

Comparative Heritage Project
mis-Reading Heritage Series

Reading Africa 2025

June 18 – Bi-Weekly Summer Discussion Group
comparativeheritage.org/summer

SESSION SCHEDULE & THEMES

I. **June 18** — Writing Back: The Rise of African Narrative

Suggested Readings

- Chinua Achebe – *Things Fall Apart* (1958)
- Achebe’s essay: “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness” (1977)
- Rudyard Kipling—*The Best of Rudyard Kipling: A Collection of Essential Poetry*

Discussion Prompts:

- How does Achebe challenge Conrad’s portrayal of Africa?
- How is colonial disruption framed from the inside?
- Does Kipling’s notion of the “White Man’s Burden” align or contrast with the realities presented by Achebe and Conrad? How?

What is Achebe’s view of tradition and change?

➤ Chinua Achebe

Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958) narrates the tragic downfall of Okonkwo, reflecting the disruption of Igbo society by colonialism and Christianity. This landmark novel critiques stereotypes, presents rich African cultural complexity, and probes themes of identity, masculinity, and cultural resistance. Foundational to post-colonial scholarship, it remains influential in examining colonial impacts on indigenous societies globally.

Thesis

The thesis of Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* asserts that colonialism profoundly disrupted and destabilized indigenous African societies, revealing the complex tensions between tradition and external cultural influence. Achebe demonstrates how cultural rigidity, pride, and resistance to change—embodied in Okonkwo—can both preserve identity and tragically accelerate cultural disintegration in the face of overwhelming colonial forces.

Argument

The core argument of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* is that colonialism, through cultural imposition and religious conversion, fundamentally ruptured traditional African societies, highlighting both their inherent resilience and vulnerability. Achebe argues that the rigidity of traditional beliefs, exemplified by Okonkwo’s tragic pride, paradoxically contributed to the collapse, illuminating the complex dynamics between cultural continuity and inevitable change under colonial pressure.

Critical perspective:

The critical perspective in *Things Fall Apart* is a postcolonial critique emphasizing cultural authenticity, agency, and resistance against European colonial narratives. Achebe challenges Western stereotypes by presenting African society as complex, dignified, and internally coherent, arguing that colonial disruption wasn’t merely external domination but involved nuanced internal tensions around tradition, identity, masculinity, and the consequences of resisting inevitable change.

While Kipling intended the poem as a pro-imperialist exhortation, it has since been widely criticized for its racial assumptions and justification of colonial exploitation. Many scholars and

Comparative Heritage Project mis-Reading Heritage Series

writers (including postcolonial critics) read it as a quintessential example of the ideology that underpinned colonialism.

➤ Racism in Conrad

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* explores the moral corruption of European colonialism through Marlow's journey into Africa. The novella critiques colonial exploitation, portraying European greed and hypocrisy symbolized by the mysterious, morally degraded Kurtz. Africa is depicted ambiguously—both feared and misunderstood—highlighting Conrad's complex but often controversial exploration of colonial ethics, imperial violence, and psychological darkness within humanity.

Thesis

The thesis of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is that colonialism, under the guise of civilization, reveals profound moral and psychological corruption inherent in imperialist ambitions. Conrad argues that imperialistic exploitation leads to spiritual decay, illustrating how the brutal quest for power, exemplified by Kurtz, strips humanity of morality, exposes hypocrisy, and reveals the inherent darkness within human nature itself.

Argument

The core argument of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is that colonialism exposes the fundamental darkness and moral ambiguity inherent in humanity. Conrad critiques imperialism by illustrating how ostensibly civilized societies perpetuate violence, exploitation, and psychological corruption. Through Kurtz's descent into madness, Conrad argues that unchecked power and imperial greed ultimately degrade the colonizer as profoundly as the colonized.

Critical Perspective

- **Postcolonial Criticism:**
This perspective critiques Conrad's portrayal of Africa as reinforcing racist stereotypes, as famously articulated by Achebe, questioning colonial narratives that silence or dehumanize colonized populations.
- **Psychological and Psychoanalytic Criticism:**
Focuses on human nature's inherent darkness, internal conflict, madness, and moral ambiguity, notably through Freudian interpretations of Marlow and Kurtz's psyches.
- **Marxist Criticism:**
Analyzes economic exploitation and class struggle within colonial imperialism, viewing the novella as a critique of capitalist greed and resource extraction.
- **Historical and Cultural Criticism:**
Considers the novella in the context of late 19th-century European imperialism, interpreting it as both reflective of and critical toward its historical setting.
- **Narrative and Structural Criticism:**
Examines Conrad's literary technique, fragmented narration, symbolism, and ambiguous language to interpret the novella's thematic complexity and moral uncertainty.

AUTHORS' BIOS

- Chinua Achebe: Nigerian novelist, poet, critic; pioneered African literature, challenged colonial narratives, explored cultural identity, notably authored *Things Fall Apart* (1958).
- Joseph Conrad: Polish-born English novelist, explored colonialism, moral ambiguity, and psychological depth, best known for *Heart of Darkness* (1899).
- Rudyard Kipling: British writer and Nobel laureate, known for *The Jungle Book*, *Kim*, and imperialist poetry like "The White Man's Burden," reflecting colonial attitudes and adventure.