a balanced and judicial approach, this latest anthology brings together some of the classic essays on *Heart of Darkness* such as Ian Watt's "Conrad's Impressionism" (1979) and Zdzislaw Najder's "To the End of the Night" (1983) together with new or recently unearthed material such as G. F. W. Hope's "Joseph Conrad's First Cruise on the *Nellie*" (2000) and Cyril Clemens's "A Chat with Joseph Conrad" (1966). In so doing, the casebook balances erudite criticism by seasoned experts with more relaxed pieces written by people who had met Conrad but were not literary scholars, producing a variety of styles and perspectives rarely found in such collections.

Another characteristic of this casebook is the way it includes essays from a wide spectrum of theoretical approaches ranging from postcolonialism to reader-response criticism and radical feminism to polite after-dinner banter, deliberately setting the different perspectives in fruitful interplay or open antagonism with one another, depending on how one looks at it. Thus, the penultimate essay in the casebook, David Denby's "Jungle Fever" (1995), can be read as an answer to some of the more polemical pieces that make no bones about questioning Conrad's achievement in the novella such as Nina Pelikan Strauss's "The Exclusion of the Intended from Secret Sharing in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" (1987) or Rino Zhuwarara's "*Heart of Darkness* Revisited: The African Response" (1994). Moore himself wisely avoids being drawn into the fray by privileging any single perspective: all voices are heard and respected, and the reader is encouraged to judge for him or herself just what all the fuss is about.

The inclusion of Max Beerbohm's well-known parody of Conrad's style entitled "The Feast" (1912) is indicative of the editor's impish (one is tempted to say iconoclastic) sense of humor as it clearly reveals something Conrad devotees, hypnotized by the "great man's" authority, are often keen to overlook: the accomplishment is more stylistic than philosophical, and what we take for essence is quite often merely form. If one hasn't read Beerbohm's hilarious and sobering spoof, this is a good opportunity to do so. However, if the last essay in the casebook by Cyril Clemens represents in any way an authentic record of a chat with Joseph Conrad, as its title claims, then it goes a long way to explaining why we are still talking about the author of *Heart of Darkness* a century or so later, as it presents Conrad quoting verbatim whole pages from books that he had read from memory: a remarkable feat by any standards and one which explains how so many different authors and texts find themselves embedded within Conrad's own work.

The introduction to the casebook traces the history of the novella's reception by readers and scholars alike while setting out the basic critical approaches that have been applied to *Heart of Darkness* since F. R. Leavis admitted Conrad to the "great tradition" in 1948. Beginning with the psychological criticism that was popular in the 1950s and arriving at the New Historicism that is fashionable today, Moore detects a pattern in Conrad studies in which the "cutting edge of literary criticism seems to swing (like Poe's fatal pendulum) between formal and cultural-historical approaches every twenty years or so," the implication being that if one is not following the swing, one risks either becoming history or getting deconstructed (7).

In the introduction, Moore does not shy away from confronting one of the most contentious issues surrounding *Heart of Darkness*: its representation of Africans and Africa. Although he does not include Chinua Achebe's famous attack on Conrad for being a "bloody racist" in "An Image of Africa" (1977), Moore does concede that this essay "changed the very nature of Conrad studies" by outlawing once and for all the notion that Africa does not itself deserve attention as a cultural or historical entity, but merely serves as "an exotic backdrop for more important or 'universal' self-confrontations" in the tale (6). As Moore politely points out, the terms *racist* and *racism* were unknown during Conrad's lifetime, so it may not be altogether paradoxical that Conrad could object to what, in "Geography and Some Explorers," he called "the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience" while at the same time failing "to deplore a prejudice that was as yet nameless in both English and French" (7).

The texts in the casebook have been chosen with great care and ordered in such a way as to give a balanced and comprehensive overview of the subject as well as making for interesting reading. Thus, the casebook begins with *Heart of Darkness's* companion piece, "An Outpost of Progress," which reflects Conrad's views on Europe's colonial venture in Africa even more unambiguously than they may have appeared to some readers of *Heart of Darkness*. Moore places this piece first to suggest that the two works need to be read in conjunction, if we are to fully understand the lessons that Conrad's Congo experience taught him. Next comes what is perhaps the flagship of the casebook, Patrick Brantlinger's "Victorians and Africans: The Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent" (1985)—a brilliant forty-five-page essay analyzing Victorian attitudes to the continent and peoples of Africa through an examination of such phenomena as social Darwinism, humanitarianism, as well as the slave trade and abolitionism. After this impressive demonstration of how New Historicism can advantageously contextualize a text like *Heart of Darkness*, Moore places a piece which is remarkably similar in tone, yet written three quarters of a century earlier by someone we would not immediately associate with Conrad studies: Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

The rhetorically powerful and well-informed extract from Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Crime of the Congo* brings home the fact that we are not the first people in history to ask crucial ethical questions regarding the true nature of the colonial enterprise and the so-called project of spreading the light of civilization to the dark corners of the globe—questions that are as relevant today as they have always been, it seems. As Moore points out in the end of his introduction, "The heart of Conrad's darkness lies not only in Africa or in ancient London, but also in the bosom of the beholder, male or female, black or white" (7). Reading the casebook, as reading *Heart of Darkness*, therefore, one becomes very wary of using the verb *to enlighten*, for one may merely be projecting onto others what one refuses to acknowledge in oneself: this is an acquisition that more than justifies the attention paid to these texts.

NIC PANAGOPOULOS

*University of Athens*