The Shaman in *Heart of Darkness*
by Michael Harkins

In the first few pages of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* we are given an overture of the rest of the work. The character Marlow describes how England was once “one of the dark places of the earth.” (Conrad 5) He continues by imagining how the Romans first came up the Thames and how these “were men enough to face the darkness,” cheered on by thought of “promotion,” but how many would succumb to the “mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs in the forest, in the jungle, in the hearts of wild men.” (Conrad 6) What he has done is provide us with a “map” of the terrain we are about to follow—from the delta of civilization to the headwaters of humankind.

Conrad warns us of the “fascination of the abomination” and the “regrets, the longing to escape, the powerless disgust, the surrender, the hate” (Conrad 6) that would ensue when we encounter the truly wild other out there. The “map” to man’s interior that Conrad draws takes us to a shamanistic dawn where “herds of men” followed the visions of an “alpha male” until he dropped. We know this because shamanism arose at a time when humans emulated wolf packs and lion prides or lone hunters—the bear and the solitary cats.

Mircea Eliade, in *A History of Religious Ideas* (Vol. 1), states the shaman “is able to penetrate even into the source of animal life, the bony element.” “The so-called X-ray drawings, ...showing the skeleton...of the animal, have also been referred to shamanism.” (Eliade 18) This too is taken up in the opening pages of Conrad as a template for the thorough accounting later in the text. The men awaiting the tide toying with “bones,” in the form of dominoes (Conrad 3), a prelude to the bones Kurtz seems to find all over the dark interior, are using the tools of the shaman. Eliade also points out that the shaman/hunter was probably employed by early agricultural societies as hunter/guardian. (Eliade 35) Kurtz is such a shaman as we have described. He does our killing for us.

What Conrad proposes in his synopsis, contained in the first few pages of *Heart of Darkness*, and posits in the body of the work, is that the individual society chooses to send to the brink of civilization must be extra-ordinary, an individual capable of staring into the dark chaos of nature and making sense of that darkness. The individual, and shamans were the first individuals, must also choose to enter the darkness, as Kurtz and Marlow chose, and, upon entering the darkness, if no sense can be made of it the individual must impose one.

*Heart of Darkness*
by Leszek Berezowski

At the threshold of the twentieth century, when exploitation of colonies was still widely spread and the problem of abuse of natural resources and native inhabitants was largely ignored, Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* invites us to reflect on and ask ourselves when does progress and expansion become rape.

Joseph Conrad presents us with this, unfortunately, ageless book. It sheds a bright light onto the inherit darkness of our human inclinations, stripped of pretense, in the middle of the jungle where those savage tendencies are provided with a fertile ground.

The combination of greed, climate and the demoralizing effect of frontier life brought out the worst in people. They were raping the land, practically stealing the ivory from the natives, whom they were treating like slaves, or even worse than slaves, for slaves in America were an expensive commodity and therefore it was in the best interest of slave-owners to keep them well fed and healthy; these poor chaps, however, were allowed to starve to death once they fell ill.

And this was the place where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die. They were dying slowly - it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now, nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. Brought from all the recesses of the cast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest. These moribund shapes were free as air - and nearly as thin. (Conrad 14)

The natives were cannibals, but in contrast, had higher moral standards than some of the raiders, who were plundering their country and even though they were paid "royally", for their services, with useless wire with which they were expected to procure food, they did not stoop so low as to threaten the lives of the pilgrims, even when they were bordering on starvation. They had given them every week three pieces of brass wire, about nine inches long; and the theory was they were to buy their provisions with that currency in river-side villages. You can see how that worked. There were either no villages, or the people were hostile, or the director, who like the rest of us fed out of tins, with an occasional old he-goat thrown in, didn't want to stop the steamer for some more or less recondite reasons. So, unless they swallowed the wire itself, or made loops of it to
snare the fishes with, I don’t see what good their extravagant salary could be to them. ... - ... Why in the name of all the gnawing devils of hunger they didn’t go for us - they were thirty to five - and have a good tuck in for once, amazes me now when I think of it. (Conrad 37)

Technology and progress, in contrast with simple existence of the indigenous inhabitants of the land, afforded the colonists a God-like powers over the natives. Hidden behind a veil of lofty ideas like expansion and progress, colonists were committing unspeakable atrocities, not unlike the treatment of Native Americans in our own country. But there is hope. At the time when racism wasn’t even a pejorative term and belittling attitude toward the "savages" was just an ordinary fact of life, you can see the change taking place in Marlow’s attitude toward the natives; he misses his helmsman, a man, whom he called "improved specimen" (Conrad 33), who was watching the steam boiler of the boat and who was killed by Kurtz follower’s spear. Marlow surprises himself thinking of this man as his equal.

Many of us, today, would benefit from just such a change of outlook. It seems as though time is standing still and even today, we are ridden with hate and prejudice toward each other based on foolish ideas and ideals.

How Language Evokes a Dream Like Image of the Jungle
by Daisey Gonzalez

Conrad effectively evokes a dream like image of the jungle by using language. He uses strong words to describe the natives appearances, characteristics and presumed behavior.

Very common in his descriptions are the use of very strong and erotic words like "wild " and "intense". For example the description of a boat load of natives paddling down stream is distinctly primitive. He says "they shouted, and sang… their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had grotesque masks…but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality and intense energy of movement…”(78). In contrast a comparison, to the author's description of a white, affluent, suggestively desirable race, made them appear artificial, sloppy and lethargic. Clearly seen in the following phrase, "flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly"(81).

Another obvious implication of a primitive and savage culture using language, which gives the reader the illusion of wilderness, is the author's use of the word cannibals. By using the word cannibal the author implies a savage and uncivilized race, since both the word and the act are abrasive. Especially in context with the period this text was written in, 1910. Back then, the idea of natives in the jungle was a proven fact not a rumor or fantasy. Already afraid of this reality the use of the word made the image of the native more frightening and convoluted. Whereas today, cannibals are hardly threatening at all since the likelihood of their existence is purely fiction. Ironically, Conrad is able to combine the use of this word with a very tender and humorous description of his crew, "Fine fellows - cannibals-in their place. They were men one could work with…And, after all, they did not eat each other before my face: they brought along a provision of hippo-meat"(104).

A last description of a native is of Marlow’s companion the "savage who was fireman"(106). He too was described to imbue the image of a savage as society had presupposed a native would look like. Marlow describes his native physical traits, beginning with a description of his teeth. He said " -and he had filed teeth, too, the poor devil, and the wool of his pate shaved into queer patterns, and three ornamental scars on each of his cheeks. He ought to have been clapping his hands and stamping his feet"(106).

Clapping hands, dancing and singing seem to be the predominate characteristics of this culture and as such labeled scandalous behavior for that time. In contrast a lot can be assumed about the methods of recreation and disposition of the white man. However today, since we all clap our hands, sing and dance it could hardly be believed that the savage natives were very different from us at all.

A Web of Cunning
by Juliet Paez

Marlow’s wilderness is not vibrant nor majestic, nor is it boisterous in its vitality, illuminating and nurturing its lush bounty within its sensuous bosom. It is not a wondrous place, intoxicating with radiant color and a symphony of sounds those who journey into its interior. It is not a quiescent nor serene, willing to reveal its secrets, easily subdued or tamed. His wilderness is a primeval, mysterious enigma that swallows light and sound, rationality and language, imprisoning them deep within its immense folds. It is fascinatingly savage, menacing in its power to mesmerize and lure, and finally to seduce the “bearers of a spark from the sacred fire” (67).
Many had set out to conquer it, dreaming of creating splendidous empires; others had embarked on a quest to extract riches, fame, and glory from deep within its heart; yet others had been beckoned by the irresistible call of the unknown. Lucky were those that could “glide past [it], veiled...by a slightly disdainful ignorance” (68), shielding themselves with the mantle of civilization, secure in their invincibility. Marlow was luckier than most, for the wilderness called to his “very heart [with] its mystery, its greatness, the amazing reality of [its] concealed life” (95); yet he was able to realize in time that it was but an illusion, a “deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness” (124), and to step back from the edge of the abyss.

He was good man in search of purpose and adventure, believing he would find his aspirations by sailing the waters of a mighty river. Upon arriving at his destination he was disheartened by the actions of his brethren, by their “conquest of the earth”, which to him mostly meant “taking it away from those who [had] a different complexion...than [themselves]” (70). Contemptuous of their beliefs and brutal behavior, their greed and deceitfulness, he went in search of a man considered “the emissary of pity...science and progress” (94); believing that in him he would finally find someone to guide him through the “silence of the land” (95).

However, the deeper he penetrated into the somber stillness of the wilderness, he could not escape the realization of his vulnerability. In that landscape he could either be “swept off without leaving a whisper or a shadow behind”(114) or infinitely worse, “the powers of darkness [could] claim him for their own” (126). The intelligent, resourceful, Kuntz, the beacon of light in the darkness, the guide he had hoped for, was not to be found. He had proven to be too weak to the lure of the whispering shadows; neither his vision nor his “magnificent eloquence”(138) had saved him. Instead Marlow found “an animated image of death” (140), “buried in a vast grave of unspeakable secrets” (144).

The bewitching darkness had driven Kuntz mad. It had lulled him into a fantasy, believing himself an omnipotent power, supreme ruler of his world, totally blinded to the fact that it was but a spell; that in reality the wilderness had “draw[n] him to its pitiless breast by the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts” (149), and there he would remain its prisoner. Horrified by what he saw and heard, Marlow tried to “break the spell” (149), but it was to late, it had been to late long before they ever met. Kuntz’s soul would be release only in death. Marlow had to save himself; leaving behind the people he had met, “to dream their insignificant dreams”(156) he escaped, back to the land of his birth and its river, to “that great and saving illusion that shone with an unearthly glow in the darkness” (162).

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*Heart of Darkness* by Dianna Guadagnino

*Heart of Darkness*, by Joseph Conrad is a story that connects the audience to the narrator’s senses. We come to understand the environment, the setting, the other charters, and Kurtz strictly from the narrator’s point-of-view, as he experiences things.

We are locked out of Conrad’s (the narrator in this case) world, allowed to feel only what he let’s us, see the savages as he does, through his eyes, feel with his body. We are not able to see how the world views him. Is he seen as superior, a drone, a sailor? His dreamlike consciousness navigates us, the readers, down the river as if we are a part of the flow of things, ripples in the water, patches of the darkness.

Conrad uses language to paint images in our minds. He poignantly uses metaphors like, “In exterior he resembled a butcher in a poor neighborhood” (57) to animate those images, allow them to breath a bit.

His choice of words and word combinations, his poetic tone, and suave style and smooth transitions craft a sensual experience. He is on the surface talking about the exploration of man in Africa with all of its physical and moral dilemma, and yet the underbelly is the interior of man, an endeavor to touch the reader at his core. “Each station should be like a beacon on the road towards better things, a center for trade of course, but also for humanizing, improving, instructing.” (104) When Conrad says that the “germs of empires” floated into man’s head, ebbing down the river into the mystery of an unknown earth, his metaphors appeal emotionally to something serious, a commentary on the heart of man. (67)

Our senses are serenely assaulted with tastes and surfaces, sounds and images. The “tremor of far-off drums,” the “silence driven away by the stamping of our feet,” and the “heads on the stakes” are sensual. When you read: “she rang under my feet like an empty Huntley & Palmer biscuit-tin kicked along the gutter,” I can see it and hear it and almost feel the vibrations of the tin. (99)

The darkness, reader as part of the darkness: The darkness of man, is meant to be universal. All men can relate to the drums, there’s a great passage where Conrad explicitly says so, “Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would
admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you - you so remote from the night of first ages - could comprehend.” (109) There are implicit phrases as well, woven neatly around the events. “I assure you that never before, did this land, this river, this jungle, the very arch of this blazing sky, appear to me so hopeless, and so dark.” (135) The narrator himself wonders about his own darkness. The darkness is related in the book to health, success, savages, and humanity.

Memory verses sense of memory: His story couldn’t be real memories, but perceptions of the memories, mutated with time, flourished by the total experience. We know that Conrad himself had similar experiences to the narrator of his story. The writer’s memory has been fictionalized.
The rape of the land, the consequences to the sole, the temptation of solitude, were a dark challenge, constructing moral dilemmas. Kurtz discovered, “He was empty inside.” His dying words, “the horror, the horror” displays what he was inside at the end.

There was a homologous hegemony. For as much as the natives were influenced by the white men's guns and mechanical wonders, the whites didn’t have a chance of not being influenced. “(White) men that come out here should have no entrails.” (90) They were savages, even the pishe assistant to Kurtz, who couldn’t discern taking the human heads off the stakes in the ground. He thought he wasn’t corrupt like the others, he perceived himself as being in control. But the jungle and savages changed the white men. They became wild and uncivilized. For all of their manicuring and white collared shirts, their symbolic clinging to systems that didn’t apply, they acted as beasts. “His starched collars and got-up shirt fronts were achievements of character.” (85)

“Just kill this guy if we need to...there are no laws here.” There were laws. There were natural laws. The geographically transplanted white men were so far removed from imposed structured laws, that they were ill equipped to survive in nature, to respond to the innate laws of nature. Civilized man no longer saw himself as part of nature. He was not just separate but superior and impious. They irresponsibly answered to no one. They were corrupt and they imprisoned the natives, stole from them, plundered the earth’s ivory, murdered anyone they wanted to, and so forth. Historically, Europeans couldn’t have had any hope of avoiding becoming human slave traders having had no preconceived respect for any aspect of nature.

Conrad’s description sums it up,

They wandered here and there with their upsurd long staves in their hands, like alot of faithless pilgrims bewitched inside a rotten fence. The word ‘ivory’ rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed. You would think they were praying to it. A taint of imbecile rapacity blew through it all, like a whiff from some corpse. By Jove! I’ve never seen anything so unreal in my life. And outside the silent wilderness surrounding this clear speck on the earth struck me as something great and invincible, like evil or truth, waiting patiently for the passing away of this fantastic invasion.

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Heart of Darkness
by Nadine Murray

“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 65) So stated Marlow as though this was his justification for ravaging the Congo in his search for ivory. Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness shows the disparity between the European ideal of civilization and the reality of it as is evidenced by the domination, torture, exploitation and dehumanization of the African population. Heart of Darkness is indicative of the evil and greed in humanity as personified by Kurtz and Marlow.

These emissaries of light are shown to be crude, sordid and violent. They had no regard for the destruction of Africa’s natural environment, wantonly destroying hills in a feeble attempt to establish a railway. “No change appeared on the face of the rock....the cliff was not in the way or anything; but this objectless blasting was all the work going on.” (Conrad 76) This statement reveals the real motive for venturing into the Congo which was not to bring a better, more civilized lifestyle to the poor, underprivileged Africans; but to satisfy their lust for power. “It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind - as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness.” (Conrad 65)

Just as Victor Frankenstein in the novel Frankenstein created a monster that was a manifestation of his inner turmoil and demons, so too Kurtz and Marlow’s journey into Africa is an unveiling of their inner darkness which we are all afraid to
Like Grenouille, in *Perfume* and Victor Frankenstein, Kurtz sought power, adoration and godlike status both among his European counterparts and the native Africans. Just as Grenouille bottled and collected special fragrances so too Kurtz collected human heads displaying them around his hut as trophies. Kurtz’s journey into Africa, as well as his inner journey, can be likened to Grenouille’s hibernation in the cave for seven years or Victor’s search for his monster across the icy slopes. During this period each individual underwent a transformation and a realization of the horrors they have created.

Kurtz’s final words “The horror! The horror!” are comparable to Victor fleeing the scene when faced with the manifestation of his handiwork. It is as though neither of them can face the reality of what they are responsible for - Victor for playing with science and creating a monster which killed those he loved, and Kurtz for destroying other’s lives, for participating in “unspeakable rites”, and for the “unspeakable secrets” of his method. At the end of their journey lies not ivory, the secret of regeneration of the most exquisite fragrance, but instead their true inner self - the heart of darkness.

**HEART OF DARKNESS**
by Mary Kursar

Power has been defined as the psychological relations over another to get them to do what you want them to do. We are exposed to forms of power from the time of birth. Our parents exercise power over us to behave in a way they deem appropriate, and in school teachers use their power to help us learn. When we enter the work world the power of our boss motivates us to perform and desire to move up the corporate ladder so that we too can intimidate someone with power one day. In Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness Kurtz had a power over the jungle and its people which was inexplicable.

Kurtz is one of many men sent into the jungle to rape the land and its people of its natural resources. Many men have journeyed into the jungle also refereed as the heart of darkness never to return. Kurtz goes into the jungle and becomes obsessed with the people and the land. Though Kurtz has an obsession with ivory this is not the sole reason for him to overstay his welcome in the jungle.

Power this is what kept Kurtz in the jungle for such a long period of time. Determined not to become another causality he becomes allies with the natives through fear. Kurtz is a brilliant man who did not have to adapt to his environment but had it adapt to him. On top of a hill his hut is surrounded by the heads of men who have betrayed in him some sort, this serves as a reminder to anyone who contemplates going against his wish.

When Marlow finally reaches Kurtz he is in declining health. This same jungle which he loved, embraced and consumed with every ounce of his flesh had also taken its toll on him. Marlow finally meets the man whose name has haunted him on his river journey. Could this frail human be the ever so powerful Kurtz? The man who has journeyed into uncharted territories and has come back with scores of ivory and the respect of the native tribe. Yes, this was the very man and though he is weak and on his way to death his power still exudes from him. This is where the definition of power comes in to play the “psychological relation” see even though his body was decomposing his mind was still sharp. Kurtz’s voice still boomed when he spoke, he still demanded the respect he thought he deserved. Since Kurtz had terrorized the natives into fearing and respecting him even on his last legs he was still powerful. The psychological game he played with the natives was brilliant, he had them attack boats that carried people who had come to help him. There was nothing the natives would not do for him.

Kurtz does not want to return to civilization but he does not use his power to have Marlow and his crew killed either. Kurtz leaves on the steamboat leaving behind the people who have cared and worshipped him to survive on their own. He loves the feeling of the natives watching from the shores mourning his departure. He asks Marlow not to blow the whistle to frighten the natives so that he can bask in his last hour of power.

What made Kurtz so powerful? Why was he able to manipulate the natives into his puppets? Kurtz was able to do this because he preyed on the insecurities of a what was believed a less intelligent people. Rather than be the “white man” who was an enemy he portrayed himself as a friend. This ability to play psychological games on others was a gift for Kurtz and what helped bring him into power. This same ability is what politicians posses today and inflict upon us in order for us to vote them into power. Guess we are no more intelligent than the natives.

"Heart of Darkness"
Hope DeVenuto
Civility, civilization and civilize, are they and could they be man’s defense against the power and mystery of nature and the primal nature of himself? When man lives away from refinement and education and is living in the natural habitat of sea, jungle, and forest, there can be seen a tragedy of a warrior, in the destruction of nature and himself. In "The Heart of Darkness", Joseph Conrad must go on a quest to discover the fire and passion in his male being and ignite the flame in his heart that is the fuel for his will to survive in the earth. The immediate relationship to the Thames River and his merging consciousness with that element, reflect back to him a memory of myth and history of all the archetypes of man and warriors who also as he, was engaged and moving in this famous passage. The sea has parted and has opened all past memory to the strong images that have crystallized before him of his first journey where man and sea began.

The sea is a man’s world where he goes through trials and initiations that test his manhood, and why? Is there an obsession in our past history and today with manliness and manpower?

If aliens were to study our cultures, they definitely would notice something very strange. It is our social obsession with manhood that is considered a test to be passed, which creates unnecessary arenas of war, and work that links man with the social stresses of protecting, providing and procreating. In "The Heart of Darkness" there is the fear of a man not being man enough. The tragedies of a hero and the hazards of heroism are that the more he fights the enemy, the more he begins to be like the enemy; the more he kills beasts, the more he becomes like a beast.

Has the ego then becomes the dictator instead of the servant and vehicle to evaluate the moment to realize itself. This brings up another question; Are women’s natures civilizing balance? Or could it be said that men civilized women by taking care of the killing. Just as a genius walks a fine line with destructiveness, so heroism walks a thin line with both the destruction of others and self-destruction which can only be balanced by the hero’s heart and consciousness.

HEART OF DARKNESS
by Brigitte Aponte

The story is about a man named Marlow, who is hired by The Company, which is a shipping company located in England. Although Marlow had sailed before, he had never sailed to Africa. The people who operated The Company (those located in England) are so far removed from reality, that they have no concept of the devastation caused in order to ship vast loads of ivory. The Company is a perfect example of how these profit driven industries obtain their wealth – through the blatant disregard of the environment and their fellow man. One can only imagine the death and destruction that was inflicted in order to ship mass quantities of ivory. The Company’s disrespect for the Africans and their environment was the typical attitude had by many nineteenth century profiteers. Their rationale was that no matter what degree of damage was inflicted, they felt it would never affect them.

Their disdainful attitude towards the Africans is expressed in the following words:
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 9)

In order to be able to conquer a people, one must dehumanize them and believe they are insignificant/inferior. This mode of thinking is used to justify any atrocities committed by the conquerors. In “Root of Racism,” the superior attitude is described as All groups, by their nature, imply to the members that they are somehow special in particular ways and in many ways better, than their fellow travelers on this earth.  (Ross)

This superior attitude has been evidently pervasive throughout mankind’s history; some strong examples of these are the war in Bosnia, the slaughter of the Tutus in Rwanda and the white settlers near annihilation of the Native Americans.

Conrad’s character Marlow describes the natives as having “a wild vitality” and their “faces like grotesque masks.” These remarks demonstrate his fear and reinforces the distinction between himself and the natives. Racial or ethnic hatred is a direct consequence of our Fear Response. Hatred is really taking the fear response one step further. We justify that fear by invoking certain attributes to others by assuming that they may be inferior, evil or harmful.
Your group will reinforce these feelings since all members of the group will respond to the same fear. This becomes institutionalized and the accepted norm for group thought.

(Ross)

The Company had no qualms regarding the mistreatment of the natives, as described by the following account:

They were dying slowly—it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now—nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation...

Brought from all recesses of the coast in all legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, become inefficient, and were allowed to crawl away and rest. (Conrad 26)

In the Heart of Darkness, the Africans are perceived to be dispensable, not nearly as valuable as the ivory they are relied upon to collect for the white man. It is unfortunate that the propensity for this way of thinking is still very evident today.

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HEART OF DARKNESS
by Brigitte Aponte

The flowing river is soiled
Intermingling with black oil
Human blood running into the earth
Summons the smell of destruction and death
Their land, the heart of darkness, devoid of light.
Who will come to deliver them from their plight?
The white man, he is the cause of all this
The white man, he can save them from the abyss

Is It Really Just A Word?
Laurie P. Cody

“The Heart of Darkness,” by Joseph Conrad was written in 1898 and 1899 and published in 1902. So, although it wasn’t surprising that the word used to describe a black person was nigger, it was insulting just the same. Throughout the short story I had to remind myself of the time period it was written.

Joseph Conrad is nothing short of a genius. His writing technique is eloquent, and surreal and yet after having completed “The Heart of Darkness,” I couldn’t help feeling a little insulted by the oft used word nigger. My feelings lead me to do a little research on this word nigger. I checked three dictionaries: (1) the “Oxford Concise Dictionary,” (2) the “Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary,” and (3) “The American Heritage Dictionary.” They all had in common one definition, “a member of any dark-skinned race.” In addition, they all said it was “offensive.” Webster’s went one further and said “a member of a socially disadvantaged class of persons.” Now this last definition was closer to what my parents had told me the meaning of the word nigger was, an ignorant person. I tend to like my parents’ definition much better than all the rest combined!

The word nigger is actually derived from the Latin word niger which means black. Okay, so we’re getting closer to understanding now. So why all the controversy surrounding this word? I even have to wonder if “The Heart of Darkness” was written by a black author would I have been equally or less offended? This word nigger was recently the cause of a controversy between two very prominent directors, Spike Lee (black) and Quentin Tarantino (white), in regards to Tarantino’s new movie “Jackie Brown.” Lee felt Tarantino used the word nigger too many times in his movie and considered it a racist act. I’m not sure, but I believe Lee too has overused the word in his movies and yet he publicly cries foul when Tarantino does the same thing. What makes blacks so offended by whites using the word nigger when they use if themselves?
The main reason touted is because some blacks use it (and I mean use it often) as a term of endearment. Then there are some blacks (usually the upper crust) who use the word as an insult, as in Webster, as a description of a low class black person. If one was to use my definition “an ignorant person,” wherein this way it possesses no race, creed or color, there would be no black/white controversy because ignorance has no color boundaries. This is a weirdly less offensive way of describing someone. I couldn’t begin to imagine a director complaining that someone used a word meaning ignorant too often. If one follows the history of nigger, as a derivative of niger (black) it was a descriptive representation of my race’s dark-skin, not as an insult. The insult in those days was the way we were forced to come to America and the treatment thereafter. It is true that even today in some states, especially the Southern states, the “n” word still holds the derogatory meaning, but within time that could be changed. Is there a happy medium with the word nigger, depends on the arena a person is standing in when it is said. Why is it comical when comedians such as Eddie Murphy, Richard Pryor and the later Red Foxx used the word throughout their profane-based comedy acts? I know some white people who were extremely offended by Martin Lawrence’s stand-up comedy routine; and yet most blacks find him hysterical. Again, double standards. If anything, some black people find the aforementioned comedians offensive, not because of the use of the word nigger, but because of the amount of profanity used in the comedian’s monologue.

In my opinion, if my race is going to get upset over the use of the word nigger, we should all just stop using the word. We certainly cannot expect other races to stop using the word, while we use the word, whether with love or hatred, every chance we get. The word is derogatory and is no more acceptable between my brothers and sisters than from someone of another race. This double standard is not only harmful, but unfair. No matter the history of the word, we now have, in my opinion, too many words to describe a black person. We have black, African American, Afro-American (what does that mean?), person of color, and lets not forget my all time personal favorite, colored. In the end, the only word we all need to remember and practice is respect.

The Heart of Darkness, which follows closely the actual events of Conrad’s Congo journey, tells of the narrator’s fascination by a mysterious personage who, by his eloquence and hypnotic personality, dominates the primitive savages. Full of contempt for the greedy traders who exploit the natives, he cannot deny the power of this figure of evil who calls forth from him something approaching reluctant loyalty.