

Why should we read "Heart of Darkness"? A response to J.Hillis Miller.

After having read some responses on Conrad's Heart of Darkness, I found J. Hillis Miller's one particularly interesting. Undoubtedly critics change our understanding of a text, but asking whether you should read or not Conrad's novel is a very radical way to question the reader (incidentally I must admit it echoes some doubts deeply buried in my unconscious). Furthermore, this key question raised by a praised literary critic, is certainly something worth studying. Thinking of it, *a posteriori*, it proves that we, and especially I, might probably have not. That's the risky thesis I will try to support in the following lines.

At first I will address the paradox pointed by Miller: To decide if a work is worth reading with full knowledge... we must first read it! Is it reasonable then to ask the question?

Then, Miller notices that "Heart of Darkness" suffered many prosecutions and trials, and that it should be taken as a literary work and no other genre. Hence I will scrutinize some literary features he emphasizes in the novel.

Eventually Miller evokes Conrad's amazing descriptive skills, I will express my views about his creativity and his consequent lack of commitment.

Should the question be asked? ...I really wonder: In the beginning of his response, Miller himself raises a paradox stating that "It is impossible to authoritatively decide whether or not we should read [it] without reading it." and he even adds "Nothing can be more problematic than

professor of literature deciding collectively whether we should read the [novel]." ¹ The insistence to challenge his own thesis, cannot be incidental, and rhetorically speaking is for me a way to shoot in his own foot. If we do have to read a book to make ones opinion (which I really believe) what is the use of critics then. Nobody can "authoritatively" decide for us, where is our free will then? But some enlightened people can at least give us some advices. Along the same lines, another important issue, Miller doesn't mention, is that "Heart of darkness' having already been read by an amazing number of students and above all by many scholars ² for more than a century, the question comes very late.

Praised since the beginning, more as a popular Adventure Novella, than an anti-imperialist or anti-colonialist claim (which is not surprising, assuming the historical context and common beliefs in Europe at that time), Heart of Darkness has been discussed a lot, by very eminent people throughout the 20th century. Along with Achebe, I think mainly scholars may be held responsible for his contemporary success, and that students are the largest part of its audience. But either advised or asked to read it, should we read it as a literature work?

Miller lists some devices Conrad uses in his novel. Obviously there are two narrators: After some introductory pages by a first narrator, Marlowe introduces himself in a quite visionary way, warning not only his mates but the potential readers as well: "I don't want to bother you much with what happened to me personally" (p7). Then ignorant of the possible answers, he monopolizes

¹ Somewhat oblivious of his first legitimate interrogation, he ends his well-argued essay with this peremptory affirmation: "there is an obligation to do so"

² Its interesting to check on Google that Joyce's Ulysses , for example, is cited 3 times more than Conrad's Heart of Darkness BUT that if the keyword "criticism" is added Conrad's then appears to 50% more present!

the speech until the end of the novel³. I doubt if somebody, say I for example, writes a text with two (or even more) narrators it will be sufficient to classify his work as a literary work.

The use or abuse of "similes", "as" and "like"⁴ as advocated by Miller, is, to say the least, not so obvious in Conrad's work. Not as obvious whatever, as the very often discussed plethora of adjectives. The presence of similes, is a light argument to make the novel a literary piece of Art. For example, during the first encounters of black people (14&15), moments that can legitimately be considered as very important while telling the story of a travel through the heart of Africa, "like" appears only twice within the two pages. Though less enthusiastic than Miller when he speaks about "episodes with extreme vividness [] brought by Conrad's remarkable descriptive power", I acknowledge some sense of description and details, as displayed for example in his flight of lyricism (16): "They were called criminals and the outraged law like the bursting shells had come to them an insoluble mystery from the sea. Behind this raw matter one of the reclaimed, the product of new forces, strolled despondently carrying a rifle by its middle. He had a uniform jacket with one button off and seeing a white man on the path hoisted his weapon to his shoulder with alacrity". Shouldn't we agree with Conrad himself then, and say his novel is only, I quote "some sordid farce acted in front of a sinister black-cloth"?

Despite his qualities and his technical appeal to literary devices⁵, Conrad sometimes seem to lack of inspiration. Miller says that one of the most important literary device used is "that displacement from Conrad to two imaginary narrators [that] invites the reading as literature" To say it in a more mundane way, Conrad chose a Frame narrative form for his story. This type of

³ It's interesting to notice that Kurtz the second, if not the most important character, only utters two words

⁴ If the use of "like" was a criteria for literary works, every American people under 25 would be a Nobel prize!

⁵ To put things into perspective, Joyce only 10 years later made real literary inventions. More recently, Raymond Queneau's Master pieces don't rely on any literary device but almost every page conceals a genuine and hitherto unseen literary creation.

narration, far from being original was rather a convention for genre stories in the 19th century. Furthermore the ground had already been prepared as early as in the 14th century: Boccaccio's Decameron (1353) and Chaucer's Canterbury Tales (c.1390), and later on Mary Shelley's Frankenstein (1818) and Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights (1847) to name only a few. Besides his "remarkable descriptive power" Conrad is also capable of very poor similes as when he describes black people: "they had faces like grotesque", "a lot of people, mostly black and naked moved about like ants" or Kurtz's agony: "his life running swiftly out [as the brown current...towards the sea]". Moreover, his desperate efforts to loop the loop, to echo the very dark and artificial atmosphere of the opening scene on the Thames with an even more artificially solemn and displaced last sentence of the novel: "into the heart of an immense darkness" are not ringing true to anybody, and especially to me.

There's also a permanent and stubborn refusal (failure?) to describe Africa or Africans. Marlowe bitterly admits (14): "Nowhere did we stop long enough to get a particularized impression, but the general of vague and oppressive wonder grew upon me". "Nowhere", "vague", "wonder", "no particular impression" ...can one be more evasive in a single sentence. Moreover, throughout the novel, the numerous adjectives used to describe are almost systematically negative or with a privative prefix. This stubbornness is no more a literary device but an almost systematic rope that he uses to (non) depict the local places and characters. More precisely Conrad often denies sensorial experience or simply comprehension: "unsound"(67), "incomprehensible"(14),(16), "inscrutable"(61)," unspeakable"(62)," impenetrable"(67)," indefinable" (67), ...

Eventually there may be nothing to speak of!: "Nothing happened", "nothing could happen" (14), "they were nothing" (17), "stare at nothing"(17), "there was nothing, there was nothing"(28)

Miller also sings some prayers about the description of the indescribable (?): In an apex of his powerful skill, Conrad tries to qualify the "thing", the "it" he mentions so many times and failed again. "it" is actually deaf and mute⁶: "*this* was great, expectant, mute [...] *that thing* that couldn't talk and perhaps was deaf as well"(56). One page later he confesses with insistence that "it is impossible, it is impossible to convey the life sensation of any given epoch". Which I easily acknowledge.

To me, this non commitment in the description of important protagonists of the story, finally betrays Conrad's lack of political commitment. In the novel he never really takes sides of the anti-Imperialists⁷ . He only describes some vague aftermath of its excesses. For example, concerning the most disputable of his character Mr Kurtz: he makes it clear "You can't judge Mr Kurtz" (56).

Conrad had written to his first publisher Blackwood before the first instalment of the novella and confessed that the idea behind the scene was "the criminality of inefficiency and pure selfishness when tackling the civilizing work in Africa". How committee to qualify colonialism and imperialism of "civilizing work" and to only notice the inefficiency of the process!

Let's conclude, as Miller did, in going even further beyond our first statements and questions. We tried to answer that maybe we shouldn't have read Conrad's Heart of Darkness, but given his proven "unspeakable" and "inscrutable" object, some may claim that it was (at least) a challenge to write it.

⁶ Fortunately 'it' doesn't seem to be blind as well. But p15, as if there were not enough reference to darkness , when there is sunlight it's a "blinding" one

⁷ In his personal life, his participation in the anti-colonialist movement was very discrete unlike some of his fellow writers