

2008

# Teaching a 'Racist and Outdated Text': A Journey into My Own Heart of Darkness

Melody Wong  
*United World College Costa Rica*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cedar.wwu.edu/jec>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

## Recommended Citation

Wong, Melody (2008) "Teaching a 'Racist and Outdated Text': A Journey into My Own Heart of Darkness," *Journal of Educational Controversy*: Vol. 3 : No. 1 , Article 17.  
Available at: <https://cedar.wwu.edu/jec/vol3/iss1/17>

This Article in Response to Controversy is brought to you for free and open access by the Peer-reviewed Journals at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Educational Controversy by an authorized editor of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact [westerncedar@wwu.edu](mailto:westerncedar@wwu.edu).

## ARTICLE

**Teaching a “Racist and Outdated Text”: A Journey into my own *Heart of Darkness***

Melody Wong

United World College Costa Rica

**Abstract:** In wrestling with her teaching of Joseph Conrad’s frequently challenged novella, *Heart of Darkness*, a high school English teacher discovers her own complicity with and complacency about Western political, economic, and social hegemony. Ultimately, her research into the historical, social, and political contexts of the 19<sup>th</sup> century novella enable her to understand its immediate relevance to the privileged world that she and her students live in, and to take her students on a personal journey in the modern “heart of darkness.”

***In Retrospect on the Boat Mellie***

“*And this also . . . has been one of the dark places of the earth*” (Conrad, 1899/2006, p. 5).

Each spring for six weeks at an American international school in Hong Kong, I teach the novella *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad (1899/2006) to twelfth graders in Advanced Placement English Literature and Composition, knowing that it will be the most important book of the year for them. But not for any of the typical reasons that this text is chosen for AP.

Maybe once upon a time, when I first taught *HoD*, I focused on authorial style, point of view, narrative structure, imagery, diction, syntax, and symbol. I lectured on Impressionism and Symbolism as modern artistic and literary movements that influenced Conrad’s style. We read Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s (1817) poem “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and looked at its similarities to *HoD* in terms of narrative structure, liminal spaces, and the themes of man vs. nature and the narrator’s need for public confession to expiate his sense of guilt. T. S. Eliot’s (1925/68) poem “The Hollow-Men” also had to be included for its “Mistah Kurtz—he dead” epigraph, allusive images, and parallel themes of lost ideals and one’s response to the inevitable shadow/darkness.

Despite all the accusations of racism against his novella, Conrad’s savage and satirical indictment of European colonialism and imperialism was important, too, so we read Rudyard Kipling’s (1899) poem “The White Man’s Burden” as representative of 19th century colonial and imperialist attitudes, then George Orwell’s (1936) essay “Shooting an Elephant” as an example of how the colonial relationship warped both the oppressor and the oppressed.

I dutifully led my classes through debates on whether Conrad was a racist after they read Chinua Achebe’s (1977) critical essay “An Image of Africa.” I assigned them Professor Mark Dintenfass’ (1996) online lecture on *HoD*’s narrative structure and purpose, and handed out David Denby’s (1995) *New Yorker* article, “Jungle Fever,” on how freshmen at Columbia University grappled with *HoD*. We also compared the structure, characters, and themes of *HoD* with John Ciardi’s translation (1982) of Dante Alighieri’s medieval *Inferno* and Tim O’ Brien’s (1990) short story “The Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” from his novel *The Things They Carried*. An optional class activity was watching Francis Ford Coppola’s (1979) film *Apocalypse Now* after school. Moreover, I encouraged students to independently read novels such as Arundhati Roy’s (1997) *The God of Small Things*, with its own “heart of darkness . . . the History House,” Chinua Achebe’s (1959) *Things Fall Apart* with its depiction of the impact of Western colonization on Ibo culture in Nigeria, and *The Poisonwood Bible*, Barbara Kingsolver’s (1998) story of a dysfunctional American missionary family in the modern Congo. It was a good unit, one of the lynchpins of my AP English course and the last text we did before Shakespearean tragedy, and then the AP English exam in May.

After about four years though of teaching AP English to some of the most intelligent, articulate, privileged and ambitious young people in the world, I began to wonder what the point of the course was . . .

*The numbers?* My assessment results were gratifying. My students usually wrote strong culminating essays when we finished the *HoD* unit and did well on the AP literature exam when they chose to use *HoD* for the free response question.

*Appreciation of literature?* Most of them didn't like *HoD*—not its style, its plot, its characters, nor its themes. Their year-end course evaluations made that clear. So I felt increasingly uneasy about what I and my classroom teaching represented about literature to these students. Why make a captive audience of students read and study depressing books that they couldn't relate to?

*Student learning?* What does it mean for a student to understand and appreciate a text? Was I turning out groups of kids who could do literary analysis by dissecting the diction, imagery, and syntax of any piece of writing that they came across, but couldn't read “as if their lives depended on it” (adapted from Rich, 1991)?

What effect did I want a year of AP English to have on students as they prepared to leave high school and become independent adults in a complex and multicultural, yet increasingly globalized, world?

Thus, after a summer of reflection, I naively decided that it was my job to show students what the point of all that depressing literature was—and to model true personal understanding and appreciation of a text, especially the one most alien to them: *Heart of Darkness*. It was as far removed from their lives as writing could get.

But before I could do that, I had to figure out *HoD* for myself. And all of my questions—a journey into my own heart of darkness—began when I realized that, while students could intellectually appreciate *Heart of Darkness*, they didn't get it. Not really. And it was because *I* didn't get it. All my training, education, and experience as a literary scholar and English teacher hadn't been enough to open me up to the experience and hard-won wisdom that Marlow (Conrad's semi-autobiographical alter-ego) was trying to represent to his audience on the boat—and to Conrad's readers. In fact, they had been impediments because I tended to look at every text for its literary elements and how it should be taught to maximize its value for the AP English exam.

Although I knew intellectually why *HoD* was an example of great writing and—by the time I was done with them—so did my students, its fantastical story and characters had not affected me. I couldn't teach *HoD* as if it mattered because I honestly didn't see what relevance a 19<sup>th</sup> century novella about corrupt Europeans in Africa had to my life, and thus I didn't really care about what it had to say. Maybe it was racist—I'd never thought deeply about Achebe's arguments, simply presenting his essay to my students as another view of the text. I didn't even think Conrad had done a good job of exploring the universal nature of evil, the usual perspective taken in high school and college English classes. So I took what I wanted from it as an AP English Literature teacher and ignored everything else, especially the darkness. So why was I teaching *Heart of Darkness*? . . . I didn't know.

Sally Gadow (1990), a nurse-practitioner and curriculum theorist, posits that knowing and caring are two different forms of situating oneself in the world: “As knowers we stand outside the world, studying it . . . . The world is reduced to objects of our knowing . . . . Caring is a relationship between subjects” (p. 2). Because we didn't care enough to find out what was in the darkness, what the novella—and by extension, Conrad—left unspoken and merely hinted at, my students and I couldn't see ourselves in the world he depicted. Reading *HoD* didn't make us more racist than we already were: enjoying our

designer clothes, diamond jewelry, and state-of-the-art cell phones in our shiny whitewashed international school in rich Hong Kong, we didn't care about Africa and the lingering impact of European exploitation of the continent. I had always deliberately forestalled political discussions in my English classes because it was tangential to our *literary* study—and as a professional, I believed that my primary responsibility was to maintain classroom control and an intellectual focus on the texts. So we avoided the personal and the political. We never asked the question: “What is the ‘heart of darkness’?”—and never wanted to look at the implications of our answers. Though “stories have always been an important way of transmitting values and wisdom” (Kilpatrick, 1993, p. 24), we read, studied, and discussed *HoD* as an “object of our knowing,” safely remote from and meaningless in our lives.

“The heart of teaching and learning lies in how teachers construct meaning” (Duckworth, 1986) in the curriculum—for themselves, with the course materials and activities, and for the students. According to the 1986 Holmes Group Report on the state of American education, “The entire formal and informal curriculum of the school is filtered through the hearts and minds of classroom teachers, making the quality of school learning dependent on the quality of teachers” (as cited in van Manen, 1992, p. 23). And my own reflective awareness of what I was doing in the *HoD* unit—and in my English classes in general—was a long time coming. Like Marlow, I didn't know what kind of person I was, what my teaching values were, until I decided to enter the whiteboard jungle and face myself as an agent of control for the school system (and the greater society) over the student natives being colonized.

As a new young teacher, reinforced by everything I had learned in my education courses, my job was getting through the mandated curriculum, making sure that student learning objectives were achieved, and enabling students to be academically successful—that is, get good grades and standardized test results. But as I moved beyond survival mode and became more confident and comfortable being “Ms. Wong” (or Kurtz?) in the classroom, I had found myself disturbed by how much of school was about teaching and enforcing obedience to often arbitrary rules and authority, perpetuating conformity to external standards of achievement and excellence, and turning students into diligent and responsible workers (enslaved natives?) who would do whatever homework was assigned, however trivial or repetitive, as long as they received credit for it. In the moral hierarchy of school, “good” students seem to spend most of their time accumulating the grades to get into so-called “good” colleges that would launch them into “good” jobs and ultimately—it is implied—“good” lives. Those who don't follow this path are often considered “bad” students.

But getting into Harvard wasn't going to make students “good” people—and the single-minded, even ruthless focus on “playing the game” of school in order to create the perfect college application package had made some of my most successful students selfish and amoral, like Kurtz. I didn't want my students learning for the sake of grades; I wanted them to care about what they were learning—what they were seeing, hearing, saying, reading and writing.

The value of knowledge is without question. Caring happens afterward; it is what we *do* with what we learn that matters . . . . Our present dualistic approach to knowing makes caring impossible. As knowers, we stand outside the world, studying it—observing, describing, classifying, counting. The world [and others within it are] reduced to objects of our knowing. (Gadow, 1990, p. 2)

But caring is subjective, personal, and emotional, and requires the very “acts and moments of desire, fear, horror, pleasure, power, and unintelligibility [that] most educators sweat over trying to prevent, foreclose, ignore, close down”—the unpredictable “emotive experiences” of deeply embodied learning (Ellsworth as cited in Alvermann & Hagood, 2000, p. 200). I was going into the heart of darkness without knowing how I or the students were going to return.

## ***The Whited Sepulcher***

“Then—would you believe it—I tried the women” (Conrad, 1899/2006, p. 8).

For my wealthy, Ivy-league bound, National Honor Society students to care about Marlow’s journey and the condition of the European agents and African natives, they would have to live it—and experience their own journeys into the heart of darkness. They would become the company directors, lawyers, and accountants of the 21st century and, like Marlow’s audience, the only way they could go on the journey—and perhaps understand and *care*—would be with a storyteller guide who had already experienced it: me.

Some of my students had admitted that *HoD* was painful to read and hard to understand, so they resorted to study aids like Cliffs Notes and online analyses such as Sparknotes. “[E]ach image created in the mind has little meaning unless we associate it with words on the page and with other images and memories in our lives . . . the conclusion we draw, the interpretation we create—is our very personal rendition of text” (Keene & Zimmermann, 1997, p. 126). So I decided to create a PowerPoint presentation to show what “civilization” meant in Victorian England and 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, using Impressionist paintings to match Conrad’s writing style and to provide images of 19<sup>th</sup> century middle and upper class European society. “Visualization or imagery is a form of comprehension . . . students who experience difficulty in comprehending what they read often have difficulty in creating mental images during reading” (Rasinsky in Richards & McKenna, 2003, p. 196).

But as I Googled Claude Monet, I came across his series of studies of London at the turn of the century. He had actually painted “the biggest, and greatest, town on earth” at sunset in 1902 with “a mournful gloom brooding motionless over” the seat of political, social and economic power in England—the *Houses of Parliament* (Conrad 1899/2006, p. 3)!

In addition to slides of Monet’s London alongside excerpts from the first couple of pages in *HoD*, I paired Pierre-Auguste Renoir’s painting *The Luncheon of the Boating Party* and Georges Seurat’s *Un Dimanche Après-Midi à l’Ile de la Grande Jatte* to show the “beautiful world” that Marlow comments on: “They—the women I mean—are out of it—should be out of it. We must help them stay in that beautiful world of their own, lest ours get worse” (Conrad, 1899/2006, p. 48).

I always ask my class to read *HoD* on their own first before we do some preliminary response and discussion. Then I take them on the PowerPoint journey. While my class views and discusses these slides and their accompanying *HoD* quotations, I play Tchaikovsky waltzes (a 1997 recording) in the background. Then I ask my students what they thought it was like to be a white person with status and/or money in 1880s and 1890s Europe. What kinds of lives did the people in the paintings live? What did they value—and why? As students view these images, I ask them how our lives in Hong Kong resemble that “beautiful world” that must be preserved at all costs.

## ***At the Outer Station***

“The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much” (Conrad, 1899/2006, p. 7).

They didn’t understand yet. So the next set of slides in the PowerPoint show deals with the geopolitical, economic, and scientific contexts of Western paternalism and self-proclaimed superiority that Marlow, Kurtz, and the other Europeans would have been operating in. Textual meaning needs to

be understood “in the context of social historic and power relations, not solely as the production of intention of the author” (Bainbridge, Malicky & Payne, 2004, p. 390). This section starts with a chart depicting the various races in terms of their supposed evolutionary development according to skull features, with a William Shakespeare lookalike at the top; the “slanty-eyed Chinaman” next; in the middle, the American Indian complete with feathers in his hair; and the African at the bottom, just above the rendering of a simian humanoid “missing link.” The diagram makes clear the deeply racist assumptions of the West, supported by culturally biased 19<sup>th</sup> century pseudo-science (Gould, 1981).

I also pair excerpts from Kipling’s (1899) poem “The White Man’s Burden” with a *Detroit Journal* political cartoon (May, 1899) of the same name, asking the class to analyze the visual imagery in light of the poem. Students often point out how the caricature and pose of the African native infantilizes him and takes away his humanity. Sometimes someone will point out the resemblance between this image and the racist caricatures of slaves and blacks (e. g., blackface minstrelsy) in 19<sup>th</sup>-and 20<sup>th</sup>-century America. We also discuss how Kipling uses light and darkness as symbols in his poem to reinforce the racist dichotomy of white as good and black as bad.

Conrad’s novella powerfully subverts those associations, though. He had worked briefly for a Belgian company in the Congo in 1890, and he knew the truth. In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad reveals the rampant greed and hypocrisy underlying Kipling’s paternalistic justification of imperialism and hints at the atrocities committed in the name of “Christian” salvation and civilization of the “heathen” natives.

I then show my students a series of maps of Africa from 1815 to 1914, demonstrating how rapidly the continent was colonized by various European powers in the mid- to late-19<sup>th</sup> century, and quote King Leopold II of Belgium:

Our only programme, I am anxious to repeat, is the work of moral and material regeneration, and we must do this among a population whose degeneration in its inherited conditions . . . is difficult to measure. The many horrors and atrocities which disgrace Humanity give way little by little before our intervention. (Harris, 2003)

Against his high-minded rhetoric, I juxtapose the comments of Leopold’s contemporary—the late 19<sup>th</sup> century British colonialist, co-founder of the De Beers diamond company, and eventual first prime minister of South Africa, Cecil Rhodes: “We must find new lands from which we can easily obtain raw materials and at the same time exploit the cheap slave labour that is available from the natives of the colonies. The colonies would also provide a dumping ground for the surplus goods produced in our factories” (as cited in Bigelow & Peterson, 2002, p. 44).

At this point, I sometimes ask students to form small groups to discuss this problem: You are a European agent in the middle of Africa in 1890, miles away from home, and any other Europeans are days away by boat. You and four large wooden boxes have just been dropped off on the banks of the Congo river. The steamer will not be back for a couple of months, in order to pick up your quota of ivory and to bring fresh supplies. There are native villages within the trading area that you have been assigned. You don’t speak the language, you don’t have any maps of the territory, you don’t know what is in the jungle, and you have only enough food to last you for a week. The rest of your boxes are filled with cheap trading goods. You also have guns and ammunition. You will not leave Africa until you make enough money to go back home a rich man—or you die of disease, native attack, or accident. What is your plan?

### *At the Central Station*

*“It had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery. . . . It had become a place of darkness”*  
(Conrad, 1899/2006, p. 8).

Through Google, I had found the “White Man’s Burden” cartoon at Jim Zwick’s (2004) extensive site, *Reforming the Heart of Darkness: The Congo Reform Movement in England and the United States*. Clicking curiously through various links, scanning the historical information, I suddenly came across “the horror—the horror” (Conrad, 1899/2006, p. 71). It was too late not to look—and once you know, you cannot un-know and go back to the person you were. But what can you do?

I finally understood why Conrad had been haunted by his time in the Congo and felt the compulsion to write *HoD*. He had been in the jungle for only three months in 1890 before falling ill—perhaps spiritually as well as physically—and like Marlow, he had only been a passive observer-participant in the European invasion of Africa. But “[h]uman beings can be held to account for that of which they are the authors” (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 195), and in writing *HoD*, perhaps Conrad’s conscience could finally rest a little.

So many photographs of mutilated adults and children accompanied by the tragic stories of their families and villages . . . I cannot express the shock and distress I felt. I had taken history classes through university. Why had I never heard about this genocide?

Before embarking on my research for the PowerPoint, I had never heard of King Leopold II or the Congo Free State, his vast personal fiefdom from which he earned the hundreds of millions of dollars to fund schools and hospitals in Belgium. He was regarded throughout Europe as a great philanthropist. But the truth, hidden in the darkness of the jungle thousands of miles away, was this:

King Leopold turned much of the Congo's adult male population into a slave labor force to gather wild rubber. [Whippings and mutilations were common punishments for individuals and villages that could not fulfill their rubber quotas.] His private army worked large numbers of men to death, raped and starved their wives (held hostage to make the men work), shot down 20 years of uprisings, and terrified hundreds of thousands of people into flight to avoid rubber slavery. Disease ravaged a traumatized, half-starving people, many of whom hid unsheltered in the rain forest. The birth rate dropped dramatically. Using official Belgian statistics, demographers estimate a loss of population of some 10 million [approximately 50%] during Leopold's rule and its immediate aftermath. (Hochschild, 2003)

The invention of the pneumatic tire in 1888 had sparked a Victorian enthusiasm for cycling, with its attendant natural health and leisure benefits, and created a huge worldwide demand for rubber to make the tires. Millions of dollars worth of profits and pleasure in the West were silently and invisibly paid for by African blood and suffering.

Then I remembered something I had learned in high school: Auschwitz hadn’t been just a death camp, but an industrial compound of approximately forty buildings, many of which were manufacturing centres for German companies and the Nazi Army. The ironic slogan on the front gates, “Arbeit Macht Frei,” means “Work makes one free.” The camp inmates were slave labor feeding a capitalist juggernaut; the vast majority were Jews who, like Africans, had been socially and scientifically categorized as evil and subhuman. If people’s lives are not valuable, if they are not people but animals or tools, you can work them to death without a qualm or destroy them if they cannot work.

### *At the Inner Station*

"It appears however I was also one of the Workers, with a capital—you know" (Conrad, 1899/2006, p. 12).

I began to wonder what else I didn't know or understand, and thus couldn't care about. My Google search into "Leopold II of Belgium" turned up multiple hits for Adam Hochschild's (1998) book *King Leopold's Ghost*, in which I found heroes, unlike in Conrad's bleak *HoD*. These men of great personal conscience and conviction are featured in my PowerPoint show:

- African Americans—missionary William Sheppard and journalist-historian George Washington Williams—were among the first to personally see and reveal the Congo horror.
- Liverpool shipping clerk Edward D. Morel established the Congo Reform Association when he realized that all the ships which had brought rubber and ivory from Africa went back carrying only officers, guns, and ammunition. Morel quit his job and spent most of the rest of his life publicizing Leopold's atrocities and lobbying for change.
- His secret partner in the Congo Reform Association was Sir Roger Casement, British Consul for the Congo, who provided both financial support and firsthand information from Africa.
- Literary figures such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, British author of the Sherlock Holmes mysteries, and Mark Twain, American author of *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), joined the cause, writing and bearing witness for those who could not speak and would not be heard. Conan Doyle (1909) wrote *The Crime of the Congo* in eight days after talking to Morel and Twain (1905) wrote the savagely satiric mock apologia *King Leopold's Soliloquy*.

The founders of the Congo Reform Association, Morel and Casement, could have, like many others, turned their back on their fellow human beings. Casement in particular had every reason not to get involved, given his officially neutral capacity as a British government official in the Congo. But they acted on their moral outrage. Brazilian educator and activist Paulo Freire points out, "Washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral" (as cited in Young Oxfam). Alongside their photographs on the PowerPoint slide is Auschwitz survivor and author Primo Levi's comment: "Monsters exist. But they are too few in number to be truly dangerous. More dangerous are . . . the functionaries ready to believe and act without asking questions" (as cited in Todorov, 1996, p. 123). According to one study, the Christians who had rescued Jews during World War II tended to be risktakers and nonconformists (London, 1970).

And now, I finally understood what I wanted to do as a teacher, what an education should mean . . . and why I was so disturbed by the successful "good" students conforming by "playing the game" in my school (and I suspected, school systems all over the world) and adults turning their backs on contemporary genocides and crimes against humanity in places such as Rwanda, Myanmar, Darfur, and—the site of the worst ongoing conflict and humanitarian crisis in the world—yes, the Congo.

### ***My Interview with the Intended***

"But I couldn't. I could not tell her. It would have been too dark—too dark altogether . . ." (Conrad, 1899/2006, p. 77).

The final section of the PowerPoint show connects the exploitation of local populations and their natural resources in Conrad's Congo to modern-day neocolonial parallels. In particular, I use Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

A picture of diamond panners in Sierra Leone, earning 20 U.S. cents a day and two cups of rice, is



ironically followed by a glossy American diamond ring advertisement asking, "How can you make two months' salary last forever?" Then an excerpt from a March 2000 *Economist* article reveals the consequences of our desire for diamond jewelry, cellphones and other luxury goods:

"Remember, this war is about making money," explained a local journalist in Freetown during Sierra Leone's civil war, before ticking off the interests of fighters, mercenaries, peacekeepers, aid workers, and other hangers-on at the war's edges.

Rebels, governments, and even peacekeepers have fought for diamonds, minerals and timber in recent wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone. A long-running war in Angola, once seen as ideological, is condemned by its people, foreign observers, and governments as, to a large part, a scramble for oil (by the government) and for diamonds (by the rebels). (*The business of conflict*, 2000, p. 46)

As students view a slide of Freetown machete victims missing hands and arms, I remind them of Conan Doyle's (1909) words: "mutilations of this sort were unknown among the native savages. Knowledge was spreading under European rule."

In the Congo,

[multinational] corporations have been eagerly buying Congo's diamonds, gold, timber, copper, cobalt, and coltan. Eastern Congo has more than half the world's supply of coltan, which is used in computer chips and cellphones, and has occasionally sold for as much, per ounce, as gold. The multi-sided war is driven by greed, not ideology; the worst fighting sometimes shifts location with the rise and fall of commodity prices.

. . . Few of these multinational companies, the rebel militias, or Congo's African neighbors have much interest in ending the country's Balkanization. They benefit far more from a cash-in-suitcases economy than they would from a highly taxed and regulated one that would tightly control natural resources. (Hochschild, 2003)

The consumers for these natural resources were people like me and my students. The Intended's piano, with its ivory keys, sits silently in the dark room where Marlow tells his lie to her. By never wanting to know where our pleasures came from, we turned a blind eye to our part in the darkness.

### ***Back on the Mellie***

*"What if the ultimate horror of the Congo nightmare is that there is no price for ignoring it?"* (Gourevitch, 2003, p. 35).

*"It seemed to me. . . that the heavens would fall upon my head. But nothing happened. . ."* (Conrad, 1899/2006, p. 77).

But something did happen in Hong Kong—first to me and then to my students as we journeyed into the "heart of darkness." I realized that Conrad was right: The potential for evil does reside within each one of us. We have choices to make about what we do in response to injustice and inhumanity and to do nothing—or worse, lie like the younger Marlow and perpetuate the Intended's ignorance—is also a choice. Yet the older and wiser Marlow (and Conrad) chooses something else: to tell his tale to the people who have the power to make a difference.

For the past four years, the best and brightest students in my high school have come into AP English,

having heard that they “have to read *Heart of Darkness* with Ms. Wong.” Some of them choose it for their summer reading and arrive in September admitting that they “didn’t get it.” My seniors tell the juniors each spring during registration that even if they don’t want to take AP English, they have to because it will change the way they understand the world. I usually show the PowerPoint about halfway through our *HoD* unit. At the conclusion of the 85-slide journey, which—including carefully facilitated discussion—lasts approximately two hours, I tell the class: “I have taken you as far as I can. The critic Roland Barthes has claimed that ‘Literature is the question minus the answer’ (as cited in Thiele, 2006, p. 243), so I just want you to ask yourself: What is the ‘heart of darkness?’”

Now, students need to bring it all together for themselves. I remind them that Edward Morel called *Heart of Darkness* “the most powerful thing ever written on the subject [of the Congo]” (as cited in Simmons, 2002, p. 106) and Conrad himself claimed, “Fiction is history, human history, or it is nothing . . . a novelist is a historian, the preserver, the keeper, the expounder of human experience” (Conrad, 1921). Their homework for the weekend is to write—to answer the question and to reflect on what their own individual journeys into the heart of darkness mean to them—because the only effective filters against injustice and evil are the values, knowledge and judgment that a young person brings to the world in his or her own head and heart (adapted from Friedman as cited in Alvermann & Hagood, 2000, p. 193).

“The world we know is the world we make in words, and all we have after years of work and struggle is the story” (Rouse, 1978, p. 187). “In telling and writing stories, teachers actually ‘authorize’ their lived experience, retelling and reliving them to gain insight” (Jalongo, Isenberg, & Gerbacht, 1995, p. 80) into their teaching practices, their personal values, and their professional identity.

“Teaching is a complex, situation-specific, and dilemma-ridden behavior” (Sparks-Langer & Colton, 1991, p. 37)—to pretend that it is merely delivery of curriculum or intellectual (dis)interest in abstract themes or techniques is to ignore the political ramifications of how we choose to educate the next generation and the transformative value of education for both students and teachers.

In the process of teaching subjects . . . teachers at all levels also teach, through example and through shared forms of social exchange, the virtues of diligence and persistence, of commitment to truth, of listening to and caring for the contributions of others . . . we put our best foot forward in the classroom. We project to our students not who we are but the kind of person we would like to be or what we would like others to think of us as being . . . . After years of such trying, we often wind up better than we were at the start, which is surely one of the great rewards of teaching. (Jackson, 1992, pp. 242-243)

## References

- Achebe, C. (1977). An image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s “Heart of Darkness.” *The Massachusetts Review* (18)4, 782-794.
- Achebe, C. (1959). *Things fall apart*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Alighieri, D. (1982). *The inferno*. (J. Ciardi, Trans.). New York: Penguin Putnam. (Original work published in 1317-1319.)
- Alvermann, D. E. & Hagood, M. C. (2000). Critical media literacy: Research, theory, and practice in “new times.” *Journal of Educational Research* 93(3), 193-205.

Bainbridge, J., Malicky, G., & Payne, P. (Eds.). (2004). *Constructing meaning: Balancing elementary*

*language arts* (3rd ed.). Toronto: Nelson.

Bigelow, B. & Peterson, B. (Eds.). (2002). *Rethinking globalization: Teaching for justice in an unjust world*. Milwaukee, WI: Rethinking Schools Ltd.

The business of conflict. (2000, March 4). *The Economist* 354(8160), 46-47.

Coleridge, S. T. (1817). Rime of the ancient mariner. Available at:  
<http://eir.library.utoronto.ca/rpo/display/poem530.html>

Conrad, J. (1899/2006). *Heart of darkness: An authoritative text, backgrounds and sources, criticism* (4th ed.). (P. B. Armstrong, Ed.). New York: Norton.

Conrad, J. (1921). *Notes on life and letters*. Available at:  
<http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/c//conrad/joseph/c75nl/>

Coppola, F. F. (Producer/Director). (1979). *Apocalypse now* [Motion picture]. United States: United Artists & American Zoetrope.

Denby, D. (1995, November 6). Jungle fever. *The New Yorker* 71(35), 118–29.

Dintenfass, M. (1996). *Heart of darkness: A Lawrence University freshman studies lecture*. Available at: <http://mural.uv.es/rosegar/critical.htm>

Doyle, A. C. (1909). *The crime of the Congo*. Available at:  
[http://www.boondocksnet.com/congo/congo\\_crime.html](http://www.boondocksnet.com/congo/congo_crime.html)

Duckworth, E. (1986). Teaching as research. *Harvard Educational Review* 56, 481-488.

Eliot, T. S. (1968). The hollow-men. In *Collected poems, 1909-1962*. New York: Harcourt Brace. (Original work published in 1925.)

Gadow, S. (1990, October 13). *Beyond dualism: The dialectic of caring and knowing*. Paper presented to the conference, The Care-Justice Puzzle: Education for Ethical Nursing Practice, University of Minnesota, MN.

Gould, S. J. (1981). *The mismeasure of man*. New York: Norton.

Gourevitch, P. (2003, June 2). The Congo test. *New Yorker* 75(14), 33-35.

Harris, B. (2003). King Léopold II of Belgium. Available at:  
<http://www.moreorless.au.com/killers/leopold.html>

Hochschild, A. (2003, Fall). Heart of sadness: Congo. In *Amnesty International Amnesty – Now*. Available at: [http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/Africa/Heart\\_Sadness\\_Congo.html](http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/Africa/Heart_Sadness_Congo.html)

Hochschild, A. (1998). *King Leopold's ghost: A story of greed, terror, and heroism in colonial Africa*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Jackson, P. (1992). Reflections on teaching ourselves. In D. Bursleson (Ed.), *Reflections: Personal essays by 33 distinguished educators* (pp. 232-244). Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappan.

Jalongo, M., Isenberg, J. P., & Gerbacht, G. (1995). *Teachers' stories: From personal narrative to*

*professional insight*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Keene, E.O., & Zimmerman, S. (1997). *Mosaic of thought: Teaching comprehension in a reader's workshop*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Kilpatrick, W. (1993). The moral power of stories. *American Educator* 17(2), 24-35.

Kingsolver, B. (1998). *The poisonwood bible*. New York: HarperCollins.

Kipling, R. (1899). The white man's burden. Available at:  
<http://www.boondocksnet.com/ai/kipling/kipling.html>

London, P. (1970). The rescuers: Motivational hypotheses about Christians who saved Jews from the Nazis. In J. R. Macaulay & L. Berkowitz (Eds.), *Altruism and helping behavior* (pp. 241-250). New York: Academic Press.

MacIntyre, A. (1981). *After virtue: A study in moral theory*. South Bend, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press.

May. (1899, February 18). *The white man's burden* [Cartoon]. Available at:  
<http://www.boondocksnet.com/ai/kipling/detroit.html>

Monet, C. (1902). *Houses of Parliament, Sunset* [Artwork]. Private collection.

O'Brien, T. (1990). The sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong. In *The things they carried* (pp. 89-115). New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Orwell, G. (1936). *Shooting an elephant*. Available at: <http://www.k-1.com/Orwell/site/work/essays/elephant.html>

Renoir, P.-A. (1881). *The luncheon of the boating party* [Artwork]. Washington, DC: Phillips Collection.

Rich, A. (1991). *An atlas of the difficult world: Poems 1988-1991*. New York: Norton.

Richards, J., & McKenna, M. (2003). *Integrating multiple literacies in K-8 classrooms: Cases, commentaries, and practical applications*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Rouse, J. (1978). *The completed gesture: Myth, character and education*. Morris Plains, NJ: Skyline Books.

Roy, A. (1997). *The god of small things*. New York: HarperCollins.

Seurat, G. (1886). *Un dimanche après-midi à l'Ile de la Grande Jatte* [Artwork]. Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago.

Simmons, A. (2002). The language of atrocity: Representing the Congo of Conrad and Casement. In A. de Lange & G. Fincham (Eds.), *Conrad in Africa: New essays on "Heart of darkness"* (pp. 85-106). New York: Columbia University Press.

Sparks-Langer, G. M., and Colton, A. B. (1991). Synthesis of research on teachers' reflective thinking. *Educational Leadership* 48(6), 37-44.

Thiele, L. P. (2006). *The heart of judgment: Practical wisdom, neuroscience, and narrative*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Todorov, T. (1996). *Facing the extreme*. New York: Henry Holt.

Tschaikovsky, P. I. (1997). *Tschaikovsky: Ballet suites/Rostropovich, Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra* [CD]. Deutsch Grammophon. (Tschaikovsky composed music from the 1860's until his death in 1893.)

Twain, M. (1905, September). *King Leopold's soliloquy: A defence of his Congo rule* [Pamphlet]. American Congo Reform Association. Available at: <http://diglib1.amnh.org/articles/cls/>

van Manen, M. (1992, April). *On teaching as virtue*. Paper presented at the AERA Annual Conference, San Francisco, CA.

Young Oxfam UK and Ireland. *Washing one's hands of the conflict*. [Poster]

Zwick, J. (Ed.). (2004). *Reforming the Heart of Darkness: The Congo Reform Movement in England and the United States*. Available at: <http://www.boondocksnet.com/congo/index.html>