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Nigerian Representations in Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*

Laura Tenpenny

Introduction

To emulate, meaning to imitate with the intention of equaling or exceeding the former. Joyce Cary cited Joseph Conrad as one of his influences, and perhaps Cary meant to emulate Conrad's writing, but *Mister Johnson* is not a diluted version of *Heart of Darkness*. Due to criticisms from one of the most critical voices in legitimizing race criticism, Chinua Achebe, Conrad's work has overshadowed Cary's. No doubt, this may also have to do with Conrad's greater finesse in writing, but *Mister Johnson* has its own merits in navigating the British imperial mind's preconceptions of its Nigerian colony. Gerald Graff concedes that Achebe's famous essay "Image of Africa," concerning race in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, convinced him "that Conrad's assumptions about race are not...simply an extraneous or nonliterary element...but something that the novel's literary and aesthetic effect depends on" and changed his manner of teaching Conrad's novel (184). Achebe, "the man who invented African literature," has consistently decried racism in Conrad's novel and accused the author as a racist and his words carry substantial weight (Gikandi, 303). Often in conjunction with these indictments, Achebe mentions Cary. Achebe asks in *Home and Exile*, commenting on the unsavory Nigerian characters of Cary's novel, "Haven't I encountered this crowd before? Perhaps in *Heart of Darkness*, in the Congo. But Cary is writing about my home, Nigeria, isn't he?" (24). He concludes that not only are Cary's representations of African people copies of Conrad's, but Conrad's are "a hand-me-down from earlier times" (26). He doubts whether Cary could have thought outside this tradition of "colonial ideology" left over from the days of the slave trade (Rowell, 183). I counter that he did try to present Nigeria aside from the ideology and partially succeeded, though to Achebe, Cary's novel will understandably remain a source of

frustration. *Mister Johnson* does have its strong points but also employs questionable characterizations. Achebe acknowledges that:

...we can all differ as to the exact point where good writing becomes overwhelmed by racial cliché. But overwhelmed or undermined, literature is always badly served when an author's artistic insight yields place to stereotype and malice. And it becomes doubly offensive when such a work is arrogantly proffered to you as your story. (*Home*, 41)

Achebe's and other arguments involving issues of race often result in polarization, since as Cary himself observes that "racial feeling...has very deep roots in human nature" (*African*, 23). In a society where the individual and his or her freedom rules, accepting two separate viewpoints as valid and true requires a new way of thinking, but arguments at odds can be simultaneously sincere and veritable, and *Mister Johnson* is a case in point.

As a celebrated writer and critic, Achebe and his opinions naturally carry some force, and others have followed his lead in condemning Cary as a failed imitator of Conrad and likewise as a racist. Mala Padurang dismisses *Mister Johnson* as a "racist-colonialist representation of Africa" (344). Others have said Cary's Nigerian characters serve "as an implicit justification of the British civilizing mission" or that the novel's protagonist, Johnson, is the "classic colonial stereotype" and "the botched African product of the imperial civilizing mission" (Harris; Korang). While these true statements may bring to light what Achebe sees in Johnson as "caricature" and racism, they also take precedence over other equally important elements, such as Cary's understanding of the imperial mind and how it conceptualized its colonies (Hall, 25). To dismiss Cary as a lesser Conrad overlooks Cary's abilities and how different, in fact,

Mister Johnson is from *Heart of Darkness*. The dearth of criticism on Cary compared to the mountains devoted to Conrad highlight how the former has been subsumed under the latter. Achebe's comments coupled by those who second his beliefs have obscured an equally valid and alternative understanding of Cary's theme and intentions in his protagonist and other Nigerian characters from *Mister Johnson*.

Then, there is an opposite response that lauds Mister Johnson a little too much. These critics tend to explain away the sometimes insulting Nigerian characters and cover up the less flattering representations. This type of argument, while correctly claiming that Cary did not intend these characters as insults but as a satiric critique of their inaccuracy, overlooks the fact that Cary chose to portray Nigeria through these fictions rather than offering a more correct, or at least more humanized, alternative. Chris Walsh expresses many of these ideas. He believes that Achebe must have missed the irony behind the novel's main character, Johnson, and his fellow characters, Nigerian and European. Of Cary's Europeans, Walsh explains that they cannot control the forces of progress they create nor the power they have, that they are more "helpless and ignorant than those they subject." Similarly, he claims that Cary "presents a full complement of self-regarding, ambitious, cruel, and petty natives too." Finally, what results from these characters is a "white and black" picture "of the usual individual human folly exacerbated by the more general and novel folly of the colonial encounter." Cary does give all his characters flaws, but the argument that this condemnatory aspect proves that Cary's novel does not discriminate is defective. Simply because Cary presents this "full complement" of immoral Nigerian and European characters does not excuse the racist qualities which he bestows on the former. It only proves that he does not hold back from pointing out the

negative in his characters. These divergent readings of Cary's *Mister Johnson* each neglect some vital underpinnings of the novel. It depends both upon a satirical representation of the protagonist, Johnson, and simultaneously restates the stereotypical conceptions it seeks to discredit.

Achebe and others have cited copiously the many disrespectful representations of different Africans in Conrad and Cary, but that does not necessarily make the two identical in their depictions. In fact, if one looks past the characters to the manner in which the author treats them, the "crowd" Achebe and others "encountered" in *Mister Johnson* is not the same as that in *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad and Cary had themes quite different in scope and in content. Whereas Conrad built a depressing and all-encompassing perspective on human nature, Cary wrote mostly to a European audience with an aim to dislodge typically accepted ideas about the colonies. Conrad, alert to the disturbing truth about humanity, maintains a dark and sometimes frightening tone. Quite the opposite, Cary laughs at his characters. He works on purpose to exaggerate their qualities into comedy, because that is exactly his point. Mr. Johnson is ridiculous and intentionally so, not because it was Cary's motivation to legitimize colonial rule through his protagonist's foolishness but because he wanted to demonstrate that the imperial, European idea of its colonies was flawed, blind, and silly. What Achebe takes literally, Cary meant satirically. Conrad and Cary are not interchangeable.

Even more surprising is that a comparison with Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* makes *Mister Johnson's* message clear. Achebe and Cary write much differently about their Nigerian characters. Achebe writes to convey "the colonial experience from an African perspective," an insider's perspective, concerned not only with colonization but also with the current "crisis of

culture generated by the collapse of colonial rule" (Gikandi, 299). Achebe's novel speaks with little humor and much respect as it pinpoints the beginnings of this crisis. Cary, as said, makes light of his characters. Cary's and Achebe's tones are almost as diverse as Cary's and Conrad's. In accordance with the novel's tone, the main characters have few characteristics in common. Okonkwo reeks of masculine aggression, power, and prestige, is someone who demands obedience and respect, and rarely shows his softer side. Mr. Johnson, conversely, has more in common with Okonkwo's lazy and musically talented father. Mr. Johnson bubbles over with creativity, dislikes work, adores and worships his boss, sings, dances, and is often foolish and childish in his enthusiasm and impulsiveness. Despite the varying personalities and behavior of the main characters and the varying tones, the protagonists' stories are strikingly similar. Both adore their cultures and people (of course, Johnson has adopted the English culture), both are betrayed by their societies, and both are destroyed by the colonial machinery which seeks to eliminate threatening aberrations such as themselves. The foreign officials then record or alter their stories, just as Africa's story was usurped by its colonists. Differences of tone and similarities of main characters point to a like purpose in the novels. Both sought, in part, to confront the colonial ideology, to change the way Europe thought about its colonies, or in Achebe's case, its ex-colonies.

Despite good intentions, Cary employs the very stereotypes his novel argues against, and yet it does not serve Cary, literature, or criticism well to neglect what the novel accomplishes or what it attempts to do. There is something contradictory in Cary that is likewise found in Conrad. *Heart of Darkness* condemns imperialism and imperialism's greedy, destructive nature, but at the same time depicts dehumanized Congolese people that act more

as a backdrop for “the break-up of one petty European mind” than as rounded characters (“Image”, 176). Cary uses Mr. Johnson and other Nigerian characters to emphasize the absurdity of British and European stereotypes but does so at the expense of yet again invoking those ideas. Regardless of these contradictions, reducing a novel to presumed authorial values and flaws does not seem appropriate to literature or to criticism. However, race criticism often promotes division in which the critic either agrees that the novel, and perhaps the novelist, is racist or else that the at best stereotypical and at worst racist aspects of the text do not exist, that the text has been misunderstood and besmirched. Neither of those options seems particularly rewarding.

Achebe’s vehement argument brought to light issues of race which few in English literary criticism had thought of or taken seriously, but it also polarized discussion of race and specifically discussion of Conrad’s novel, with Cary’s often implicated. Achebe takes literature as a work of conscience, as something that speaks truth about its author and its world, but also affects and alters the reader’s ideas or way of thinking. It can detrimentally transform the mind, so dangerous, racist literature like Cary’s cannot be called good literature (Image, 176). Some, like Padmini Mongia, would say that Achebe and others who argue thus do not mean to take these novels off the shelves and stop reading them. Instead such critics mean only to “jostle the white establishment into a consideration of race that would allow them to see its operations even in texts considered high literature” (304). But what else is a bad novel good for but the fire? Besides, this logic has a contradictory nature. If a novel was so blatantly evil, then few would actually read it and even fewer would take the effort to point out that it is racist. Mongia does agree that “because Achebe cannot simply write Conrad off as racist, he writes his critical

essay" (302). Neither Conrad's nor Cary's texts are so easily dismissed. As Achebe paints it, these novels are subtle in their descriptions and act "as purveyor[s] of comforting myths" (Image, 171). Of course, Achebe had to read and study these books to make his point, and others must continually do the same to verify that he is right or wrong. J. Hillis Miller sums up this dilemma when he writes that the reader or critic, to verify Achebe's and others' beliefs in the dangers of Cary's or Conrad's texts, must "take the risk and read" the book because "no one else can" pass judgment besides the individual (23). Achebe describes this process for himself in *Home and Exile*. Only by reading these texts for himself did he begin to "call into question [his] childhood assumption of the innocence of stories" and see that his "home was under attack" (33, 38). The complications of the novel should be learned from and not obscured. It is a detriment to discard and neglect Cary as he has been for many years when his novel offers such an interesting perspective on the colonist's mind and how the colonist has overlooked the character and potential of the colonies. It would be a shame to do as the fictitious British officials and ignore Mr. Johnson, to blind ourselves to the potential of *Mister Johnson* for generating such groundbreaking literature, ideas, theories, and criticism such as Achebe's.

Part I: Conrad and Cary

“I believe intensely in the creative freedom of the mind. That is indeed absolutely essential to man's security in a chaotic world of change...He requires to be free, he requires his independence and solitude of mind, he requires his freedom of mind and imagination...It is the mind, the reason, the imagination that steers.”

-Joyce Cary, interview with John Burrows for *Paris Review*

True, Joyce Cary claimed Joseph Conrad as one of his influences, but many, following Chinua Achebe's lead, subsume Cary's *Mister Johnson* under Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as the lesser or weaker *Heart of Darkness*. These critics see Cary's Nigerian characters and ask, like Achebe, “Haven't I encountered this crowd before? Perhaps in *Heart of Darkness*, in the Congo” (*Home*, 24). An initial glance at Cary's work could easily elicit this response, but Conrad's text has a global inclusiveness that Cary's does not. That universality is one of the main flaws which Chinua Achebe, perhaps Conrad's and also Cary's greatest critic, has with *Heart of Darkness*. Achebe decries the picture of Africa perpetuated in Conrad, as a “setting and backdrop...devoid of all recognizable humanity,” and demands, “Can nobody see the preposterous and perverse arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind?” (176). Achebe takes issue with the assumed, worldwide acceptance of this prejudiced perspective that many previously admitted without doubt. Cary's descriptions and characterizations of Nigeria include stereotypical elements similar to Conrad's, but *Mister Johnson* only occasionally resembles *Heart of Darkness*. Marlow via the anonymous narrator

professes truths about human nature whereas Johnson's story reflects the misconceptions of certain groups, specifically of the British and of other imperial societies. Significance, intended audience, and tone vary between Cary's and Conrad's texts. *Heart of Darkness* is just as its title suggests, mysterious and sinister, while *Mister Johnson* maintains a satirical attitude. Perhaps Conrad had some influence on *Mister Johnson*, but Cary did not lack the talent to make a creation of his own separate from his predecessor's works.

Heart of Darkness holds throughout that despite Europe's supposedly "civilized" society, its members have the same qualities as those in the Congo, especially a propensity for evil, often reflected in the darkness and threatening mystery of the Congolese jungle and in Kurtz, the man who embraced that darkness. Though some consider themselves superior in intelligence or morals, all people have the same nature under the surface: greedy and selfish to the detriment of others, lacking conscience in pursuit of satisfaction. There are numerous examples and manifestations of this dark side, illustrated most often by the jungle and personified in Kurtz. Marlow keeps this truth mostly to himself, whether out of contempt for the blindness around him or out of fear and pity. Conrad, however, has no problem with honesty, and therefore wrote his novel as an invective against humanity.

The novel provides many displays of humanity's disturbing nature. Marlow visits Brussels, the center of the imperial mission to "civilize" or exploit the colonies, to join a Belgian trading company in the Congo, marking one of the first instances of this nature. Marlow says that whenever he thinks of Brussels, it "always makes [him] think of a whited sepulchre," polished on the outside but inside filled with putrid and perhaps malevolent matter (55). Before he sees the Congo, Marlow makes it clear that the centers of imperial Europe are only

varnished by civilization to conceal the subconscious evil in the human soul. Marlow's first words refer to ancient London as "one of the dark places of the earth" (49). Also part of his first words, he says that "conquest of the earth," or imperialism, is no more than "the taking [of land] away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves," which "is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much" (52). Everything is full of darkness, abominable secrets, and things that are not pretty when one looks closely. The "civilized" society of Europe masks what those in Africa experience daily: the darkness of human nature, meaning "savagery...that stirs in the forests, in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men" (51). Conrad explains that everyone, regardless of appearances, possesses a shared wickedness.

A comparison of the Thames to the Congo, which frames the novel, elucidates what civilization tries to hide. The novel opens on a ship leaving the Thames in lovely weather for the moment but headed toward a dark cloud bank. The anonymous narrator concludes by describing how the path was "barred by a black bank of clouds" and how "the tranquil waterway....seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness" (148). The evil capabilities inherent to humanity lurk in everyone, everywhere. When Marlow explains his condition after his return from the Congo, he tells how he wandered through the streets laughing at the foolish blindness of supposed, superior society. He "tottered about the streets...grinning bitterly at perfectly respectable persons" (139). He explains that in Europe people were a nuisance to him because their "knowledge of life was...an irritating pretence," and their "assurance of perfect safety" was "offensive" because it seemed like "outrageous flauntings of folly in the face of a danger" that they cannot "comprehend" (139). Europe feels secure in its assumed separation

from the untamed masses, but Marlow knows this is a fake assurance and finds imperial society's ignorance and arrogance hateful now that he knows the horrible truth. Marlow does not feel the need to enlighten anyone, not even Kurtz's Intended. Yet, Marlow does divulge this truth to his comrades, and Conrad reveals it to his readers, that this real darkness of human nature was manifested in the jungles of the Congo and incarnated in Kurtz.

Numerous times, Marlow refers to the deep jungles he encounters as a representation of what he learned about the soul and also associates this darkness with Kurtz, sometimes as Kurtz. He speaks of the jungle as if it had a mind of its own. It has a "face" with "hidden evil" and "profound darkness [in] its heart" (87). Marlow identifies it as one with the Congolese people. When he finally meets Kurtz, people "were poured into the clearing by the dark-faced and pensive forest" (123). For Marlow, and presumably Conrad, the jungle's darkness mirrors the baseness of humanity. Marlow relates the jungle and the darkness more importantly with Kurtz. When Marlow finally rescues Kurtz, the feeble Kurtz struggles back to the jungle. Marlow tries to break the "heavy, mute spell of the wilderness...that seemed to draw him to its pitiless breast by the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts, by the memory of gratified and monstrous passions" (132). Kurtz is so wrapped up in satisfying himself, in living by his basic instincts. Marlow discovers this selfish evil at the foundation of human nature which Kurtz has so entirely embraced. For Marlow, Kurtz embodies the dark side of humanity. He calls Kurtz a "soul" that had gone "mad" because "it had looked within itself" and consequently had "no restraint, no faith, and no fear" (133). Kurtz is the quintessence of greed, self-centeredness, and pure self-indulgence that Marlow found in the Congo's jungle and in the human heart.

He also calls Kurtz a “voice,” as though Kurtz signifies not only the incarnation of human evil but its mouthpiece, as well. Marlow describes Kurtz’s mind as full of “images of wealth and fame revolving obsequiously round his unextinguishable gift of noble and lofty expression” (135). Even Kurtz’s thoughts bow before and serve this powerful greed, put into words by his gift of speech. When Kurtz speaks, he uses possessives: “my Intended, my station, my career, my ideas” (135). His speech and his devotion to the greedy darkness he had discovered in the soul are never far apart. Marlow equates Kurtz with “an impenetrable darkness. [Marlow] looked at [Kurtz] as you peer down at a man who is lying at the bottom of a precipice where the sun never shines” (136). For Marlow, Kurtz is humanity’s dark side of lust gratified at any cost. In Kurtz’s last moments, Marlow witnesses Kurtz’s revelation. He describes Kurtz’s reaction to the terrible truth of human nature “as though a veil had been rent. [Marlow] saw on that ivory face the expression of somber pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror—of an intense and hopeless despair” (136-137). Marlow rushes out of the room when at his last words Kurtz “cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision... ‘The horror! The horror!’” (137). These were the words with which the eloquent Kurtz summed up his life and the truth he discovered about himself and humanity. Kurtz both personifies and expresses the darkness of desire, hate, and greed at the bottom of the human soul.

In supporting the evil of human nature as universal truth, Conrad also employs many Congolese characters questionable in the current and purportedly unbiased society. The way Conrad chooses to convey this truth, through the Congo and Congolese, paints a rather unsettling picture, a picture and truth that are not shared by all as the novel claims. Some contend that Conrad was ahead of his time in trying to escape some of its evils, namely the

greed and destructiveness of colonialism. Allan Simmons tracks the experience of Conrad in the Belgian Congo and concludes that “Conrad’s contribution to the movement for reform in the Congo is precisely the provision of this (fictionalized) context [*Heart of Darkness*] which enabled the subsequent transmission of uncomfortable facts” (101). Conrad underlines the awful conditions of the “workers,” basically slaves, in the company to condemn the avariciousness of the Europeans after ivory and criticizes the company members as “burglars breaking into a safe” (84). As many have pointed out, there are also some rather questionable, sometimes stereotypical, and even, dare I say it, racist representations of the Congolese beside these more sympathetic and humanized characters.

There are a number of contradictions in the novel that both advocate for and write against imperialism and the racist assumptions that underlie it. The wealth of criticism concerning *Heart of Darkness* and racism and the responses to this accusation show that each side can be viably defended. Gerald Graff agrees that “literature is an arena of conflicting and contradictory social values, a struggle of utopian and dystopian visions” (186). Frederick Crews also posits that “literature is a site of struggle whose primary conflicts...deserve to be brought to light rather than homogenized into notions of fixed authorial ‘values’” (quoted in Graff 187). It discounts literature’s many possible readings and belittles criticism to “reduce literary works to transparent expressions of ideology, whether for good or bad” (Graff, 186). Instead, “literature is a scene of contradictions that cannot be subsumed under any ‘totalizing’ ideology” (Graff, 187). To argue for a particular reading as the only true one makes any criticism pointless and disregards the basis of literature and its structure. As a work of art, literature both relies upon and alters reality, but it does not necessarily relate solid facts or realities about its writer.

It is impossible to tell from an author's work what he or she might or might not have believed and whether those beliefs somehow infect the minds of those who read their texts. In short, it is fruitless to argue whether or not the text or author is racist. The answer is both yes and no.

The contradictions of racism and egalitarianism in *Heart of Darkness* make it worth study. Denying such contradictions unravels Achebe's and others' arguments, and yet many feel the need to either agree with or argue against them. Padmini Mongia observes that "the Conrad critic needs to rescue Conrad and his text from the charge of 'racism' in order to bring him back to the canon of 'high' art" (310). According to many critics engaged in discussions of race in Conrad, the novel must either be stricken from the record or the racist factors obscured altogether. Perhaps Conrad's work should not be considered great literature, but that would also mean important ideas in race criticism like Achebe's would also lose some of their prevalence. To read Achebe's "Image of Africa" necessitates a reading of *Heart of Darkness*, too, in order to verify Achebe's points. Achebe's shortcoming is the paradox that lies at the base of his argument. He both denies that Conrad should be considered important literature, but his ideas encourage a reading of the text for confirmation. Although Mongia believes that "Achebe presents his argument precisely in order to jostle the white establishment into a consideration of race that would allow them to see its operations even in texts considered high literature," his argument seems aimed more toward throwing out this racist "high" literature completely (304). In his exposition on the literary aspects of *Heart of Darkness*, J. Hillis Miller writes that those, like Achebe, who accuse the text with such "powerful indictments" imply that "the novella should not be read, taught, or written about except as something detestable" (23). Of course, one could "only be sure about this by reading the novella" and putting oneself, "if

these critics are right, in danger of becoming sexist, racist, and Eurocentric” (Miller, 23). This is counter-productive for Achebe’s purposes. Even if it can be decidedly proven as racist, it should be learned from rather than hidden. It is precisely for that fault that it should not be forgotten, precisely because it weaves such an intricate, and beautifully written, mix of diatribes against imperialism and avocations for part of imperialism’s underlying suppositions. Graff makes the crucial observation, which Achebe emphasizes, that “Conrad’s novel...played and may still be playing an active role in constructing the western image of black Africa” (185). Conrad’s text still has influence as Achebe contends and as the wealth of criticism concerning Conrad’s novels attests. Therefore different, even if opposite, and valid perspectives deserve attention for a balance of perspective and to clarify what Achebe and others assert. After all, Achebe would never have written against Conrad’s racist representations if Conrad had not been part of the canon and neither would he have derived from Conrad’s and others’ novels the motivation to write the magnificent books that have changed perceptions of literature and post-colonial theory.

Since Conrad has become so steeped in debate over racism and since the canon also includes Achebe’s famous indictment, it is almost necessary to address this facet of criticism in order to compare Conrad’s text with Cary’s which is likewise accused of racist leanings. My angle is not to argue for or against racist sentiments in Cary’s novel, but to examine its attempt at a satire of the European, specifically British, colonial mission and ideology. It is possible to see the merits of a text while also cautioning against its possible weaknesses. *Mister Johnson* is not quite groundbreaking in form or in style like *Heart of Darkness*, nor is it so well-regarded, but many overlook its value. In fact, most disparage and dismiss Cary’s novel for its racist

qualities, a reaction perpetuated by many race critics as has been earlier detailed. Achebe has said of Conrad and Cary in an interview that they portray the “colonial ideology” and that Cary creates no more than a “caricature” in *Mr. Johnson* (Rowell, 183; Hall, 25). *Mister Johnson* deserves an alternative reading, one just as valid. The two novels are not of the same category, though they may present some unflattering representations of Africans.

Although Joyce Cary has cited Conrad as one of his influences, and their novels do have similar features, *Mister Johnson* and *Heart of Darkness* are not the same. Indeed, their descriptions of the Congo and Nigeria do have related elements. These descriptions are stereotypical of their societies, but they have notable differences. The typicality of Cary’s work serves a purpose, namely to rewrite what the British and Europeans in general think of their colonies in Nigeria and in Africa as a whole. True, Conrad labels the Congo as “prehistoric earth” and Cary calls the Fada station in British Nigeria “something between a prison and a hospital” (122). Both works tend toward the prejudiced in descriptions of the African countries they write about. According to one perspective, Conrad sets his novel in the Congo and uses it as “props” for “the break-up of one petty European mind” (Achebe, 176). Whether or not this is true is complicated by the fact of a rather disjunctive tale given through the perspectives of two different narrators. Equating the language of these narrators with Conrad’s does not follow so easily. Nigeria and *Mr. Johnson*, however, are no props; *Mr. Johnson* and Nigeria are the protagonists and main subject of Cary’s novel. The many discrepancies between novels point to the satirical nature of *Mister Johnson* and Cary’s intention of rewriting the usual image of Africa in petty European minds.

As it is directed toward European readers and concerned with changing what European readers think and how they think, it does not presume an all-encompassing theme and certainly not one of the inherent evil of human nature. Whereas Conrad's novel makes a universal statement, Cary's is specific, partly premised on human nature, but directed to Britain and to Europe. Like Conrad, Cary does not give many glimpses into Mr. Johnson's or other African characters' minds. The story comes mostly from an outsider's point of view. In Cary's political essays, *The Case for African Freedom*, he writes that when in Nigeria, he "was like the other whites. [Cary] knew nothing of what was going on in the native mind. Seeing primitive people in their isolated villages, [He] assumed that their ideas of the world were primitive, that they were isolated also in mind. But they were not" (21). Cary uses a third-person, limited narrator to convey the outsider's understanding, how he or she does not have a coherent understanding of the local. Though the foreign British and Europeans may live in, judge, and label Nigeria and other African colonies, strangers cannot fully understand what they see. One views Johnson from the narrator's and other characters' perceptions. Cary says that "as Johnson does not judge, so [he] did not want the reader to judge. And as Johnson swims gaily on the surface of life, so [he] wanted the reader to swim" ("Author's Note", 300). Yet, everyone does judge Johnson. He is a lunatic from the South to the local Fada people, a bothersome thief to the former station manager, Blore, and a failure to his wife. He almost functions as a projection of the British and locals' ideas of the other: a living, breathing stereotype. Achebe even calls him a "caricature" (Rowell, 183). Despite what Cary may have wanted, Johnson is judged and quite harshly. Even the form of narration comes through an outsider looking in on Mr. Johnson's life. These diverse opinions again emphasize the pointed attack upon British and European

judgmental ideas of Nigeria and of Africa and dislodge any argument for a universal statement upon human nature or upon the Nigerians' human nature as distinct.

Apart from the variation in intended audience and universality of the novels' themes, there is also a more significant difference in the initially related description of Conrad's and Cary's African characters. Cary offers Johnson as a source of creativity and ideas, where Conrad accepts that the country and its people are locked in a state of "incomprehensible frenzy" and "impotent despair" (Conrad, 91, 62). Nigeria will inevitably change, but the animalistic characterizations of the Congolese leave little room for improvement. For Conrad, human nature remains the same, always purely selfish and therefore evil, despite what the illusion of civilization and empire might argue. For Cary, quite the opposite is true. In an interview, he explains that for him, "the principal fact of life is the free mind. For good and evil, man is a free creative spirit. This produces the very queer world we live in, a world in continuous creation and therefore continuous change" (Burrows). Nigerians have the capacity for innovation and creation, and Mr. Johnson is the embodiment of man's creative ability as he demonstrates:

Johnson, rushing to the office, is in a panic. But his legs, translating the panic into leaps and springs exaggerate it on their own account. They are full of energy and enjoy cutting capers, until Johnson, feeling their mood of exuberance, begins to enjoy it himself and improve upon it. He performs several extraordinary new and original leaps ...in a style very pleasing to himself. He begins to hum to himself a local song, with his own improvements. 'I got a lil girl, she roun' like de worl'.'

(Mister, 12-13)

Johnson dances, sings, makes poetry and improvises his life. Cary writes this innovation in *Mister Johnson* as Nigeria's hope and potential to break free of its limitations dictated by unfortunate geography, which lacks "beauty, convenience, or health," and by foreign rule, which has brought "peace" but no "liberty of mind" (121, 122). However, Cary sees that the British often miss this potential, especially the government officials like Blore and even the beloved Rudbeck. Blore encapsulates this blindness. Blore "really hates Johnson. The shouts and songs from the clerk's compound, during several nights, have filled him with what he takes for indigestion, but which is chiefly fear. All exuberance alarms him, as if he feels in it, from Nature itself, some threat to established things" (18). In short, he "likes all old things in their old places and dreads all change, all innovation" (16). From the start of the novel, then, Cary makes it clear that creativity (Johnson) threatens the old order and highlights the British people's inability to see this innovative capability. Unlike Conrad's "incomprehensible frenzy" of human nature's selfishness that will never change, Mr. Johnson, and by extension Nigeria, have great potential and ingenuity. The descriptions appear to mirror each other, but Cary's has key differences based on "liberty of mind."

Cary's representations of Nigeria also disagree with Conrad's of the Congo in that they absent the darkness that ordinarily characterizes the Congo and its people, underlying the most important difference of the authors' tones. Marlow describes "an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention" lurking in the jungle (88). Such an unsettling presence does not exist in *Mister Johnson's* Nigeria. Instead, the Fada station "lacks charm even of antiquity....But neither has it the freshness of the new" and "its people would not know the change if time jumped back fifty thousand years" (*Mister*, 121). While the Congo holds some malevolent and

mysterious truth about humanity, Cary's Nigeria demonstrates the European stereotype of Africa, ignorant and underdeveloped, but lacks a sinister intent. This difference in description underlines the much more significant difference in tone. Where Conrad would fear and despair, Cary laughs. Most laughable of all is Johnson who "every moment...shouts out some joke,...makes a little song and dance" and "wiggles and skips" as he dances (166, 167). Conrad, however, speaks forebodingly of "the lurking death...the hidden evil...the profound darkness" of the human soul to which Kurtz wholly surrenders (87). While Conrad writes with trepidation, warning, and gloom, Cary makes light of his subjects, especially Johnson. Cary meant his protagonist to be laughed at as the ridiculous set of imperial, European misconceptions he is.

Cary satirizes the Nigerians and the British officials to make an accepted fact, the narrow-minded, European perceptions of its colonies, a preposterous idea, whereas Conrad builds a case for human depravity. Cary pits Johnson against British government and tradition, especially against British imperial tradition. The empire is like Blore, who "is a deeply sentimental man" with a "conservative nature" and who "dreads all change, all innovation" (16). Of course, the chaotic, improvising, and lively Johnson threatens Blore and the British control of Nigeria as an established, imperial power. Rudbeck, although the narrator says he does not speak to his black junior as "a white official speaking to a Negro whom he despises," still misses Johnson's creativity (55). Rudbeck even overlooks the admiration with which Johnson regards him. In fact, Rudbeck has few original ideas. He loves to build roads because of his mentor, Sturdee, and copies the mannerisms of his superiors. He even adopts his wife's derogatory name for Johnson, "wog," without realizing it. Only when Johnson inventively acquires men for the beloved trade road does Rudbeck consider if Johnson might truly be "the

man with ideas” (189). Then he merely laughs at the thought, and the novel continues with Johnson as the fool, the one whose legs “enjoy cutting capers” (12). Throughout, Cary uses others’ opinions of Johnson to make fun of his impulsiveness and childishness, qualities with which imperial Europeans liked to label Africa. The way Johnson talks, sings, dances, is often portrayed as amusing and peculiar. He dances “stiffly and jerkily, throwing up his knees like a stallion” at his wedding (47). His thoughts and actions are often farfetched, impetuous, and unrealistic, just as his dance and song are often improvised, spontaneous, and unpredictable. He imagines fantasies, such as his belief that he and Rudbeck are best friends. Johnson says of Rudbeck, “He my frien’—soon as he see me—he smile and say, ‘Why is dat you, Mister Johnson?...God bless you, Mister Johnson—I ‘gree for you—I pray for you’” (19). He dreams similarly of how his wife, Bamu, will adore him and embrace civilized, English ways as he has, of how “happy it is for women to stop being girls and to be civilized wives with loving Christian husbands” (42). Of course, being a government man’s wife is not what Bamu has in mind as she scrambles to escape an English wedding dress that Johnson attempts to pull on her. This is of course much different from the serious and even frightening implications of Conrad’s novel. Where Conrad makes allegations upon the human race, Cary pokes fun at the European idea of stereotypical Africa through a series of comical scenes and especially through Mr. Johnson.

Johnson is clearly meant to be laughed at, and yet there is one point upon which Cary is humorless. From the interview previously cited, Cary believes that:

...the principal fact of life is the free mind. For good and evil, man is a free creative spirit. This produces the very queer world we live in...A perpetually new and lively world, but a dangerous one, full of tragedy and injustice. A world in

everlasting conflict between the new idea and the old allegiances, new arts and new inventions against the old establishment. (Burrows)

Cary takes creativity seriously. Though it initiates good and evil, it is a tragedy to stifle imagination, for the “old establishment” to kill man’s potential. The “old establishment” of the British Empire does just that to Nigeria, and British officials do likewise to the original and visionary Mr. Johnson. Some critics, such as Kwaku Larbi Korang, say that Cary’s attempt at tragedy fails because Mister Johnson’s “‘tragic’ characterization is persistently undercut and ultimately undermined by a buffoonery that he never convincingly outgrows” (11). Though the title of mister for a seventeen year old is ironic and though Mr. Johnson is laughable for his ridiculous and stereotypical attributes, Johnson is also tragic in that everyone misses his potential and genius for innovation. Perhaps the most tragic is Rudbeck’s betrayal of Johnson after the execution. Rudbeck takes credit for Johnson’s wish that his hero execute him. When Rudbeck tells the story of Johnson’s execution to his wife, whose lips begin to quiver on the brink of weeping, “Rudbeck, growing ever more free in the inspiration which seems already his own idea, answers obstinately, ‘I couldn’t let anyone else do it, could I?’” (294). The last words of the novel by Johnson’s idol and “best friend” usurp Johnson’s creativity. To an author who understands the basis of human life as a “free mind,” there could not be a more dreadful ending than one in which that freedom of invention is taken away.

As a complicated mix of European stereotypes and volatile creativity, Cary’s protagonist defies any comparison with the mostly mute and static Congolese characters in *Heart of Darkness*. While these authors’ African representations resemble each other in some aspects, those of imperial ideological and formulaic qualities, the way in which Cary and Conrad write

about them varies enormously. Cary's narrator uses humor and Conrad's double narrators speak soberly and even fearfully. Also discrepant are their themes and the people implicated in those themes. *Heart of Darkness* makes claims about the savagery of human nature's selfishness, suggesting a rather dismal and desperate state of humanity, whereas *Mister Johnson* means to discredit the assumptions of the British and other European perspectives on African colonies. Cary's work does not deserve to sit in Conrad's shadow. Conrad may have had influence on Cary, but *Heart of Darkness* did not write *Mister Johnson*. For an author who believed in the sanctity of human potential for innovation, nothing could be worse than for his main character to lose the right to creativity, and nothing could be more tragic than for Cary's own invention to be overlooked as an imitation of another's writing.

Part II. Achebe and Cary

“...we only have to step beyond the shores of Europe to encounter quite a different notion of interpretation...: the sense of a text as a site, or an area of conflicting and often contradictory potential interpretations, no one or group of which can claim ‘intrinsic’ primacy or ‘inherent’ authority, and all of which are always ideological in nature and subject to extrinsic political and economic determinants.”

-Terence Hawkes, “Telmah”

Cary’s and Conrad’s novels more often meet in the same sentence than do *Mister Johnson* and Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, and yet the latter pair when compared perhaps have more in common than the first. Achebe has called Johnson a “caricature” and a “bumbling idiot” (Hall 25; quoted in Walsh). He has also set his novels apart from those of the “colonial ideology” in presenting an accurate portrayal of the Igbo people (Hall 25; Rowell, 183). Like *Mister Johnson* and *Heart of Darkness*, Cary’s and Achebe’s texts vary in tone, due in part to their separate audiences. In this case, however, what clarifies *Mister Johnson’s* purpose, especially the main character’s purpose, is what Cary’s and Achebe’s texts share. Their protagonists, while enormously divergent in character and treated differently by their creators, hold to a similar pattern. Both devote themselves to country and people, are betrayed by their societies, die at the hands of the colonial machinery (indirectly in Okonkwo’s case), and lose control of their story to colonial officials. In his novels, Achebe has corrected stereotypical and at times racist perceptions of the Igbo people, and even of Africans on the whole, but the essential differences of tone and audience and similarities between Cary’s and Achebe’s main

characters, Johnson and Okonkwo, reveal a similar purpose in Cary's *Mister Johnson*, one that seeks to dislodge perceptions of Nigerian and of African colonies, now ex-colonies.

Achebe attacks inaccurate ideas of Nigeria and its people head-on through realistic fiction, a contradiction of terms perhaps but applicable. By realistic fiction, I mean a novel that establishes itself upon anthropological and historical accuracy. Achebe wishes *Things Fall Apart* to convey a positive, more correct presentation of Igbo people through culture, values, and history. Achebe places a lot of emphasis on his job as writer and storyteller not only to present an alternative version of the colonial encounter but, in his particular case as a "writer in a new nation," to show "that African peoples did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and, above all, that they had dignity" (Achebe quoted in Lindfors, 555). Many critics have noted Achebe's use of Igbo proverbs and storytelling techniques to accomplish a more authentically Nigerian worldview. Simon Gikandi goes further to say that Achebe "was able to show, in the structure and language of his first novel, that the future of African writing did not lie in simple imitation of European forms but in the fusion of such forms with oral traditions" (Gikandi, 303). His novel's success depends in part on the accurate representation of his people's past. To achieve that, Achebe writes like traditional storytellers spoke, for instance, with proverbs, such as "if a man said yea his chi also affirmed" (*Things*, 131). Of course, the individuals and the specific story of the novel have no historical truth but are predicated on events that could have happened when "the power and influence of the British became tangible" or anywhere from 1860-1890 according to Gikandi (Falola, 85; 298). The novel seeks to capture this encounter from the perspective of Achebe's ancestors. His

novel aims to rewrite previous literary and incorrect representations of Igbo people for current Nigerians and others, and as such, Achebe presents the story and an Igbo worldview through a storyteller's voice with historical awareness.

Achebe writes with the solemnity his purpose commands. As a storyteller and recorder of history, Achebe keeps a serious tone, making sure that the Igbo's dignity, in history and culture, comes across "above all." Okonkwo, as Achebe's protagonist and the champion of Igbo values and society, conveys this dignity best. The first words of the novel set him up as the chosen of his community, Umuofia, as the man who defeated the best wrestler of the region in what the elders of the village "agreed was one of the fiercest since the founder of their town engaged a spirit in the wild for seven days and seven nights" (Things, 3). Since "the most effective tool of colonial expansion was the British willingness to use superior military might to subdue any opposition violently," Achebe treats his characters and the culture he encapsulates with urgent reverence, knowing that inaccurate portrayal and understanding of his people has led to many such deaths as Okonkwo's (Falola, 86). Just as devastating, such misunderstanding and misrepresentation damaged many of the varied societies and cultures of the Igbo people from the outset of West African colonization, hence the title of Achebe's book (Falola, 86). As a more accurate picture of part of Nigeria's people, *Things Fall Apart* maintains a serious tone through realistic fiction.

Conversely, Cary takes an indirect approach through a satirical, but ultimately tragic, tone, which unexpectedly underscores a purpose analogous to Achebe's. *Mister Johnson*, too, attempts to change its readers' ideas about Nigeria, about African colonies in general. Here, it is important to remember that Achebe was writing with his country, but also others, especially in

mind, whereas Cary wrote to a Europe that often stereotyped and discriminated against its African colonies. Rather than portray a stereotypical Nigerian character as legitimate and logically acceptable, Cary makes a mockery of him to jostle his audience's preconceptions through humor. As stated during *Mister Johnson's* comparison with Conrad's novel, Johnson is judged injudiciously by those around him. He is the fool, lunatic, or thief. He appears as "a child caught robbing the jam," a skinned rabbit, "a terror of the world," or any number of exaggerated and outrageous images (Mister, 13-14, 1, 86). Rarely does he come across as a humanized character. Instead:

Cary's heroes are outcasts, rejected by a society that does not understand them... [and,] although frayed at the edges and rather seedy, they clearly embody those life-giving virtues of spontaneity, kindness, and imagination in which Cary believes. They are all immoral rogues who, in their joyous embracing of life, come closer to the secrets of it than the decorous representatives of society who frown at them and put them in jail. (Rosenthal)

Johnson throws extravagant parties, funded by his illicit methods, pretends he knows the king of England, and believes his traditional bride will wholeheartedly accept the English culture that he has already embraced. True, Cary presents some backward and corrupt Nigerian characters, but that does not mean they serve "as an implicit justification of the British civilizing mission" (Harris). The novel's tone makes it clear that this is quite the contrary. Through the humor Cary employs, Johnson becomes a ridiculous conglomeration of excessive qualities rather than a realistic conception such as Achebe's.

Cary may make a joke of the exaggerated or caricatured Johnson, but he does not make light of Johnson's creativity. As said, Cary believes in the "free mind" and human inventiveness as the basis for individuality and identity (Burrows). The satire ends at Johnson's execution, when the "man with the ideas" loses his life and his creativity is usurped by his beloved Rudbeck (*Mister*, 189). At this point, Cary takes a tragic tone, elucidating the blindness of Europe concerning its African colonies' abilities and potential, which the colonial administration has smothered. As Blore demonstrates, the British colonial system cannot tolerate anyone or anything "dangerous to the established order of things" (*Mister*, 16). Therefore, Johnson's innovation and zeal must die, and Europe continues in its prejudice and erroneous preconceptions. Although Cary satirizes Johnson's stereotypical characteristics, the death of Johnson as the force and embodiment of creativity, is a tragedy. Each distinct tone, the satiric and tragic, emphasizes the purpose of *Mister Johnson* to break Cary's imperial, British and European readers of their inaccurate ideas about the African colonies.

Even more so than the difference of tone, the similarities of Cary's and Achebe's main characters clarify the purposes behind *Mister Johnson*. Both Johnson and Okonkwo are devoted to their cultures, or adopted culture in Johnson's case. Johnson adores England and frequently sings that England is "[his] home" and "[his] country," whose king, "[his] king," is the "bes' man in de' worl'" (*Mister*, 35). In a memorably comical scene, he attempts to pull an English wedding dress on his new bride, Bamu, who has just experienced a strange, English wedding ceremony and cannot take anymore. Johnson covets his beautiful, patent leather shoes as a piece of the country he loves so dearly and as any well-bred, English gentleman would do. He carries them when outside rather than ruin them. Although his idea of English culture is rather superficial, a

culture built out of catalogs where one can find English wedding dresses, he rarely falters in his devotion to it. If he transgresses colonial law, it is often due to his zeal and impulsiveness and not because of a lack of love for all things England. When he steals from the treasury and lies to Rudbeck about it, during his crisis, Johnson curses himself copiously: “You fool chile, Johnson, you bigges’ god damn silly fool in de whole worl’...” and so he goes on (82). Perhaps the greatest expression of his devotion to his chosen country is his admiration of Rudbeck. He believes that, because Rudbeck acts in an “entirely thoughtless and impersonal” manner toward him instead of despising him as a “negro,” Rudbeck is “[his] friend Mister Rudbeck” (55). The first several pages of the novel make it clear that Johnson “worships Rudbeck and would willingly die for him” (17). As a gentleman and military man, Rudbeck epitomizes the Englishman for Johnson. Rudbeck is the “wisest, noblest, and most beautiful of beings,” echoing Johnson’s affection for England’s king, “the bes’ man in de’ worl’” (17). Even when Rudbeck steals, Johnson does not see a conflict between his crimes and the English virtues he extols, since it is in the name of progress to pay for a trade road. This road is “the wonder of the world” in Johnson’s eyes (*Mister*, 205). The road communicates to Rudbeck that it “shall change everything and everybody...” and bring “wealth and opportunity for good as well as vice,” that it is “the revolution” (215). Although the road brings trouble to Fada, Rudbeck and Johnson believe it will also bring prosperity and “civilization” to the region and therefore any measures taken to meet the costs of building are negligible. Both Rudbeck and Johnson embezzle funds from the treasury and other sources to pay for the road. Yet, it is Johnson who dies at the hands of the man and country he adores, even though Rudbeck and the British Empire participate in similarly shady practices.

Okonkwo likewise loves his culture and community, despite the personal weaknesses of temper and impatience that sometimes cause him to transgress. As a true Umuofian, Okonkwo values strength, masculine aggression and power, prestige, and decisiveness. Unlike his father, Okonkwo has no patience for laziness or weakness of any kind. His father, Unoka, was degraded in the eyes of Umuofian community, and Okonkwo “washed his hands” of him to “eat with kings” (Things, 8). Achebe sets him up as a “representative of this particular group of people,” the fictional, Umuofian Igbo, and expresses through Okonkwo the “virtues [that] are largely the virtues of [Okonkwo’s] society” and the “weaknesses [that] are largely the weaknesses of [Okonkwo’s] society” (Nkosi, 11; Palmer, 412). The various Igbo villages generally “admired a man of strength, a man of wealth, a man who had a big compound with wives and who had many farms...” (Nkosi, 11). As such a man, Okonkwo is admired. Umuofia praises his prowess as wrestler, as the only one to throw Amalinze, who was previously undefeated in the region. They give him many honors. Okonkwo acts as emissary to an opposing village, serves as one of the sacred and revered ancestors, the egwugwu, and wins praise for his abilities in battle. Quite the opposite of Mr. Johnson, who is laughed at wherever he goes, Okonkwo commands respect. Not only does Okonkwo reflect his community’s values, he would do anything for his people. He even kills his almost son, Ikemefuna, because “he was afraid of being thought weak” (Things, 61). Okonkwo puts all he has into maintaining his image in the village and would therefore sacrifice much to protect and uphold it. On the surface, Cary’s and Achebe’s main characters appear quite opposite, but a careful comparison reveals significant similarities that uncover their parallel paths to betrayal and destruction. Both devote themselves to and perform, or attempt to perform, their people’s culture.

Despite the zeal which both characters have for their people and culture, both meet with betrayal by their beloved societies. Johnson tries to conform to English codes of behavior and values, but he is often alienated from society and treated as an outcast. Michael Rosenthal believes Cary's comic novels to be predicated on "the opposition between the hero and the conventional society from which he is alienated." In his typical inventive and zealous behavior, Johnson goes overboard in thinking of ways to help Rudbeck build roads for Fada. He suggests fiddling with the accounts to filch some money, after all it is for the sake of progress, but Rudbeck reproves him by declaring that he is not an embezzler (Mister, 96). Of course, Rudbeck does prove himself an embezzler by taking funds from the treasury for the road, which he is promptly censured for and sent home when the government uncovers his crime. Johnson, however, sees no fault in this since it is in the service of Rudbeck and the all-important road and in the name of progress. When the new official, Tring, accuses Johnson, Johnson explains that "it's for the road—Mr. Rudbeck's road..." and runs off "repeating to himself in astonishment, "But he didn't understand...all de money spent for de road" (140). If it will bring the good that Rudbeck promised, all the "motors," trade, and prosperity, if it fulfills the imperial value of progress, Johnson cannot see where he and Rudbeck are wrong. This first betrayal by his beloved England and its officials marks the beginning of Johnson's road to execution. Chris Walsh points out that the traditional and conservative style of the English and their imperial tendency to maintain control through military force means that Johnson's zeal and imagination... is both his blessing and downfall. He provides innovation and ideas that support imperial values of progress, but this volatility also threatens the empire's stability. Despite his potential, Johnson is in the end an aberration that his England cannot tolerate.

Just as Johnson finds English society and law against him, Okonkwo finds that his society will sacrifice its control and dignity in order to survive when he remains steadfastly adamant in its culture and values. Although Okonkwo has weaknesses that lead him to go against his society's laws, these weaknesses spring from his devotion to Igbo values. As Achebe says himself, Igbo society values "strength and aggression" (Nkosi, 11). So when he beats his wife for disobedience during the week of peace, he defies the law in adhering to other of the society's values, because he cannot tolerate any disrespect of his power and authority. Okonkwo willingly accepts punishment for his transgressions. When he accidentally kills a clansman, again while participating in a demonstration of masculine strength, he does not disrespect the punishment of seven years exile. However, it is "during his time away that the clan changes profoundly while Okonkwo does not; and it is only now that a gap appears between Okonkwo and his society. But it is not so much Okonkwo who deviates, as his society which is forced to shift from the old paths" (Palmer, 421). Colonists arrive in Umuofia while Okonkwo serves his sentence away in Mbanta. While Okonkwo expects his people to remain staunch in their beliefs and traditions of strength and aggression, some of them accept and also join the white missionaries who have entered the town. When Okonkwo first hears about white men in nearby villages, he proclaims "God will not permit" the colonists to take over Umuofia and that such unpreparedness for battle and weakness "could never happen in his fatherland, Umuofia" (*Things*, 142, 159). On arrival in Umuofia after his seven years, Okonkwo finds his home and people "barely recognizable" (*Things*, 182). Obierika intelligently observes that "the white man...has put a knife on the things that held us together, and we have fallen apart" (176). On his return, instead of finding joy, Okonkwo "mourned for the clan, which he saw breaking up

and falling apart, and he mourned for the warlike men of Umuofia, who had so unaccountably become soft like women" (183). Okonkwo sees everything he holds dear, everything he bases his identity on falling apart. His society gives in to the colonists' wishes rather than stand its ground, and in that Okonkwo feels betrayed. Expanding on the statement of an interviewer that Okonkwo accepts his society's values to his own detriment, Achebe responds:

Yes, quite. Actually the culture "betrays" him. He is "betrayed" because he's doing exactly what the culture preaches. But, you see, the culture is devious and flexible, because if it wasn't, it wouldn't survive. The culture says you must be strong, you must be this and that, but when the moment comes for absolute strength, the culture says, "No, no, hold it!" (Jeyifo, 118)

When the Igbo culture upon which Okonkwo builds his life denies its supposed nature, it turns on Okonkwo. The Umuofians give up their values of strength and masculine aggression against those who disobey or disrespect them. At the most important meeting of the clan, where it will decide whether to fight or surrender, Okonkwo impulsively kills one of the colonists' messengers who attempted to break up their meeting. Once the people flee in fear, Okonkwo understands that in their "tumult" there was "fright" instead of "action" (205). Okonkwo comprehends this turning point as "the real death knell of traditional Umuofia society" and sees that "the society which he has championed for so long is forced to change, while he finds that he cannot" (Palmer, 422). His society betrays him and some of its essential values, just as English society betrays Johnson, in order to survive.

Okonkwo's and Johnson's deaths come about partly because of their culture's betrayals, and perhaps because of the fault of their own characters, but it is also a result of colonial

intolerance for anything that threatens control of the colony. The empire destroys them and then steals their story for its own uses, mainly to further establish its power. If their lives are no longer a source of alternativeness and ideas for rebellion, then the threat is completely demolished. As a culture and society “superior,” and therefore deserving of whatever it wants, it “dreads change, dreads all innovation” (Mister, 16). Johnson, as a wellspring of creativity and ideas, cannot afford to live in a society established by “an organization, simply an obstructive mass blocking all creative energy”, founded on “old things remaining the way they are, in the place they are” (*Mister*, 214, 16). England cannot afford to accommodate someone with ideas and innovation according to this conception. Instead, it supports the persons like Rudbeck who feels pressured into doing what tradition and duty require, who, when confronted with the thought of killing Johnson, “finds himself walking down a narrow, dark channel in unknown country, which goes on getting darker and narrower; while he cannot decide whether he is on the right road or not” (*Mister*, 289). Instead of “horror,” Rudbeck feels “a peculiar relief and escape” when he finally kills Johnson and finally chooses tradition and duty over his own ideas and individuality (291). Chris Walsh notes that Rudbeck pacifies himself with the thought that it was his idea to kill Johnson himself. Rudbeck feels “free in the inspiration which seems already his own idea” that he “couldn’t let anyone else” execute Johnson (*Mister*, 294). Rudbeck, English culture, and empire betray Johnson and then in the cruelest twist take his ideas for their own.

The colonial machinery and law in *Things Fall Apart* proves similarly greedy for Okonkwo’s death and for the usurpation of his story for its own ends. When Okonkwo and his fellow clansmen take revenge on the church for Enoch’s disrespect and flouting of his former

people and gods by killing one of the clan's sacred animals, the python, the colonial law brings Okonkwo and his comrades to justice. First, messengers trick Okonkwo and the other men into a meeting, as if to compromise, but then imprison them as punishment. The guards torture them, hold them for ransom, and then humiliate and emasculate them by shaving their heads. Whereas Okonkwo uses this to fuel his resolve for action and war, the village quickly realizes that a more serious retaliation will only result in its punishment. In yielding to colonial authority, Okonkwo sees the death of his culture and his identity, so he kills himself, which is the only avenue left if he wishes to remain true to the values he lived by and was defined by. This gives Obierika the reasons for shouting at the district commissioner who comes to arrest Okonkwo, "You drove him to kill himself" (208). His community's betrayal of its values due to the threatening pressure of the colonial machinery, ever urging absolute authority and more established control, results in Okonkwo's tragedy and suicide. As with Johnson's ideas, Okonkwo's life and death become a tool in the hands of the commissioner, become merely "interesting reading" made up of "perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph" (209). This measly paragraph, Okonkwo's life story, all his prestige, power, and strength, become fodder on which new officials seeking guidance on the "pacification of the primitive tribes of the lower Niger" will feed and learn (209). Similar to Johnson, the colonial power has a hand in Okonkwo's death. The British law serves as the catalyst for Umuofia to sacrifice some of its values to avoid this foreign law's power. Okonkwo commits suicide in response to the village's surrender to the colonial power and so indirectly dies as a result of that power but is never fully controlled by it. Obierika's dramatic outburst to the district commissioner shows that Umuofia will not forget Okonkwo and his legacy, but the commissioner also records

Okonkwo's story for his own uses, for the better establishment of the colonists in the people and society he loved so dearly.

Though Achebe detests Cary's representations of Nigerians, these authors' main characters have unexpectedly corresponding lives. Their societies reject them, and the colonial power either directly or indirectly participates in their deaths, quickly appropriating their stories or ideas to imperial uses. Achebe did not misunderstand the Nigerian characters in Cary's work, but he does not accept the attempts Cary makes in rewriting the typical, European conception of its colonies which he calls "a most superficial picture" that he had to "look at...from the inside" (quoted in Gikandi, 297). True, Cary does use the same stereotypes he seeks to change. However, he does so through a tragicomedy in which he makes those stereotypes ridiculous and then laments the unseen, creative potential of his protagonist. *Mister Johnson* shows "in its comedy the rich human potential of the continent and in its tragedy the manifold ways in which this potential is mocked and smothered" (Walsh). Perhaps the worst of Cary's novel is the lack of an alternative vision of Nigeria; Cary offers only a critique of current European misconceptions. Of course, Achebe writes to correct the colonial ideology and understanding of the "other" but accomplishes his work through realistic fiction, incorporating his Igbo society's culture and history into the story of Okonkwo and his fictional Igbo community of Umuofia. In part, these authors write to change or correct their readers' ideas about Nigeria through the use of their protagonists, though they employ dissimilar tones and types of writing.

Mister Johnson has been overlooked due to the shadow cast by Conrad and by the plethora of race criticism that has grown significantly since Achebe's article, "Image of Africa."

Cary and Conrad and their most famous novels have often been equated. They both write about an African colony and share some aspects in their representations of the colonies, but Cary did not copy Conrad. Conrad's theme is universal in that he explores humanity's selfishness, desire, and evil. He "uses colonization...to explore...universal questions about man's capacity for evil" (Phillips, 204). Cary, however, focuses on the absurdity of European ideas about its African colonies and emphasizes the blindness of the British officials in the novel to Johnson's "life-giving virtues of spontaneity, kindness, and imagination in which Cary believes" (Rosenthal). The authors also treat their novels differently. Conrad maintains a dark, serious, and sometimes frightening tone, especially when it concerns the Congolese jungle and Kurtz, the embodiment of human greed and evil. In contrast, Cary first makes fun of the foolishness of his protagonist and then laments the passing of Johnson's unnoticed creative promise. Unfortunately, most do not take their differences into account or the implications of these differences, namely that Cary did not intend his Nigerian characters as insults to Nigerians, but as a critique of the blindness of Europeans and their ridiculous ideas about their colonies.

Some critics see Cary's and Conrad's novels as interchangeable, as either totally racist or as completely unbiased. However, this issue need not inspire so much division. There are elements that argue for and against the stereotypes of the "colonial ideology" (Rowell, 183). In a rather unrelated article about alternative readings of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Terence Hawkes observes that "a thing...cannot be both what it is and another thing" from a Eurocentric understanding of interpretation (117). Whether or not this is only a Western or European understanding of interpretation, his hypothesis explains that in most English literary criticism there cannot be more than one true reading because otherwise it would "explode our notion of

the single and unified 'point of view' whose 'authority,' as that term suggests, derives from its source, the author" (117). Instead, literature acts as "an area of conflicting and often contradictory potential interpretations" where no single reading has precedence over another (117). Of course, *Mister Johnson* is not *Hamlet* by any stretch, but Hawkes describes the same situation in both texts' cases. A reading of race in *Mister Johnson*, with its prejudiced and unprejudiced elements, necessitates an accommodation of both readings, readings typically understood as polar opposites. Cary's novel calls up imperial preconceptions to underline their foolishness and the foolishness of a Europe that does not see a humanized colony and its colonies' abilities.

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