RESEARCH ARTICLE

Crossing Shadows: Conrad, Said, and the Journey Between Empire and Exile

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Abstract

Joseph Conrad and Edward Said represent two contrasting intellectual movements—one a Western writer moving southwards into the colonial world, the other an Eastern scholar moving westwards to deconstruct colonial discourse. Conrad's Heart of Darkness critiques imperialism yet remains bound within a Eurocentric gaze, portraying Africa as the silent "Other." In contrast, Said's Orientalism exposes the ideological structures that sustain such representations, positioning him as both a critic and a product of Western academia. This article explores their intellectual trajectories, the intersections of exile and identity in their works, and the lasting impact of Said's critique on Conrad's legacy.

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Introduction

Joseph Conrad and Edward Said stand as two intellectual figures whose trajectories intersect with the vast and complex history of colonialism and its critique. Conrad, a Polish-born writer who mastered the English language and became a pillar of British literature, ventured "southwards" into the imperial world—both physically through his maritime journeys and intellectually through his fiction, particularly *Heart of Darkness* (1899). His work exposed the moral and psychological dilemmas of imperialism, yet it remained tethered to the Eurocentric perspective that defined the colonized as distant, unknowable, and voiceless. On the other hand, Edward Said, a Palestinian scholar who moved "westwards" into American academia, turned a critical lens toward this colonial worldview. His seminal work, *Orientalism* (1978), systematically deconstructed the ways in which the West had framed the East as an exotic and inferior "Other," demonstrating how these narratives were entrenched in literature, academia, and political discourse.

This article explores the intellectual movements of Conrad and Said—one moving toward the heart of empire, the other interrogating it from within. Despite their differences, both men engaged with the theme of displacement: Conrad as a writer in exile, caught between cultures and languages, and Said as a scholar who personally experienced the dispossession of Palestine. While Conrad's fiction reflects an ambivalent relationship with colonialism, portraying it as both a corrupting force and a civilizing necessity, Said's critique dismantles the ideological underpinnings that allowed such

contradictions to persist. By examining *Heart of Darkness* through Said's postcolonial framework, this article will analyze how Conrad's depiction of Africa and its people aligns with, yet also problematizes, the colonial discourse that Said critiques.

The tension between these two figures has been the subject of extensive academic debate. Chinua Achebe's influential essay *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's "Heart of Darkness"* famously condemned Conrad as "a bloody racist" for his dehumanizing portrayal of Africans (Achebe 788). Said, while recognizing Conrad's criticisms of empire, similarly noted that *Heart of Darkness* ultimately "reaffirms the practice of imperialism" by rendering the colonized world as a site of chaos that necessitates European intervention (Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 25). At the same time, Said's own position within Western academia has been subject to scrutiny—his work, while exposing Orientalist misrepresentations, remains deeply embedded in the very institutions he critiques.

Scholars have debated whether Conrad's critique of colonialism is truly subversive or whether it merely reproduces imperialist anxieties. Patrick Brantlinger argues that *Heart of Darkness* exemplifies the "imperial Gothic," a genre that reflects both a fear of and fascination with the colonial periphery (Brantlinger 198). Similarly, Homi Bhabha's concept of mimicry—where the colonized both imitates and disrupts the colonizer's authority—offers a useful lens for understanding Conrad's ambivalent portrayal of European and African identities (*The Location of Culture* 86). Meanwhile, Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* provides a powerful counterpoint to Conrad's depiction of Africa, arguing that colonial narratives systematically strip the colonized of agency and voice (Fanon 14).

This study argues that the relationship between Conrad and Said is not simply one of opposition but of complex entanglement. Conrad's narratives, while critiquing colonial brutality, still operate within an imperial epistemology, whereas Said's critique, though revolutionary, emerges from within the Western intellectual tradition. Their respective journeys—Conrad moving southward into the colonial world and Said moving westward into the academic elite—mirror the broader tensions of postcolonial discourse: the struggle to navigate between complicity and resistance, critique and inheritance. By revisiting *Heart of Darkness* through Said's lens, this article seeks to illuminate the persistent shadows of colonial discourse in literature and the evolving nature of intellectual exile in the modern world.

Postcolonial Critique of Conrad through Said: Reassessing Heart of Darkness

Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness (1899) has long occupied a central place in debates about colonial representation, imperial ideology, and racial discourse. While often read as an indictment of European imperialism, the novel has also been criticized for its dehumanizing portrayal of Africa and its people. One of the most influential critiques comes from Chinua Achebe, who argues that Conrad's novel is steeped in racist ideology, reducing Africa to a "metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity" (Achebe 788). Edward Said's Orientalism (1978) provides a broader theoretical framework for understanding this dynamic, demonstrating how Western literature and scholarship have historically constructed the non-Western world as an inferior, exotic, and voiceless Other. Through Said's lens, Heart of Darkness can be examined not merely as a critique of imperial violence but as a text deeply embedded in the colonial discourse it ostensibly condemns.

a. Africa as the Silent "Other"

One of Said's key arguments in Orientalism is that Western knowledge about the East (and, by extension, Africa) has never been neutral. Instead, it has been produced through a discourse that constructs the non-Western world as an object of European control, curiosity, and fear. In Heart of Darkness, Africa is presented not as a real, lived space with its own cultures, histories, and voices, but as a backdrop for European existential crises. Conrad's protagonist, Marlow, repeatedly describes the African landscape in terms of mystery, darkness, and incomprehensibility. The continent is depicted as an empty void, "a place of darkness" (Conrad 10), and its inhabitants are relegated to an anonymous, primitive mass, described in animalistic terms:

- "A haze rested on the low shores that ran out to sea in vanishing flatness. There was a touch of insanity in the proceeding, a touch of insanity in the setting itself" (Conrad 14).

Such descriptions reinforce the idea, central to Said's Orientalism, that non-European spaces exist only in relation to European perception. Africa is not given independent existence but is instead positioned as a mysterious "Other" against which European identity is defined. As Said notes, "the Orient was not (and is not) a free subject of thought or action. It was, rather, a set of references, a congeries of characteristics, that seemed to arise naturally from the Orient's alleged opposition to the West" (Said, Orientalism 67). Similarly, in Conrad's novel, Africa functions as an amorphous, unknowable void that heightens the European characters' psychological turmoil but does not possess any autonomous meaning.

a. Achebe's Critique: Conrad as a "Bloody Racist"

Chinua Achebe's seminal essay, An Image of Africa (1977), builds upon this critique by arguing that Heart of Darkness is not merely a Eurocentric novel but an outright racist one. Achebe points out that Conrad strips Africans of their humanity, reducing them to "limbs and rolling eyes" (Achebe 788). They are never allowed to speak for themselves, and when they do appear, they are either shrieking in incomprehensible agony or reduced to a grotesque caricature of servitude. Achebe famously condemns Conrad as "a bloody racist," accusing him of using Africa merely as a stage for European introspection while denying its people any narrative agency (Achebe 788).

Said's framework helps to contextualize Achebe's critique by explaining why such portrayals are not accidental but part of a larger tradition in Western literature. Orientalism argues that European authors and scholars have historically defined non-European peoples through essentialist stereotypes that serve the interests of empire. The Africa of Heart of Darkness is a textbook example of this colonial gaze: it is primitive, chaotic, and speechless, serving only as a foil for European moral and psychological dilemmas. Even as Conrad critiques the horrors of imperial conquest, he does so from within the same epistemological framework that justifies colonial rule.

b. Conrad's Ambivalence: Critique or Reaffirmation of Empire?

One of the complexities of Heart of Darkness is that it simultaneously condemns and reinforces imperial ideology. Marlow's journey exposes the brutality and greed of European colonial enterprises, particularly through the character of Kurtz, whose descent into madness reveals the moral bankruptcy of imperialism. Yet, even as the novel critiques the violence of empire, it never seriously entertains the possibility of African agency or resistance. In Culture and Imperialism, Said acknowledges that Conrad "allows one to realize how empires impose themselves upon the non-European world, but he stops short of imagining a world without imperialism" (Said, Culture and Imperialism 24). In other words, while Heart of Darkness highlights the corruption of European expansion, it does not offer a meaningful alternative beyond disillusionment and existential despair.

This ambivalence is what makes Conrad's work so enduring yet so problematic. As Patrick Brantlinger argues, Heart of Darkness belongs to the "imperial Gothic" tradition, in which empire is portrayed as both a terrifying abyss and a necessary burden (Brantlinger 192). This duality reflects the anxieties of late Victorian imperialism, where increasing awareness of colonial atrocities coexisted with the belief in Britain's civilizing mission. Said's critique extends this argument by demonstrating how Conrad's novel, despite its anti-imperial themes, still operates within the ideological structures of empire. Even in its most damning moments, Heart of Darkness ultimately centers European experiences and anxieties, rather than those of the colonized.

When read through Said's Orientalism, Heart of Darkness emerges not just as a critique of imperialism but as a product of the very discourse it seeks to challenge. Conrad's Africa is not a real place but a projection of European fears and fantasies, reinforcing the colonial idea that non-European spaces exist only in relation to Western perception. Achebe's critique further underscores this point, arguing that the novel's portrayal of Africans as voiceless savages is not incidental but central to its narrative structure.

At the same time, Conrad's ambivalence—his simultaneous condemnation and reproduction of colonial ideology—reflects the broader tensions within Western literature of the period. As Said notes, imperialism was not just a political system but a "way of thinking" that shaped the very foundations of European culture (Said, Culture and Imperialism 9). In this sense, Heart of Darkness serves as both an artifact of and a commentary on the colonial imagination. Its continued presence in literary studies today demands that we engage with it critically, not just as a historical text but as a lens through which to understand the enduring impact of imperial discourse.

Cross-Cultural Intellectual Journeys: Conrad and Said Between Exile and Empire

The intellectual trajectories of Joseph Conrad and Edward Said are marked by displacement, exile, and cultural negotiation. Both men, though separated by nearly a century, navigated the intersections of migration, colonial histories, and intellectual production in ways that shaped their literary and critical legacies. Conrad, born Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski in Poland (then under Russian control), relocated to France and later to England, where he adopted English as his literary language and became a key figure in British literature. His works, including Heart of Darkness (1899), grapple with themes of dislocation, imperialism, and moral ambiguity. Edward Said, a Palestinian intellectual exiled from his homeland, moved to the United States, where he became one of the most influential postcolonial theorists. His seminal works, Orientalism (1978) and Culture and Imperialism

(1994), challenged the dominant Western narratives that had long justified empire.

While Conrad's movement took him from a colonized Eastern European identity into the core of British imperial culture, Said's journey moved in the opposite direction—from a colonial periphery into the heart of American academia. Despite their different ideological positions, both men engaged with questions of exile, representation, and the power of language in shaping identity. This article explores how their migrations informed their intellectual legacies, highlighting Conrad's struggle with belonging as an exiled European and Said's critique of Western discourses on exile and representation.

a. Conrad: From Stateless Exile to British Imperial Narrator

Joseph Conrad's migration was shaped by the turbulence of 19th-century European geopolitics. Born in what is now Ukraine, he was orphaned early due to Russian repression of Polish nationalism. His father, a staunch Polish nationalist, was exiled to Siberia, and Conrad inherited a deep sense of displacement. His early life as a sailor led him across imperial territories, from Africa to the Far East, giving him firsthand exposure to the realities of European colonial expansion. When he eventually settled in England and began writing in English, his status as an "outsider within" shaped his literary vision.

Conrad's ambivalence toward empire and exile permeates his fiction. His characters—particularly Marlow in Heart of Darkness and Lord Jim in Lord Jim (1900)—struggle with their positions in the colonial world, often expressing a simultaneous critique of and complicity in imperial structures. Conrad's relationship with empire was complex: he exposed its brutal contradictions yet also reflected the Eurocentric anxieties of his time. Scholars such as Homi Bhabha have argued that Conrad's narratives often embody a "colonial unsettlement," where the stability of European superiority is questioned but never entirely dismantled (Bhabha 87).

Yet, as Edward Said points out, Conrad ultimately could not imagine a world beyond empire:

- "Conrad's tragic limitation is that even though he could see that the system was doomed, he could not envisage a fully realized alternative to it" (Said, Culture and Imperialism 25).

This limitation stemmed, in part, from Conrad's own precarious identity. As an immigrant writing in his third language, he sought acceptance in British literary circles while simultaneously revealing the moral crises underlying imperial rule. His migration, then, was not just geographical but also linguistic and cultural, positioning him both inside and outside the British imperial imagination.

b. Said: Exile as Intellectual Position

In contrast to Conrad's movement into the literary and cultural center of British Empire, Edward Said's migration took him into the heart of Western academic institutions, from colonial Palestine to elite American universities. Born in Jerusalem in 1935, Said was displaced by the formation of Israel and lived much of his life as an exile. This personal history profoundly influenced his intellectual work, leading him to challenge the ways in which the West represented and controlled narratives about the East.

Unlike Conrad, who sought literary belonging in England, Said embraced exile as an intellectual stance. He saw displacement not as a limitation but as a unique vantage point that allowed him to critique dominant cultural narratives. In Reflections on Exile (2000), he writes:

- "Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home" (Said, Reflections on Exile 173).

This idea of the "unhealable rift" is crucial to understanding Said's work. Unlike Conrad, who used exile to enter the literary establishment, Said used it to deconstruct that establishment's assumptions about culture, power, and representation. His critique of Orientalism exposed how Western scholarship had systematically misrepresented the East, portraying it as an exotic, backward, and passive space to be defined by the West.

While Conrad's migration led him to adopt English as a means of literary survival, Said's exile positioned him to analyze how language itself functioned as a tool of empire. He challenged the way narratives of migration, nationalism, and belonging were constructed, particularly in relation to the Palestinian experience. His advocacy for Palestinian self-determination, combined with his critique of Western imperial knowledge, positioned him as both a theorist and an activist, deeply engaged with the legacies of colonial displacement.

c. Exile and the Question of Representation

Both Conrad and Said wrestled with the question of how to represent the "Other"—but from very different perspectives.

Conrad, as a European outsider navigating the British literary world, depicted empire's moral crises but largely through the eyes of European protagonists. His representations of non-European spaces and people, as Said and Achebe argue, remained within the colonial framework, reinforcing the idea that Africa and its inhabitants were unknowable and voiceless.

Said, however, sought to dismantle this epistemological structure. He argued that Conrad, like many European writers, depicted non-European peoples as passive and speechless, a reflection of how empire itself functioned. In Culture and Imperialism, he critiques Heart of Darkness for presenting Africa as a "blank space" upon which European anxieties are projected (Said, Culture and Imperialism 19). Said's own work sought to give voice to those historically marginalized by imperial narratives, particularly Palestinians, whose stories had been systematically erased or distorted by Western discourse.

This contrast underscores the broader tension between exile and representation. Conrad's exile led him to seek literary legitimacy within empire, shaping his ambivalent critique of colonialism. Said's exile, in contrast, allowed him to challenge empire's very foundations, turning displacement into a radical intellectual position. Their intellectual legacies, then, are shaped not just by their personal migrations but by the larger structures of colonial power they navigated—Conrad from within, Said from without.

The migrations of Conrad and Said reveal the dual nature of exile: it can be a source of creative and intellectual energy, but it also reflects the violent histories of colonial displacement. Conrad, a European who found literary success in Britain, used exile to critique empire's hypocrisies while still working within its frameworks. Said, a Palestinian exile in America, used displacement as a lens to expose how empire justified itself through cultural narratives.

Despite their different perspectives, both figures illuminate how migration shapes intellectual thought. Conrad's work remains a crucial text for understanding imperial anxieties, while Said's critique continues to challenge how histories of exile, nationalism, and colonialism are represented. Their journeys—one moving into the heart of empire, the other resisting it from within—offer profound insights into the ongoing legacies of colonial displacement and intellectual exile.

Decolonizing the Western Canon: Edward Said's Critique of Conrad and the Reassessment of Literature

a. The Challenge of Decolonizing Literature

The Western literary canon has long been dominated by works that reflect and reinforce the ideologies of empire, colonialism, and Eurocentrism. Many of these texts—written during or in the aftermath of colonial expansion—offer narratives that, either explicitly or implicitly, justify the dominance of the West over the non-Western world. One such text is Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness (1899), a novel that, despite its anti-imperial undertones, continues to be a cornerstone of literary curricula in the West.

Edward Said's critique of Conrad, particularly in Orientalism (1978) and Culture and Imperialism (1994), represents a broader movement in literary studies aimed at decolonizing the canon. By exposing how Western literature has historically constructed the non-West as inferior, exotic, or silent, Said and other postcolonial scholars have reshaped the way literature is taught and analyzed. This article explores how Heart of Darkness remains embedded in Western academia despite its problematic representations of Africa and its people and how Said's critique of Conrad is part of a larger effort to challenge the Eurocentric biases that continue to shape literary discourse.

b. Conrad and the Canon: Why Heart of Darkness Endures

Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness is widely regarded as one of the greatest novels in the English literary tradition. It has been praised for its stylistic innovations, psychological depth, and critique of European imperialism. Yet, as Chinua Achebe famously argued in An Image of Africa (1977), the novel is also deeply problematic in its portrayal of Africa and Africans. Achebe condemns Conrad's depiction of Africa as a "place of negations" and argues that the novel's language dehumanizes its African characters, reducing them to a voiceless, primitive mass (Achebe 788).

Despite such critiques, Heart of Darkness continues to be widely taught in universities across Europe and North America. Several factors contribute to its enduring presence in the canon:

1. Literary Prestige – The novel's influence on modernist literature, particularly in its fragmented narrative style and psychological complexity, has secured its place in literary history.

2. Anti-Imperial Reading – Many scholars interpret Heart of Darkness as a critique of European colonialism, arguing that Conrad exposes the brutality and hypocrisy of empire.
3. Eurocentric Pedagogy – Western curricula often privilege works that, even when critical of empire, still center European perspectives. Heart of Darkness fits this mold, as it critiques imperialism while maintaining an othering view of Africa.

The persistence of Conrad's novel in literary studies highlights the broader issue of decolonizing the curriculum: while literature that critiques empire is welcomed, the voices of the colonized themselves are often marginalized.

c. Said's Critique: Decentering the Western Gaze

Edward Said's work fundamentally challenged the ways in which Western literature represents non-European peoples and spaces. In Orientalism, Said demonstrates how Western scholars, novelists, and policymakers have historically constructed the East as an exotic, irrational, and passive Other, reinforcing the logic of colonial domination. His later work, Culture and Imperialism, extends this analysis to literature, showing how canonical texts—including Conrad's Heart of Darkness—are shaped by the ideologies of empire.

Said's critique of Conrad is not simply about whether Heart of Darkness is racist; rather, it examines how the novel participates in a larger system of knowledge production that privileges European perspectives. Said acknowledges Conrad's anti-imperial stance but argues that his critique remains limited:

- "Although Heart of Darkness offers a powerful critique of the imperial mission, it does so entirely from the perspective of a disenchanted European. The voices of the colonized remain absent, and Africa functions only as a backdrop for European existential dilemmas" (Said, Culture and Imperialism 25).

Said's work challenges the assumption that Western literature can represent the non-West in objective or neutral terms. Instead, he calls for a reevaluation of literary studies that acknowledges the power relations embedded in these representations.

Decolonizing Literary Studies: A Shift in Perspective

Said's critique of Conrad is part of a larger intellectual movement aimed at decolonizing literary studies. This movement seeks to:

1. Reevaluate Canonical Texts – Scholars increasingly examine classic works not just for their aesthetic merits but also for their ideological implications. This means reading texts like Heart of Darkness alongside postcolonial critiques rather than accepting them as neutral or universal.
2. Incorporate Marginalized Voices – Universities are introducing more texts by writers from formerly colonized nations, such as Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Assia Djebar, to provide alternative perspectives on empire and identity.
3. Challenge Eurocentric Pedagogy – Educators are rethinking how literature is taught, moving away from a model that centers European experiences and instead foregrounding the voices and perspectives of the colonized.

One of the most significant impacts of Said's work has been the increasing recognition of literature written by those who were historically excluded from the canon. Achebe's Things Fall Apart (1958), for example, is now widely taught alongside Heart of Darkness, offering students a counter-narrative to Conrad's portrayal of Africa. Similarly, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's Decolonising the Mind (1986) critiques the dominance of European languages in African literature, arguing for the importance of indigenous linguistic and cultural traditions.

a. The Continuing Debate: Is Heart of Darkness Still Relevant?

The question of whether Heart of Darkness should continue to be taught remains a contentious one. Some argue that removing problematic texts from the curriculum risks erasing the history of colonial discourse and preventing critical engagement with its legacy. Others contend that the novel's continued dominance perpetuates outdated and harmful representations.

A middle ground is emerging in which Heart of Darkness is still taught, but in conjunction with postcolonial critiques. This approach ensures that students do not passively absorb Conrad's Eurocentric perspective but instead engage critically with how literature constructs knowledge about race, empire, and identity. As Said himself argues:

- "Texts are not inert; they actively shape our understanding of history and culture. Decolonizing literary studies means exposing the ideological work that literature performs and expanding the voices we consider authoritative" (Said, Culture and Imperialism 31).

b. Toward a More Inclusive Literary Canon

Decolonizing the Western literary canon is not about erasing the past but about reevaluating how we engage with it. Edward Said's critique of Conrad exemplifies this process by demonstrating how Heart of Darkness, despite its anti-imperial stance, remains deeply embedded in the colonial worldview. By challenging the dominance of such texts and amplifying alternative voices, postcolonial studies have reshaped literary scholarship, making it more inclusive and reflective of diverse histories and perspectives.

The debate over Heart of Darkness continues, but what is clear is that literature is never neutral. The way we read, teach, and interpret texts is shaped by historical power structures. By applying Said's insights to literary studies, we take a crucial step toward dismantling the Eurocentric biases that have long defined the field and toward embracing a more global and just understanding of literature.

Conclusion:

The ongoing debate surrounding Heart of Darkness and Edward Said's critique of Conrad is emblematic of a larger movement toward decolonizing literature. As this article has explored, Conrad's novel remains deeply embedded in Western literary curricula, often presented as an anti-imperial masterpiece despite its problematic portrayal of Africa. Achebe's critique and Said's theoretical framework reveal how such texts, even when critical of empire, continue to marginalize non-European voices and reinforce Eurocentric perspectives.

The persistence of Heart of Darkness in academic discourse demonstrates the challenges of dismantling colonial narratives within literary studies. However, the influence of postcolonial scholarship, led by figures like Said, has significantly reshaped how literature is read and taught. By interrogating the ideological assumptions of canonical works and amplifying the voices of historically marginalized writers, scholars and educators are working toward a more inclusive, critical, and global literary canon.

Decolonizing literature is not about erasing the past but about understanding how literature functions as a tool of power and representation. It requires a reexamination of the texts we consider essential, the perspectives we prioritize, and the ways in which we engage with literature as a discipline. Through the work of Said and others, the study of literature has moved beyond passive acceptance of the Western canon, fostering a more dynamic and reflective approach to reading, teaching, and critiquing texts. The question remains: How can literary studies continue to evolve to ensure a truly decolonized and equitable intellectual landscape? The answer lies in continuous critique, inclusion, and the willingness to challenge established traditions in pursuit of a more just and representative literary discourse.

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