Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* has been celebrated as a revolutionary condemnation of the Belgian Congo, the book itself is very disappointing for readers expecting a work of activist literature. *Heart of Darkness* is a critique of colonialism which still forwards colonialist tropes. It is very hard to believe that Conrad is trying to make a point about the mistreatment of Africans when the main argument of the novel seems to be ‘avoid Africa or else.’ As Chinua Achebe notes in his essay, “An Image of Africa: Racism in *Heart of Darkness,*” the novella’s “exploration of the minds of the European characters” as they deteriorate when exposed to the “wildness” of Africa “is often penetrating and full of insight” (Achebe 5), but Conrad portrays the Africans as “savages” (Conrad 4, 12, 14, 26, 35, 37, 41, 53). Achebe goes so far as to accuse Conrad of being a “thoroughgoing racist” (Achebe 5), and his argument is entirely persuasive. Achebe sets the stage for his denouncement of Conrad as a racist with quotations from *Heart of Darkness*, and substantiates the ties to Conrad’s personal views using information about Conrad’s mental capabilities and personal history. However, after discussing the novel’s contribution to systemic racism and providing ample evidence that the book would be a useful teaching tool for uncovering entrenched prejudice, Achebe comes to the strange conclusion that the solution is to stop studying the book at all.

Achebe begins to illuminate Conrad’s racism with evidence from *Heart of Darkness* itself. In his famous novella, Conrad portrays Africa as “the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization” (Achebe 1-2). Conrad completely overlooks even the most obvious signs of developed culture that anyone traveling down the Congo at the
time Conrad and the narrator Marlow did would have seen. Achebe cites the art historian Frank Willett on how one mask from the Fang people (who would have been on Marlow and Conrad’s way down the Congo) started “the revolution of twentieth century art” in Europe. Achebe describes the Fang as “among the greatest masters of the sculptured form” (Achebe 7). With this contextual knowledge about the Congo, it seems preposterous that Conrad chose to portray the people who lived there as “rudimentary souls” (Conrad 46) occupied only by a “black and incomprehensible frenzy” (Conrad 32) with no language beyond “a violent babble of uncouth sounds” (Conrad 16) and no intelligible cultural practices. Achebe goes on to explain how *Heart of Darkness* reveals Conrad’s true qualms about Africa. He is not bothered by the differences between himself and the natives but by the similarities. The book’s narrator, Marlow, is upset that his journey has shaken his certainty of Europe’s superiority by showing him its similarities to Africa. He is disturbed by the fact that the Thames river and England as an extension “has been one of the dark places of the earth” (Conrad 3) like he believes the Congo still is. Later, Marlow even states that “the worst of it” was the “suspicion of [the natives] not being inhuman” (Conrad 32). This implies that Marlow looks down on the natives and expected them to be animal-like and inferior to Europeans, and is alarmed by the “distant kinship” (Conrad 46) he feels to the Africans. Furthermore, Marlow’s assertion that traveling down the Congo was like “traveling in the night of first ages… ages that are gone… leaving … no memories” (Conrad 32) is quite close to the pervasive and harmful colonialist trope that Africa has no history or literature, the “memories” of a developed culture.
Alone, this would not be enough evidence to criticize Conrad himself, for *Heart of Darkness* is a fictional work. However, Achebe talks not just about the novella’s evidence of racism but about Conrad’s own psychology and literary prowess, demonstrating that the opinions in his famous book are more than just those of the characters. Every work of fiction makes an argument, either by bolstering old tropes or championing new ways of looking at the world, and Conrad, being “one of the greatest stylists of modern fiction” (Achebe 1), was intelligent enough to know that. Achebe wisely concedes that it is possible Conrad was holding up the “moral universe” of *Heart of Darkness* (Achebe 4) to irony and criticism, for he even shielded himself from it behind two layers of narrator. However, Achebe rebukes this by pointing out that Conrad “neglects to hint however subtly or tentatively at an alternative frame of reference by which we may judge the actions and opinions of his characters” and doing so “would not have been beyond Conrad’s power… if he had thought it necessary” (Achebe 4). This is not the only way Achebe uses Conrad’s own writing talent to condemn him: “When a writer” as good as Conrad “while pretending to record scenes, incidents, and their impact is in reality… inducing hypnotic stupor in his readers through a bombardment of emotive words and other forms of trickery much more has to be at stake than stylistic felicity” (Achebe 2). Achebe is implying that if Conrad is as good as scholars think he is, then the racist motifs he laces through *Heart of Darkness* are a reflection of his true goal in writing the novella. Achebe mentions that this “hypnotic” style would normally alert readers to possible subversion. However, by choosing Africa as his subject, Conrad has put himself in the role of “purveyor of comforting myths” (Achebe 2), feeding into his western readers’ existing prejudices against Africa.
Additionally, Achebe calls attention to Conrad’s strange racial fixations, which are evidenced not just in *Heart of Darkness* but in his personal journals. Achebe cites two contrasting personal writings, one which characterizes a large black man Conrad met in Haiti as animal-like using very offensive language, and Conrad’s account of the first Englishmen he saw in England, glamorizing his “white calves” which “twinkled sturdily” with a “rich tone of young ivory” (Conrad as cited on Achebe 5). When compared with a sample from *Heart of Darkness*, it is clear that the motif of black versus white and their various connotations present in the novella stems from Conrad’s own life: “A black figure stood up… on long black legs, waving long black arms” (Conrad 60). Furthermore, Conrad is obsessed with Africans staying in their ‘place.’ Marlow, the narrator of Conrad’s book, is appalled by a “savage” working on his boat, who he states looks like a “dog in a parody of breeches… walking on its hind legs” and “ought to have been clapping his hands and stamping his feet on the bank” (Conrad 33). Although I believe Achebe underestimates the degree to which Conrad’s excessive racial awareness was a product of the time in which he lived and quite normal for westerners at the height of the backlash to the anti-slavery and anti-colonial movements, his argument is still perfectly legitimate -- Conrad is definitely racist.

The one flaw in Achebe’s argument is his claim that *Heart of Darkness* should not be taught in today’s classrooms at all. His reasons for removing it from all syllabi better corroborate the opinion that it should be used to teach the subtle forms that oppression can take, especially in the hands of a creative master like Conrad. Because *Heart of Darkness* is “read and taught and constantly evaluated by serious academics” and “a leading Conrad scholar has numbered it ‘among the half-dozen greatest short novels in
the English language”” (Achebe 1) it’s racist messages are still influential today. Since “white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking,” Conrad’s racism is simply “glossed over in criticisms of his work” (Achebe 5), other than Achebe’s essay. This turns into a vicious cycle where Conrad’s “peculiar gifts” help perpetuate a racist image of Africa which is still “dominant… in the Western imagination” (Achebe 7). Although it can be argued that “Africa is merely a setting for the disintegration of the mind of Mr. Kurtz,” this notion completely “eliminates the African as human factor” (Achebe 5), reducing an entire continent full of diverse human societies to a “prop… for the break-up of one petty European mind” (Achebe 5). It has also been contested that since Heart of Darkness is fictional, it does not have a direct connection to the real world problems stemming from systemic racism. But this is not a valid assumption, for Heart of Darkness is “a book which parades in the most vulgar fashion prejudices and insults from which a section of mankind has suffered untold agonies and atrocities in the past and continues to do so in many ways and many places today” (Achebe 6). This forceful denunciation of Conrad’s work leaves no room for doubt about the direct impact the extremely frequent teaching of the novella has on today’s society. However, it is at this point where Achebe draws the wrong conclusion. He asserts that the best thing to do to eliminate the negative impact of the book is to stop teaching it entirely, when he himself has already made a good case for teaching it as a lesson on the reflexive nature of entrenched societal prejudices, and how well written texts can be more damaging vehicles of oppression than other media.

Although there is a lot of racism to be found in Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, it is not immediately clear whether or not Conrad himself shares the ideas of
his narrator, Marlow. Chinua Achebe proves that Conrad was indeed prejudiced against Africans by connecting the story of Marlow to Conrad’s own journey down the Congo, and calling attention to the similarities between the racist motifs in the novella and the racial fixations in Conrad’s personal writing. Achebe finishes his essay with a bang, denouncing the book further for its widespread use in the classroom, and arguing that the reading of *Heart of Darkness* should be stopped completely even as he demonstrates its value as a tool to teach about the subtleties of oppression. After reading Achebe’s critique, it is my belief that *Heart of Darkness* should still be taught but in conjunction with Achebe’s essay and discussion of white fragility to curb the likely reflexive backlash against some of Achebe’s harsher points from white students. The lessons in Achebe’s essay are quite useful, but they are better understood after reading the novel he criticizes. Additionally, *Heart of Darkness* still remains effective for its intended purpose: to teach students about the construction of great works of fiction. However, it is most important to recognize that even the work of well meaning, talented people like Conrad can have a serious negative impact on oppressed peoples. Renowned comics often joke about rape and other forms of violence targeting women to get a laugh from their male audiences, unaware that their actions are helping to sustain a violent, sexist subculture, and Conrad’s appeals to the pervasive racism in western culture are just as harmful to a significant portion of mankind.

Works Cited:
